“You can not like cake but still have a favourite”: How people evaluate and engage with political parties in multi-party systems

Short running title: Political engagement in multi-party systems

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Abstract

While partisanship is a popular measure for predicting a broad range of political and social variables, its true nature is not well understood, particularly outside the U.S. in multi-party democracies. This study uses a series of open-ended survey questions (Australian sample, N = 81) to inductively examine party evaluation, whether this can lead to identification with parties and for whom. Further, we explore negative partisanship and the nature of political independence. Using qualitative content analysis, we find issues of morality, party effectiveness and value/policy congruence are among the most common factors of positive *and* negative party evaluation. However, negative attitudes were often directed toward a particular group (not necessarily a political party, e.g. “all left-wing parties”) denoting their most threatening out-group. Most participants claimed not to identify with any political party, due to their values (which some acknowledged a political party represented) being the aspect relevant to their identity, rather than the party itself. Political independents were described in a similar way to previous U.S.-based research, i.e. morally superior and free from party constraints or biases. Overall, our research suggests that more complex

measures are required to capture and understand partisanship than what currently exists in political and psychological research.

Keywords: Partisanship, negative partisanship, political independence, Australia, Social Identity Theory

Transparency statement

Anonymised data collected for this study is freely available at https://osf.io/ys8jq. A file containing the original coding of all data (.mx22) is also freely available at https://osf.io/8ucag. Survey questions were not pre-registered.

“You can not like cake but still have a favourite”: How people evaluate and engage with political parties in multi-party systems

Partisanship is generally accepted as a positive and lasting psychological attachment to a specific political party (Campbell et al., 1960). It plays a key role in predicting voting behaviour (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2020), but its consequences extend beyond electoral outcomes to democratic satisfaction (Aldrich et al., 2020; Anduiza & Pannico, 2020) and interpersonal relationships (Reilly & Hedberg, 2022). Partisanship can benefit democracy, giving laypeople a framework to understand their political environment, encouraging political elites to be accountable to citizens, and increasing political mobilisation and stability in societies (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2020). However, partisanship also fuels polarisation, misrepresentation, and politically-motivated reasoning (Brader et al., 2020; Kunda, 1990; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2020; Strickland et al., 2011; Unsworth & Fielding, 2014). This fosters deep social divisions beyond political spheres that appear to be intensifying (Mason, 2016; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021), increasing intolerance toward those from different social groups (Mason, 2018; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Therefore, in an increasingly polarised world, understanding the inner workings of partisanship is crucial. However, when considering party engagement and its wider effects, many scholars believe negative party attitudes also play a role alongside positive attitudes. This concept of “negative partisanship” is shown to independently predict voter intention,

turnout, and support for bipartisanship (Bankert, 2022; Caruana et al., 2015; Haime & Cantú, 2022; Mayer, 2017). Additionally, it is feasible to think there are politically-engaged individuals who may not opt into aspects of positive or negative party attachment, who may be referred to as political independents. However, this concept of political independence has not to our knowledge been taken beyond the context of the United States, where it predicts commitment to values of political autonomy (Dennis, 1992), more consistent reappraisal of political issues and candidates than partisans (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011), and plays a moderating role in political discussion networks with avowed partisans (Reilly & Hedberg, 2022).

Therefore, we posit that these three positions of (positive) partisanship, negative partisanship, and political independence together influence political outcomes and interpersonal factors, and exploring how these may fit together will help to illustrate the holistic political identities of citizens in multi-party systems. Yet, the definitions of these three concepts remain contested, even where they originated in the United States, and attempts to apply the concepts elsewhere has led to further inconsistencies (see Bartle & Belluci, 2014; Caruana, 2014; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Therefore, we must gain a clearer theoretical understanding of how these concepts operate before they can be integrated. Qualitative explorations are sorely lacking in partisanship research, and we argue this approach will help to guide understanding of these concepts by providing a “bottom-up”

process to interpretation. Our research aimed to do this by directly asking people to describe their experiences of party attachment and evaluation.

Australia offers a valuable case study for partisanship in a multi-party system, due to recent growth in representation of minor parties and independent candidates (Parliament of Australia, 2022). This may suggest a subsequent shift in the nature of partisanship, providing insight into what positive, negative or independent political attachments may look like in a multi-party system.

Positive partisanship: what are we actually measuring?

This concept of partisanship as a favourable relationship between the partisan and the political party was born in the U.S., and while it was not infeasible that citizens in other democracies would show signs of partisanship, the traditional scale used to measure their prevalence was not suitable for a multi-party context. The original U.S.-based question (via the American National Election Studies, or ANES) reads: “[g]enerally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” and is still widely used to measure partisanship. However, in its transition to multi-party systems, the item was subject to contextual and structural changes, as well as language translations in order to make sense in other democracies (e.g. the Netherlands, Denmark, Israel, Britain). Some measures then asked people the equivalent of whether they are an “adherent” of a party, “attracted” or “attached” to a party, “support” a party, or even “identify” with a party (for full summaries see Bartle &

Bellucci, 2014; or Huddy et al., 2020). Further, to fit multi-party contexts, if respondents answer “yes” to this question they are then typically asked to name the party or parties with which they are attached or attracted to. The seemingly subtle differences between these updated measurement approaches and the traditional ANES measure led to incomparable prevalence of “partisans” in political systems. For example, one study examining the differences in who is classified as a partisan by two differently-worded measures showed dramatic variation, where the United Kingdom and Canada saw 89% and 69% of the population (respectively) branded as partisans drop to only 49% and 38% (Huddy et al., 2020). Therefore, within this one measurement approach, it appears there is no longer a coherent definition of what is being measured when referring to partisanship. So, when other measures of partisanship take a different approach again, there is no confirmation that the same concept is being measured globally. Notably, other studies are seen to use feeling thermometers (e.g. Gidron et al., 2022), voting intention (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2011), or measures of social identification with political parties (e.g. Huddy et al; 2015) to evaluate partisanship.

