

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 16: Partisanship

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1. Readings

Campbell et al., *The American Voter*

Green et al., *Partisan Hearts and Minds*

Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*

Some Views on Partisanship

1. **Fiorina:** a “running tally”
2. **Campbell et al.:** a stable, organizing political force
 - Formed at a young age and stable over lifetime
 - Partisanship → policy/attitudes, not policy/attitudes → partisanship
3. **Green, Palmquist, and Schickler:** a social identity
 - Not unlike gender or race; best comparison is religion
 - Stable throughout life; rare changes come from marriage or move
 - **Not** driven by different conceptions of reality; **not** inconsistent with coherent aggregate preferences
 - **Not** social validation: “They’re jerks, but they’re our jerks.”
4. **Mason:** your team

Readings

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Campbell et al., *The American Voter*

The Psychological Basis of Partisan Identification

Through extensive survey research, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes gave us the first evidence we have of:

- Stability of partisanship over a voter's lifetime
- Psychological party loyalties *beyond* vote choice in any particular election
- Partisanship shaping vote choice and attitudes — not the other way around

Readings

Green et al., *Partisan Hearts and Minds*

Partisanship as a Political Identity

The political self is for the most part eclipsed by other selves — cultural, economic, spiritual, sexual, familial, athletic, artistic. In those instances when our attention turns to politics, however, partisan attachments become highly influential, whereas more fundamental social identities, such as sex, religion, or social class, tend to have less predictive power.

The Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study

- A national sample of 728 parents of high school students were interviewed in 1965 and reinterviewed in 1982.
- **In 1965:** “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?”
 - Democrats (45%), Republicans (30%), Independents (24%), “apolitical” (<1%)
- **In 1982:** What candidate did you vote for in 1980?
 - Ronald Reagan received votes from 89.5% of those who identified as Republicans in 1965
 - 33.8% of those who identified as Democrats
 - 65.1% of Independents
- *It is remarkable to think that identities formed before the rise and fall of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, bell-bottoms, disco, stagflation, and gasoline shortages could so powerfully shape presidential preferences seventeen years later.*

The Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study

What is more, partisanship explains voting for Reagan in 1980 better than any other cleavage:

- 57.8% men, 58.6% women
- 58.2% Protestants, 60.7% Catholics
- 63.9% middle class, 47.1% working class
- Only race has the same predictive power (but is highly correlated with partisanship)

This is true despite a **decline** in the strength of party institutions:

- Urban political machines, patronage jobs, party activists, unions

What explains the durability of partisan attachments?

Green, Palmquist, and Schickler liken partisan attachment to religious identification:

- Partisan attachments form early in life
- They are the product of social environment and upbringing
- There is *some* relationship to issue positions (just as people select religion according to doctrinal preferences to some extent)
- But just as often the causality goes the other way: partisan social attachment → acceptance of party doctrine
- They persist beyond evaluations of particular candidates

What does cause changes in partisan affiliation?

- Social mobility
 - New jobs, social groups
- Regional and occupational mobility
- Marriage

What mechanisms explain this stability?

1. Inattentiveness to politics
2. Selective updating
3. Social identity theory (esteem)
4. **Partisan stereotypes + self-conception**
5. Others?

Readings

Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*

The Eagles vs. the Rattlers

Sherif (1954) experiment:

- 22 fifth-grade boys from Oklahoma City from similar backgrounds were assigned to two different teams
- Competition, violence, perceptions of each other, perceptions of reality

Analogy to politics: **partisanship** as **teamsmanship**

Henry Tajfel's *Minimal Group Paradigm*

Building on Sherif's work, was interested in whether *conflict of interest* was necessary for in-group identification and out-group discrimination. *Can groups be generated out of thin air?*

- Series of experiments assigning arbitrary group labels to subjects: Kandinsky vs. Klee, overestimators vs. underestimators of dots
- Unintended! Meant as a baseline.
- Yet even here, subjects awarded more money to in-group than out-group

People like to win.

Physical Evidence of Group Identification

- People unconsciously twitch their hand when watching a pin prick the finger of an in-group (but not out-group) member
- Brain activity: different parts of the brain process in-group-related vs. out-group-related information
- When learning a new task, people learn more quickly when being observed by an in-group than an out-group member
- Levels of cortisol in saliva rise when group identity is being threatened

In-group favoritism is not a conscious choice.

Partisanship as Team Membership

- Partisans view the other party as more extreme than their own, while their own party as not extreme
- Partisans have different perceptions of social and economic reality
- Partisans have “extremely unfavorable” views of the other party and prefer to live in neighborhoods without them
- Partisans want to win, not compromise; view of politics as zero-sum game
- Partisan sorting: partisans are less cross-pressured and increasingly isolated from each other
- Partisanship encourages political participation

Discussion

1. What are the key differences between Green, Palmquist, and Schickler's earlier views of partisanship and Mason's?
2. Do you accept Mason's view that American politics has come down to a competition between two teams? What about the role of issues, e.g. race, coronavirus, the economy?
3. How can Mason's theory (or any others) explain the *growth* of partisan identification over time?

Discussion: Normative Implications

What do these views of partisanship lead you to conclude about the possibility of a healthy democracy?

- Are there any positive implications in addition to the obvious negative ones?

Is biological determinism where the story ends? Can social institutions mitigate these problems?