Therefore, beyond the inconsistency in measurement - and perhaps compounded by it - the nature of what partisanship actually means is also under scrutiny. Many researchers argue that partisanship functions as a social identity (Bankert et al., 2017; Dinas, 2014; Greene, 2004; Huddy et

al., 2015), known as the ‘expressive’ approach to partisanship. This is explained by the Social Identity Approach, which proposes that a person's perception of themselves can be influenced by their membership(s) to a certain group(s), with differing intensity based on the value they attach to this membership (Miller, 2010; Tajfel, 1978). So, a social identity can influence one's attitude toward a certain topic (e.g. a policy) based on the opinion of a group (e.g. a political party) and how strongly one identifies with that group.

The opposing perspective is an ‘instrumental’ approach to partisanship, describing a purely practical decision that accounts for past behaviour and ideological proximity to a party (Fiorina, 1981; as cited by Huddy 2015) rather than an emotional and identity-based experience. Presently, research suggests that both conceptual approaches have merit (Bankert et al., 2017; Carius-Munz, 2020; Huddy et al., 2018) with aspects of each being relevant for different people at different times. For example, Gidengil and Nevitte (2020) found that during parliamentary scandals in the United Kingdom and Canada, while voting reflected disapproval of the implicated parties, partisan identification remained relatively stable. Further, Mari and Rosema (2009) found that a self-identity component of partisanship could be distinguished empirically from an evaluative component using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Therefore, the self-identification facet of partisanship may endure unfavourable short-term events without resisting a display of at least temporary disapproval.

However, what this debate has always noticeably lacked is a person-centred component, where people are asked if and how they identify with or experience emotion related to political parties, or if and how they instrumentally engage with them. If any single existing theory cannot account for the holistic experience of partisanship, then prior to building a new framework, we must understand the meaning behind differences in these experiences.

In summary, when scholars refer to partisanship, there is no guarantee that they are referring to or measuring the same concept. These inconsistent measurement techniques have continued for decades, yet few consider descriptions offered by partisans of their own political attitudes or identities, with the exception of Mayer (2019). This paper asked a German population to describe why they "leaned towards" a certain political party they had named, and received a multitude of reasons including ideological congruence, social group linkage, habitual reasons, party membership, and more. This was, however, a single question and did not separately probe factors of evaluation and identification. If we are asking someone whether they are a partisan, it would be valuable to first gain insight into what this concept might mean to people. The aim of this study is then to use a "bottom-up" qualitative approach to inform our understanding of party attachments, starting with positive ones.

Negative partisanship: the other side of the coin, or a different coin altogether?

Political motivation that is not driven by positive feelings toward a preferred party or parties, and may in fact be driven by negative feelings toward parties, is often referred to as “negative partisanship”. This phenomenon can be demonstrated by the mobilisation of the left in the 2002 French Federal election under the motto “vote for the crook, not the fascist” (Boonen, 2019), or a Democratic vote in the 2016 election being widely ascribed the “lesser of two evils” (Sweetser, 2017).

However, as with its positive counterpart, the conceptualisation and measurement of negative partisanship is debated. Some scholars have argued that opponent negativity merely insulates partisan loyalty, where one is not only able to defend their own party but can also criticise the other, completing the overall puzzle of a partisan identity (e.g. Wattenberg, 1982). Further, since there is a strong relationship between one holding both negative and positive partisanship towards separate parties (Medeiros & Noël, 2014), much research typically conceptualises them as two sides of the same coin, where both must exist simultaneously and in direct opposition. This is especially pertinent given the growing distance between positive and negative partisanship, also known as affective polarisation (Anderson et al., 2022). However, most recent research clearly shows that negative partisanship, or negative partisan identities, can both exist without their positive counterpart and differentially predict political outcomes (Bankert, 2022; Caruana et al., 2015; Haime & Cantú, 2022; Mayer, 2017). For example, an increasing division of partisan identities along ideological,

racial and cultural lines has been tracked in the U.S. (Mason, 2015, 2016, 2018) and assigned the cause of increased party loyalty not through positive partisanship but through negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster, 2015). Further, negative partisanship has gained a notorious reputation for discouraging bipartisan negotiations (Abramowitz & Webster, 2015), where positive partisanship does not do the same (Bankert, 2021; 2022). A lack of bipartisan compromise in a fiercely polarised democracy can lead to poor governmental outcomes, where parties do not unite to tackle overarching threats (e.g. pandemics, natural disasters, etc.).

Also akin to its positive counterpart, some scholars argue that negative partisanship functions as an identity, with Caruana et al. (2015, p. 772) claiming negative partisan identities are “affective repulsion[s]” from a party, or Bankert (2020) describing them as identities primarily explained by feelings toward the out-party rather than one's own party. Others, such as Lelkes (2021), disagree with these approaches, claiming “disdain is not an identity”(p. 495). In defence of this argument, given that citizens may identify with (Mayer, 2013; Mayer & Schultze, 2019) or at least evaluate (Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2020; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021; Wagner & Wiezel, 2022) multiple parties positively, as well as negatively (Mayer, 2017; McGregor et al., 2015), it seems unlikely that all of these evaluations would always individually translate to multiple identities. Perhaps this idea is instead best suited to two-party systems, where it may be more feasible for multi-party systems that one has a

specific political identity encompassing their feelings toward all parties, combining positive, negative or neutral, or perhaps that people have partisan identities without attitudinal evaluations and vice versa. In an attempt to better understand this puzzle, this study will probe participants' negative and/or neutral feelings towards political parties. Further, given a noticeable lack of qualitative research in the area of negative partisanship (both its nature and how it is measured), we aimed to uncover whether these attitudes or attachments are based predominantly on politicians, supporters of these parties, values and norms of the party, or some combination of these things.

Political independence: the final piece of the puzzle?

While both positive and negative partisan attachments appear consequential for predicting and understanding political behaviours, this still largely ignores those who lack partisan attachments but engage with the political system. In the United States, Carmines et al. (1987) identified a trend in the late 1980’s away from major party identification, and towards “political independence”. They attribute this phenomenon to the emergence of new issues that did not divide neatly along party lines, fragmenting the cohesion of party loyalty and driving people away from partisanship. However, as with positive and negative partisanship, researchers do not seem to agree on what exactly constitutes a political independent. An overall external view sometimes denotes a high degree of instability or lack of political opinion, but viewing independents as more “persuadable” than

partisans toward party loyalty is a mistake, as most have chosen a candidate to vote for long before election day (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Independents (at least in the U.S.) are not necessarily ideologically-positioned between parties, as some will exist at further extremes than the available parties (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011). Heaney (2016) also suggests that independents may sometimes evade party identification due to political parties not holding a strong enough stance on a specific issue on which they feel passionately. Self-proclaimed independents in the U.S. offering descriptive reasons for their position include: voting for candidates rather than parties, discontentment with either party, and not wishing to label their views (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Other general values that independents associate with the label include honesty, common sense, openness to truth, and free thinking (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). While it seems feasible that some people outside the U.S. (including those in multi-party democracies) could hold a similar collection of political values, there is no research to our knowledge that examines political independence in alternative contexts. This study aims to expand the meaning of political independence by examining the meaning attached to this label in the multi-party system of Australia, by asking participants if they do or ever have identified as an independent, and what they think this term refers to. Once we develop a better understanding of political independence in wider contexts, we can begin to speculate where this concept may fit alongside partisanship, and build a comprehensive political identity model.

Integration of political attitudes: can partisanship overlap with independence?

Many correlational studies that explore partisanship in the U.S. use data from the ANES, which utilises the traditional partisanship measurement tool that sorts respondents along a 7-point continuum shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Traditional U.S.-based partisan sorting spectrum.

Strong Democrat	Weak Democrat	Democratic leaner	Pure independent	Republican leaner	Weak Republican	Strong Republican

The nature of this measurement sparked a debate that has since divided scholars for decades: where exactly to draw the line between “partisans” and “independents”. This scale differentiates two categories of independents - those who initially claim to be independent and do not later indicate leaning toward any party (often called “pure independents”), and those who initially claim independence but do lean toward a party (“leaning independents”). In the foundational conceptualisation of partisanship (“The American Voter”, Campbell et al., 1960), leaning independents were

categorised as independent. However, Keith et al. (1992) challenged this classification by claiming that independent leaners are just partisans in disguise, given that they vote as (or more) loyally than “weak partisans”. Dennis (1988a, 1988b, 1992) offered a third perspective, stating that both previous approaches lack the nuance of political reality, a sentiment that was strongly reinforced in the book “Independent Politics” (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016) and other articles (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011; Greene, 2000; Ishio, 2006).

However, despite calls for more nuance, the trend of grouping independent leaners with partisans (rather than independents) has continued (see Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Miller & Conover, 2015; Petrocik, 2009; Reiljan, 2020). This approach assumes that similar voting patterns then equate to similar political identities. If political identity is more than just voting behaviour, then self-identification as an independent should have equal legitimacy to self-identification as a partisan. To this point, Dennis (1992) contended that although some leaners resemble strong partisans in party involvement and loyalty, they consistently score higher on independence attitudes (i.e. commitment to the values of political autonomy) and lower on emotional responses to election content than avowed partisans. This suggested that independent leaners view their party attachment as a “hypotheses to be continually re-tested” (Dennis, 1992 p. 271), rather than a deeply-rooted identity. Accordingly, independent leaners display less stability in their

political self-classifications over time than weak partisans, suggesting reappraisal of issues and candidates more regularly than those with a deeper (partisan) attachment (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011).

To mitigate the apparent likeness of leaning independents and weak partisans, Valentine and Van Wingen (1980) pioneered the idea of representing partisanship and independence on different spectrums and allowing them to coexist, meaning a person can appear partisan due to high levels of political engagement and commitment to a party but still view themselves as distinctly independent. Greene (2000) also later found higher levels of independent identity in independent leaners than for weak partisans, despite their comparable voting habits, pointing to a qualified role for conceptualising political independence separately from partisanship, rather than assuming mutual exclusivity. We will explore whether this approach may be considered appropriate for a system outside the U.S., by asking participants in the political context of Australia whether they think one can be both politically independent and support a party simultaneously, and why or why not. Discerning not only the nature of political independence in multi-party systems but also how this may intersect with partisanship contributes to painting the overall picture of political attitudes/identities in multi-party systems.

The present study

The aims of this study are twofold. Firstly, we address the contested nature of partisanship by directly asking participants to describe their

experiences engaging with or evaluating political parties in ways that may be consistent with positive partisanship, negative partisanship, or political independence. The debate surrounding these concepts is unlikely to be amended by further quantitative research, and requires rich, person-centred data to inform a nuanced approach to understanding one's political attitudes. The second aim is to facilitate a process of consciously moving concepts of political attitudes (e.g. positive partisanship, negative partisanship, political independence) beyond the U.S. context, using qualitative data to probe people’s experience rather than applying pre-existing quantitative measures beyond their intended use. We are interested in whether these concepts exist or are engaged with in Australia, and both of our aims will be addressed by a string of open-ended survey questions. Australia is an interesting case study for partisanship as it is a multi-party democracy that also has a number of successful independent, party-unaligned politicians.

As one theoretical framework does not appear to encompass partisanship wholly, we used an atheoretical, inductive approach to code responses based on the diversity of information offered by participants. The open response questions encouraged participants to provide and explain answers in as much detail as possible, and we used a qualitative content analysis to analyse and organise responses. Leavitt et al. (2018) recommends qualitative methods for research areas that are contradictory or ill-fitting for certain populations, which can be considered the case for

partisanship in multi-party systems. This research strived to expand an understanding of positive, negative and independent political attitudes to help guide future research away from relying solely on existing conceptualisations or measurement strategies that are not informed by descriptions of human experience.

Methods

Positionality statement

Both authors are white, early career researchers working in the field of social psychology. The first author (female) who did the majority of the coding for this study, and the second author (male), were both born and raised in Australia. Our cultural background affords a contextual and nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical context in which this research was conducted, but may also shape potential biases. We acknowledge that our social and academic positions may inform the data analysis and interpretations made in this paper.

Data collection

Pilot testing was conducted with five participants in June 2023, after which several edits were made to the questions due to both participant feedback and apparent functionality of questions in addressing the research aims.

Online data collection ran from July to November 2023 via the survey platform SoSci Survey. Recruitment involved a series of posts on several

politically-themed Facebook and Reddit pages, a post on the personal Facebook page of the first author, and using the SurveyCircle website. SurveyCircle is a platform that helps researchers find participants by allowing them to reciprocally complete surveys.

The study was described as an exploration of “how people relate to political parties and view certain political concepts”, and there were no incentives offered for completing the survey. The survey method was chosen (over other qualitative research methods such as interviews) predominantly due to the anonymity provided, given that political attitudes can be a sensitive topic and may have led to socially desirable responding. This method also allowed wide dissemination of the survey via the internet, and use of websites such as SurveyCircle.

Once participants clicked on the link to the survey, they were directed to read the Plain Language Information Statement before agreeing to participate. The first page collected basic (e.g. age, gender) and contextual (e.g. political interest) demographic information, before moving on to the open-ended questions (full list provided in Table 1). There was no time limit for the survey, and participants wrote an average of 18.21 words per open-ended response.

Participants

The final sample comprised 81 participants ranging from 21 to 71 years old (M = 38.43, SD = 15.92), including 51 females, 27 males, 2 non-binary people and 1 person who preferred not to disclose their gender.

76.6% of participants had “a good deal” or “some” political interest (23.4% with “not much” or “none”). 20 participants (24.7%) identified as political independents. 45 (55.6%) reported not having ever supported a particular political party, 27 (33.3%) currently supported a particular party and 9 (11.1%) did not currently but had in the past. The average political leaning on the single-item left-right orientation scale (range 0-10) was 4.36.

Table 1

All open-ended questions answered by each participant group, and how each question addressed the research aim.

Participants involved	**Question ID**	**Question**	**Concept addressed / link to aim**
Current party supporters (N = 27)	Q1	You have indicated that you support a particular party or parties. What makes you support them?	*Positive partisanship:* these questions help to inform a bottom up approach to our basic understanding of what people's party attachments are based on, and whether they see this as an identity or just an evaluation.
	Q2	Some people see their connection to a political party as part of their identity. Would you say that you identify with any of the parties you support? Why/why not?	
Previous party supporters (N = 9)	Q3	You have indicated that you previously supported a particular political party or parties. What made you support them at that time?	
	Q4	Some people see their connection to a political party as part of their identity. Would you say that you identified with any of the parties you supported previously? Why/why not?	
	Q5	What led to your discontinued support for this party/these parties?	*Negative partisanship:* these questions probe the negative or ambivalent feelings participants might have toward political parties, as understanding all facets of political attitudes will contribute to a better holistic understanding of party-based motivations and their consequences.
Non-party supporters (N = 45)	Q6	How do you feel towards political parties generally?	
All participant	Q7	Are there any specific parties that you feel negatively towards? If yes, please explain why.	

s (N = 81)	Q8	Some people base their opinions of parties on their general values, their politicians, or supporters of this party, among other things. What factors do you think inform your overall opinion of a party?	*Positive partisanship:* (as above).
	Q9	What do you think being politically independent means?	*Political independence:* this question helps us discern if political independents exist outside of the United States context and if so in what form.
	Q10	Do you believe a person can be politically independent and support a political party at the same time? Why/why not?	*Uniting independence and partisanship*: this question provides insight into the way partisanship may interact with political independence, and if these should be treated as separate spectrums or as different aspects of the same concept.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021). Using qualitative content analysis, the first author familiarised themselves with the data, before inductively creating a set of codes for each open-ended question that could encompass all relevant responses based on repetition of specific words or basic ideas. Inductive coding allows a rich description of the dataset to be gained without applying a particular theoretical lens (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2013). A semantic coding technique was also predominantly used, meaning participants' responses were taken at face value and there was little interpretation beyond the words or ideas mentioned in the data (Byrne, 2022). Units of analysis were typically single sentences, which sometimes contained only one or two words.

Any data that appeared irrelevant or as if the participant had not understood the question was discarded. Then a codebook was created that included a label for each code, a description of the code, 1-3 example quotes from the data, and the number of times the code occurred among the responses. A simplified version of this was provided to the second author, which did not include example quotes or number of instances, who independently re-coded 20% the data (as suggested by Campbell et al., 2013; O’Connor & Jaffe, 2020). Discussion occurred after 10% and 20% of the double coding to address discrepancies, until intercoder agreement met 100%.

After this process, the codes were finalised, and overarching code labels were used to group codes under common ideas by the first author. The second author oversaw and made suggestions to the overarching codes.

Results

The overarching codes that emerged from the data are described briefly in Table 2. Codes are presented in the order they appeared when analysing the data, so those most relevant to the initial questions precede codes that were most relevant to later questions. Table 2 also details which codes appeared specifically in response to each question, as this information affects how codes are interpreted.

Table 2

Overarching codes identified to explain the data. Includes the code names, number of instances the code was identified across participant responses, the total percentage of responses this represents, a brief description of the code, several example codes, and which questions the codes were relevant for.

Code name	No. of instances/ % of responses	Description	Example quotes	Relevant to
Importance of values and policy congruence	133 29.56%	Encompasses whether there is congruence or incongruence between the values of a person and a party and their subsequent policies. Also relevant when one felt there was no existing political party congruent enough to their values to support.	"The general values and policies inform my opinion of a party the most. I can separate the person from the party, meaning if I do not like a certain politician of a party, I can look past that if I support the party's values and policies." (female, 25). "There is not any political party that can express my ideology fully" (female, 25).	Q1 Q3 Q5 Q6 Q7 Q8 Q9
Importance of morality	51 11.33%	Encompasses whether parties behave with integrity and fairness (morality) or are untrustworthy or corrupt (immorality). Also includes the idea of whether parties are committed to the best interests of their constituents.	"The example [political parties] set in their behaviour - honesty and integrity" (female, 58). "[Political parties] are corrupted by the desire to remain in power for power's sake" (male, 67). "I have a lot of mistrust in [political parties]. Both left and right" (female, 33).	Q1 Q6 Q7 Q8 Q9

Importance of being realistic and effective	59 13.11%	Encompasses concerns with how effectively a political party functions, based on past performance and plans or goals for the future. Positive evaluations typically included discussion of realistic goals and foci, and negative evaluations as parties having wrong or distracted foci, being out of touch, or ineffective.	“I support parties that can demonstrate the pathways required to reach their proposed goal… I support parties that appear to be well grounded and set targets that are in the realm of possibility within the current political/economical landscape” (male, 24). “Primarily, I ask myself if a politician walks the walk” (male, 67). “I feel that [political parties] are self-serving and do not represent the general population” (female, 27).	Q1 Q3 Q5 Q6 Q8
Importance of social factors	30 6.67%	Encompasses assessment or support of political parties on social grounds, which can include the behaviour of politicians (e.g. in parliament or in media) or other supporters of the party (e.g. family and friends) and how this mobilises people.	“I think I began following the political parties and views that my family aligned with” (female, 23). “The personalities and values of the politicians inform my opinion of the parties” (female, 60). “How they represent themselves in the media [as the most important evaluative factor]. I don't like petty campaigns” (female, 33).	Q3 Q8
Opposition to particular groups	27 6.00%	Encompasses responses explaining an aversion to a particular political party or group of political parties as a	“Extremist parties of any political orientation disgust me and I think they are a threat to the well-being of our nation” (male, 24). “Both major parties” (male, 67).	Q7

		general rule. This included all major parties, any minor extremist party, issue specific parties, or all right-wing or left-wing parties.	“Greens [party]: too black and white” (female, 56). “Extreme left” (female, 25).	
Anti-system/ anti-political party attitudes	26 5.78%	Encompasses responses stating a general opposition to political parties and/or government. This was not merely nihilistic beliefs of society, but also those who have lost faith in the way Australian democracy currently functions, or who feel that all political parties are fundamentally problematic.	“Yes [I feel negatively towards] all of them. They are not interested in representing the people, just them and their donors' interests” (male, 43). “I am not a big fan of party politics at all” (male, 63). “Democracy is only viable in societies in which the vast majority identify with each other and have empathy for other people…governments are focused on juggling competing interests rather than being focused on good governance” (male, 65)	Q4 Q5 Q6 Q7 Q9
Values over parties	61 13.56%	Encompasses the idea that everyone holds their values closely, but to what extent they link these values - and their identity - to a political party varies from person to person. So, one may link their values to a political party strongly, moderately, weakly, or	“They mirror my values and I'm proud to say I support them as a way to express simply where my values lie” (female, 23). “I do feel a personal connection and identification with my party. In saying this, not all of my parties policies align with me, and not everything I do aligns with my party” (female, 25) “I don’t feel that a particular political party is part	Q2 Q9 Q10

		not at all, which affects how much they feel they ‘identify’ with the party.	of my identity as the party I support has changed over the years. It is something that I know is fluent and ever-changing depending on current issues and party members” (female, 25).	
Fear of partisan bias	25 5.56%	Encompasses claims that identification with a political party is dangerous for the individual and for democracy. This is due to the belief that once someone’s identity becomes tied up with a political party, their objectivity is damaged and their support is given mindlessly rather than conditionally.	“I believe that too strict of an alignment with a political party can restrict objectivity and impair the democratic process” (male, 25). “Partisanship eventually causes divided loyalties” (gender not disclosed, 38). “I am wary of identifying too strongly with a party” (female, 26).	Q2 Q4 Q10
Freedom	58 12.88%	Encompasses the idea of having one’s own thoughts and opinions, free from any party influence or pressure to support or believe a party’s rhetoric, and the freedom and flexibility this gives an individual within political spaces.	“Forming one's own opinions on each and every topic, and backing whoever's position best aligns with one's own viewpoint at any point in time” (male, 63). “Separating yourself from political ties, following your own beliefs” (female, 27).	Q9

Code prevalence

All codes listed provided a window into at least one of the concepts probed by the aim; namely the nature of positive/negative partisanship or political independence. Whereas some overarching codes were particularly common across a multitude of responses and for different questions, some were only relevant to one or two questions. For example, the “opposition to particular groups” code only appeared in responses to Q7 when we asked participants if there were any political parties they felt negatively towards, and the “freedom” code only appeared in responses to Q9 when we asked participants what they think a political independent is. On the other hand, The “importance of values and policy congruence” code was the most prolific, appearing in the highest number of responses (29.56%) and in response to the most questions (Q1, Q3, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9) showing strong relevance across all concepts explored in our study. The discussion below explains how each overarching code helped to paint a picture of how we can better understand political attitudes.

Discussion

The first aim of this study was to provide a “bottom-up” understanding of partisanship using a qualitative approach. This meant uncovering and integrating the contested nature of the positive and negative sides of party evaluation, as well as the attitudes of those who are politically engaged but may not support or identify with particular parties (often referred to as

political independents). The second aim of this study was to use rich, person-centred data to consciously move the concepts of partisanship and political independence beyond the United States. This meant using people's experiences with and opinions of these concepts to understand their nature, rather than perpetuating the use of pre-existing measures beyond their intended context. We explored the meaning and nature of party support and identification, as well as the meaning of political independence and its relationship to partisanship in an Australian context using a series of open-ended survey questions.

The overarching message that we interpreted from this data was that the ways people engage with political parties, and the political system more broadly, is not only extremely varied but often also conflicting. The results indicate that no existing conceptualisation of partisanship could alone accurately represent people’s experience, and the measures used in data collection to represent partisanship within these structures are likely inadequate. The following sections will unpack in more detail our findings on positive and negative partisanship, party identification, political independence and the co-existence of these concepts, using the recurrence of certain topics from the survey data.

Positive and negative partisanship

Our findings suggest that party evaluation hinges predominantly on the spectrum of three concepts: morality, being realistic and effective, and values and policy congruence. These themes consistently appeared for

discussion of both positive and negative party evaluation, meaning an individual may judge a party on a spectrum of these issues, leading to either a positive or negative partisanship to said parties. However, it is likely to be more complicated than this. Social factors also appear to play a role for some people in developing positive partisanship, for example when a party has politicians or supporters that are to their personal liking, or in cases when it provides social connectedness. Interestingly, those who gave examples of social influence e.g. “I think I began following the political parties and views that my family aligned with” (female, 23), or “it was nice to be together with a group of people with similar views and ideologies for robust debates” (female, 29), were typically from the group of participants who used to support a party but no longer did. This poses an interesting challenge to the longevity of research showing parental (Campbell et al., 1960, Hooghe & Boonen, 2015) and peer group (Quintelier, 2015; Raychaudhuri, 2020) influences on development and direction of partisan influence. Perhaps these social factors are a tenuous link to party support - inspiring but not necessarily maintaining positive party support in the face of moral, practical, or ideological inconsistencies between person and party.

Alongside this finding that social factors were the most tenuous link to party support when compared with other codes, the popularity of evaluating parties based on how realistic and effective they are may challenge certain aspects of the Social Identity Approach in understanding partisanship. While concerns of ideological congruence and morality may be tied into a

social identity, which is associated with the idea of “expressive” partisanship (where partisans have an ongoing psychological identification with a political party; Achen & Bartels, 2006; Green et al., 2002; Huddy & Bankert, 2017), other factors like parties being realistic and effective tie in well with the opposing “instrumental” approach. This posits that partisans assess practical factors when deciding which party (if any) to support, such as past performance, and proximity of policy preferences to one’s own (Fiorina, 1981; Huddy, 2020).

On the other hand, the blanket rejection of parties along specific criteria that appeared so often in our data could highlight a role for Social Identity Theory in describing the negative side of partisanship. Like with sports teams, partisans see opposition parties as a threat, and the closer the rivalry the bigger the threat (Hewstone et al., 2002). So, it is possible that the overarching group one sees as the most threatening to their political agenda or “ingroup” thereby becomes the “out-group”. In the case of our data, perhaps someone who is universally opposed to extremist parties may consider upholding the values of democracy as the most salient political issue facing society, and the threat these groups pose to this then puts them in an outgroup category, e.g. “extremist parties of any political orientation disgust me and I think they are a threat to the well-being of our nation” (male, 24). On the other hand, someone who is universally opposed to right-wing parties might see conservative policies as the most salient political issue, e.g. “right leaning parties with regressive policies pertaining to

climate and social justice issues” (female, 25), causing right-wing parties as a whole to pose the greatest threat to their ideals and become the outgroup. It is also possible that instead of representing negative partisanship per se, these oppositions represent their own opinion-based identity. This would indicate that opposition to a group that is not a specific political party (which in our data included parties with a certain ideological leaning; i.e. left/right, any party supporting or not supporting certain policy, all major parties, etc.) is outside of negative partisanship and itself forms a distinct identity. As suggested by Hogg and Smith (2007), this opinion-based identity will tie in with pre-existing identities, such as a certain aligning partisanship or negative partisanship. Of course, some people did mention specific political parties by name that posed the greatest threat to their political agenda, indicating a strong example of negative partisanship, but future research will be required to determine whether opposition along other political lines are included in negative partisanship or whether they are instead a separate (albeit related) opinion-based identity. The sentiment of differential “us versus them” polarisation is mirrored in the work of Rothers (2025), who found that there are three main axes along which people are affectively polarised in politics; left and right, mainstream and radical right, and centre and extreme. Further, research by Young and de-Wit (2024) found that U.S. and UK citizens can be opposed to factions within their own political party (that is, the one they reportedly identify with) equally or in some cases more than to out-party factions, again

suggesting that it is not always parties or party identification that creates the strongest political motivation, but sometimes other groups that pose greater relevance and/or threat to the individual's political goals.

Party identification

Qualitatively exploring the "instrumental" versus "expressive" partisanship debate, where scholars pit partisanship as a practical decision against an emotional and identity-based experience, we asked participants if they identify with a particular party and why or why not. Participant reasoning for either identifying or not identifying with parties was often along similar lines. Participants either said that they identified with a party *because* the party embodied their values, and their values formed part of their identity, e.g. "values are intrinsic to identity, so I definitely identify with the political party that I support." (female, 67) or they did not identify with a party because it was their values they held close, and the political party was merely the most appropriate vehicle (subject to change) to seeing these values realised in society, e.g. "no, I wouldn't consider my party identification to be central to my identity. My support relies solely upon the consistency of their political action with my personal values and outlook regarding a positive society" (male, 25). The former could be considered as embodying expressive partisanship, given the identification element, and the latter embodying instrumental partisanship, given the practical element.

However, some people took issue with the idea of identifying with a party because they believed this meant their goals had to be seamlessly

orientated with the party, and that simply aligning on a values-level (rather than, say, a policy level) was insufficient for identification, e.g. “I do feel a personal connection and identification with my party. In saying this, not all of my party's policies align with me, and not everything I do aligns with my party.”. Further, participants also expressed a fear of losing objectivity in the process of attaching a political party to their identity, e.g. “that has always felt like black-and-white thinking to me” (male, 28), and the perceived implications of getting caught up in an agenda that impairs their ability to think critically about political issues, e.g. “I believe that too strict of an alignment with a political party can restrict objectivity and impair the democratic process” (male, 25). These people may be avoiding the “boiling frog metaphor” - an urban legend stating that a frog placed in boiling water jumps out immediately, but a frog placed in cold water where the temperature slowly rises to boiling will not jump to safety. So, some people fear identifying with a party (i.e. being the frog in cold water) may gradually indoctrinate them to an agenda (i.e. the water slowly boiling) that does not wholly serve their ideals, without them realising.

Despite many participants claiming they did not identify with a political party, previous research in and outside of the U.S. suggests that partisan biases are rife, and may not appear in self-report format (see Clarke et al., 2022; Huddy et al., 2018; Nurse & Grant, 2020; Strickland et al., 2011). However, it may also be possible that a compulsory voting system - such as in Australia where our participants reside - leads citizens to see

political engagement more as a practical process, where party utility (that is, which candidate can best cater to their needs) is the key focus. De Leon and Rizzi (2016) do find that compulsory voting systems make citizens think more about politics, updating ideological positions and preferences toward political parties more readily than in voluntary systems. In contrast, a voluntary voting system might predominantly see intrinsically-motivated citizens participate, meaning political engagement by nature becomes more personal, and at greater cost to the individual, leading to higher rates of expressive or identity-based partisanship tendencies. While it makes sense that compulsory voting leads to higher incidence and strength of partisanship (Singh & Thornton, 2013), given that more people are involved in the political system by design, we argue that it is the nature of this partisanship that may be different.

Therefore, when we consider the idea of “party identification” and people’s emotional response to political events (e.g. electoral losses, policy defeats), perhaps these are sometimes best understood as one's reaction to society challenging their personal values, an inherently personal and emotional experience, where the party merely acts as a vessel for these values.

Political independence

Given the lack of attempts to take the concept of “political independence” beyond a U.S. context, where there is an existing (albeit unique) understanding of what this means, Australia may be a good

environment to begin this process. Due to a shift this century in vote share away from the two major parties, there is a higher likelihood of people adopting an “independent” label, as well as a rise in support for independent candidates in government (who run on an individual platform that is not beholden to or affiliated with any political party).

In asking our participants what they believe political independence means, a diversity of ideas emerged. Independents were often painted as morally superior to regular citizens, typically because they are free from this so-called partisan bias, and are seen to prioritise values and policies above party politics, e.g. “being prepared to say no to all parties to ensure the most beneficial, moral, ethical, balanced, sensible outcome” (female, 56). Independents were also often associated with the idea of freedom, or a flexibility to hold a unique set of opinions across different political topics and to further their values accordingly, however they see fit, e.g. “separating yourself from political ties, following your own beliefs” (female, 27), or “political independence reflects a desire for autonomy and the belief that political decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis rather than along strict party lines” (male, 34).

Some participants also equated political independence to anti-system/anti-party attitudes, e.g. “do not believe in politicians' contributions and believe we should not have ‘government’” (female, 25). Because voting in elections is compulsory in Australia, those who embody this attitude may not be able to simply opt out of “supporting” the political system without

facing financial penalties[1]. Therefore, perhaps these participants believe that independents should and will vote for candidates that are the furthest away from the institution of political parties as possible; with a first preference to support an independent candidate, and where this is not possible a minor party, consciously avoiding major parties, e.g. “not affiliating with any particular political party, especially the major ones” (male, 43).

Holistically, these ideas represent an independent as virtuous, fair and rational. This is directly comparable to the way the concept is viewed in the U.S., where Klar and Krupnikov (2016) found the descriptions people offered to define independents aligned with “a political scientist's ideal voter”. In addition, an idea reinforced by our participants frequently was the importance of values in politics. However, whether one attaches their values to a political party differs from person to person. We suggest that this may be the key distinction between partisans and independents - whereas partisans attach their values to political parties and as a result fulfil a process of identification with a party (or parties), independents keep their values separate from specific parties and instead use them to inform their political behaviour on a case by case basis, meaning they do not become identified with any party.

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1 Failing to vote in federal elections incurs a $20AUD fine and between $25 and $109 for state elections. As long as one's name is marked off the electoral roll at the time of voting, no fine will be issued, meaning it is of course possible to vote illegitimately by marking ballot papers incorrectly or leaving them blank.

Overall, it seems likely that this idea of a politically-engaged, rational free-thinker may exist in other democracies too - but whether they are known as something akin to a “political independent” is a question for future research, as this phrase still appeared misunderstood or confusing for several participants in our study.

The intersection of partisanship and political independence

When participants were asked whether they believe a person can be politically independent and support a party simultaneously, the results were polarised, and contained a multitude of metaphors to explain why this either was or was not possible. One participant claimed this was the equivalent of “saying ‘I am vegan’ but eating meat at the same time” (female, 21), whereas another participant said “absolutely. You can not like cake but still have a favourite” (female, 25).

This meant some participants thought that supporting a party while claiming to be politically independent was essentially a paradox, where anyone who finds themselves too close to a party and its ideals will not then be able to maintain objectivity in political realms. According to Social Identity Theory, once a group (e.g. a political party) has been adopted as part of one’s identity, the ideals of the group can influence the way one interacts with these concepts (Greene, 2002; 2004; Miller & Conover, 2015; Strickland et al., 2011). Alternatively, some agreed that it was possible for party support and political independence to co-exist, suggesting that independents do not place value on who is presenting policies or values,

and support whoever is closest to their ideals on any given topic (or, in an election, support whoever aligns best with an aggregate of their ideals). This mindset can be summed up by a quote from one participant, who agreed that someone can be politically independent and support a party simultaneously, and “to get caught up with the dilemma here would miss the point of politics” (male, 28).

So, it appears that the mismatch between these two competing arguments arises from some people believing that support can exist free of bias or future obligation, and some who do not. This is an interesting topic for future research to explore in the context of partisan behaviour, perhaps by asking participants who have a history of party support whether they felt or acted on obligation to these parties following support, or whether and how their opinions on certain topics changed during the period of support.

Consequences for measurement of partisanship and political independence

Based on the ideas that emerged under questions probing the nature of party support and party dislike, it seems that elements of different theories explain different facets of partisanship, with no single theoretical approach providing a holistic fit. So, traditional U.S.-based measurement methods of asking people if they *are* a Republican or a Democrat is likely not suitable for other democracies, where only some people consider their party support/lack of support to be part of themselves or their identity. Even the assumption of more complex multi-item partisanship measurements

(e.g. Bankert et al., 2017) presume partisanship as an identity, with the goal of the scale not to decide how people engage with politics but what the strength of this identity is. Given the high proportion of our participants who did not claim to identify with a party but still had strong value-based political motivations, it would appear too simplistic to use only an identity-based approach to measure partisanship. As detailed in the responses to our survey, there are a number of different ways to approach and engage with politics that are not done in the name of party identity. Existing U.S.-based research shows those who identify as politically independent still attend political protests (Heaney, 2016), and turn out to vote in elections at a similar rate to Republicans or Democrats (Hartig et al., 2023), indicating a party identity is not a necessary precursor to political behaviour. If we are interested in what drives people's engagement with politics and political parties, not just in the form of voting, but also attending protests, campaign assistance, financial support, and even the way people speak about and encourage or oppose the support of parties to those around them, then we must understand motivation that is not simply the result of party identification. Political motivations prove complex, meaning measurement of partisanship (and distinguishing this from non-partisanship) should reflect this.

As for the measurement of political independence, our results indicated a clear divide among people who do not believe party support can exist without partisan bias, and people who believe it is possible to be

entirely loyal to your personal political ideals (e.g. politically independent) while simultaneously supporting a party. Therefore, further research should endeavour to discern which of these theories holds more weight, and whether independence must be considered and measured entirely separately to partisanship.

Limitations and future directions

Many of the limitations in this study are based on how participants interpreted the wording of questions. For example, several participants appeared to interpret “political independents” as politicians specifically (who have received much media attention in Australia since their success in the 2022 Federal election), rather than citizens themselves. Further, when participants were asked about ‘support’ of a party, this may have carried different connotations for different people. Although this seemed the most neutral word to describe any kind of engagement with a party with the purpose of furthering a political goal, it is possible that some interpreted this to mean simple voting behaviour, and others a much larger degree of support of even social identification with a party. This difference of interpretation may be the cause of such polarised responses to the question asking whether one can be politically independent and support a party simultaneously, as the idea of one claiming political independence but merely voting for a party (particularly given mandatory electoral voting in Australia) may seem significantly less at odds than someone claiming independence but supporting a party by more invested and visible means.

Given the research by Huddy et al. (2020) demonstrating how differently worded items can create drastic differences in who may be considered a political partisan in the same population, it is clear there is still more research needed before we can trust terminology to consistently convey the intention of items probing partisanship and related concepts.

The other key limitation in this study is the limits of self-reporting to accurately describe a phenomenon. We found that most participants claimed not to identify with a party (e.g. in a traditional "expressive partisanship" sense) or those who did only did so because the party served directly as a vehicle for their values or goals. However, Huddy et al. (2018) provides robust evidence that partisans from four different European democracies (the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Italy) all consistently exhibit behaviours characteristic of the expressive approach[2]. Since approximately half of Australian citizens are considered "partisans" (Gauja & Grömping, 2020; Susan McKinnon Foundation, 2024), but most participants in our study claimed not to identify with a party, it appears issues of both implicit bias and measurement error may be at play.

Therefore, elements of expressive partisanship and a fear of partisan bias are certainly an important consideration when examining partisanship, and future research should aim to unite this with participants' claims of their own instrumentality during political engagement. For example, a

2 These included "stable partisan identity, motivated reasoning in defence of the party, the greater influence of identity than issues and ideology in shaping vote choice and political behaviour…and the existence of strong defensive emotions aroused by partisan threats and reassurances" (p 173)

measure of ‘partisanship’ should perhaps include some measures of an implicit bias to measure expressive forms of partisanship, as well as probing other methods by which people engage with politics and parties to measure the instrumental side of partisanship.

Conclusion

This study aimed to paint a picture of partisanship and the way people relate to or evaluate political parties in a non-U.S. democracy using person-centred, qualitative data. This included further exploring and integrating principles of positive partisanship, negative partisanship, and so-called ‘political independence’. Notably, in finding that positive and negative party evaluations fall along the same issue spectrums (namely values and policy congruence, morality, and realistic and effectiveness), we suggest that these two concepts are heavily linked. Further, those describing negative feelings toward political parties defined their ‘out-group’ in different ways (e.g. “all major parties” or “all left-wing parties”), potentially by selecting a category that posed the greatest threat to their personal political agenda, indicating a major role for Social Identity Theory in informing interpretations of this data. However, given that most participants did not claim to identify specifically with a political party (or if they did this was only because the party directly represented their personal values) we suggest that Australia’s compulsory voting system may lead citizens to treat political engagement as more of a practical rather than a personal identity-based process. Specifically regarding ‘political independence’, our

participants defined this in very similar ways to participants in U.S.-based research (e.g. Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), meaning this may be emerging terminology for politically engaged citizens who are not partisans. Interestingly, as participants were very divided on whether one could embody these values and simultaneously support a party, this is an important question for future research to consider.

Overall, we find a qualified use for the concepts of positive and negative partisanship as well as political independence in democracies outside the U.S., but implore the need for more complex theoretical and subsequent measurement to holistically capture partisanship (and non-partisanship). Conceptualising partisanship purely as an identity may be misguided, especially in Australia, where participants detailed many other political motivations outside of protecting their party identity. Future measures (and conceptualisations more generally) would benefit from a multi-faceted approach to partisanship, where party identification and biases are accounted for, alongside other driving forces and styles of political engagement.

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