The Role of Party Identification in Voting Behavior: Is There Room for Issue and Candidate Evaluation?

Noted American political scientist V. O. Key, Jr. once stated, "The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input" (Page 1978, 3). This political analogy lends itself poignantly to the conceptualization of voting behavior in the United States encompassing the ideas that are central to the debate around the import of party identification compared with that of issues and candidate traits in regards to vote choice. In a representative democracy, the vote is not a modest part of the people's voice; it is in fact fundamental for political participation. The vote is thus an echo. As Key points out in the quote above, it is important to consider the input as well as the mechanism that together produce the echo in order to understand the people's voice. "Voting choices are a product of both personal attitudes and social contexts, of a personal and a social calculus" (Beck et al. 2002, 57). A step removed from the actual importance of elements determining voting comportment, this relationship frames the debate around voting behavior.

In the literature reacting to the principal concepts drawn out in Campbell et al.'s *The American Voter* there are many references to voters' issue preferences and candidate traits as being important determining factors of one's voting behavior. Even with this seemingly opposing tone, there still exists among dissenters a widespread acknowledgement of the existence of the effect political party identification has on vote choice, albeit to varying extents. Indeed, until the apparition of this sort of debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the "so-called "Michigan Model," with its emphasis on the fundamental importance of long-standing partisan loyalties, dominated the subsequent decade of academic research on voting behavior" (Bartels 2000, 36), making addressing

the model in ulterior research practically incontrovertible. Since then some scholars have reinterpreted the role of party identification in vote choice, while others have downplayed its importance and nuanced its predictive power based "on a triad of factors as explanations of vote choice": party identification, issue perceptions, and candidate evaluations (Whiteley 1988, 961). The former group of scholars tends to have the aim of strengthening the conventional wisdom; the latter group is of course of particular interest in the analysis of the role of issue voting and candidate traits in the electoral function. In looking at the current literature on the topic, it is evident that studies on issues and candidate traits have been successful to a certain extent in checking the power of party identification and have been helpful in identifying social and personal circumstances in which these additional factors are important. However, party identification prevails as a more convincing and more important vote predictor.

In order to evaluate the current state of literature on voting in terms of political issues and candidate traits, it is necessary to discuss original works that relate the additional factors to the conventional wisdom as well as some of the problems that arise in these revisions. John E. Jackson in his 1975 article takes an idealistic approach to the voting process that includes party identification as an endogenous factor in the voting process that is required by the democratic model. Contrary to convention, he claims that "party identifications result from the issue evaluations of the two parties as well as from individual social experiences" (162). It is then also a choice and is a part of the electoral process. The notion that partisanship is born within the voting process is crucial to Jackson's argument because it effectively downplays the importance of partisanship. In fact, the statistical model developed in the article demonstrates that "Party affiliations,

issue positions, and evaluations are simultaneously related to each other" (1975, 171), suggesting an interdependency of party identification and other factors.

Furthermore, Jackson emphasizes a sequential process of voting of which the issues are central. The first proposition that "people's positions on the important public issues relate to their social, economic, and geographic situations" (1975, 162) provides the circumstances that in turn affect policy preferences. Next, according to the model, these issue positions determine people's evaluations of the competing parties, from which party identification is derived. Finally, the vote choice is "related" to candidate evaluation.

This sequence of social context, issue evaluation, then vote choice is founded on two assumptions which seem logically misguiding. The first, and most important to Jackson's argument, is the endogenous nature of party identification. This assumes that the first level in the sequence (social, economic, and geographic situations) has a negligible effect on party identification. Any substantial effect would logically undermine Jackson's direction and order of causality in issue evaluation and in perceived distance between the voter's evaluation and the candidate's stand. In fact, Campbell et al. circumscribe party identification to "the individual's affective orientation to an important group object in his environment" (1960, 121). Therefore, "partisanship could be a cumulative tally of affective evaluations which have their own dynamic separate from issue evaluations" (Whiteley 1988, 965). Affective evaluations are dependent on one's environment but devoid of issue content. If party identification is in fact exogenous or predetermined, then it cannot be an integral part of the voting process.

Secondly, it is founded on the assumption of a certain level of sophistication and political constraint on the part of the respondents. This assumption creates some methodological problems because the data is taken from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center's study of the 1964 presidential race between Johnson and Goldwater. The historical context for this contest provided voters with unusually clear party lines especially on "easy issues" such as black civil rights. Question of this nature are of course included in Jackson's analysis of evaluation of important issues. "Insurgent candidates," like Goldwater, "offer relatively distinct choices on the issues, so that more people vote on policy grounds even if their capacity to do so remains constant" (Page 1978, 103). Respondents were able thus to move through Jackson's voting process with greater ease to candidate evaluation. The particularity of the data leads to the bloated conclusion that "Voting decisions are largely motivated by evaluations of where the parties are located on different issues relative to the persons' stated positions and to a much lesser extent by party identifications unless people are indifferent between the parties on the issues" (Jackson 1975, 183). The last part in this conclusion leaves the issue-causal model open to criticism on the basis of voters' political awareness, their intensity on the issues, and the utility of their being interested. Here, exogenous party identification completely divorced from the issues would play a determining role. In this case, "it is reasonable to infer that changes in party attachments, in the short run, derive primarily from affective feelings rather than from cognitive judgments about issues" (Whiteley 1988, 981).

The strongest point of argument in Jackson' s analysis has to do with the fluidity of party identification, especially on the short-term. Larry M. Bartels takes into account the short-term factor and highlights its viability:

> While the traditional Michigan party identification questions are clearly intended to tap long-term partisan affiliations rather than short-term vote intentions, voters who support a party's candidate or candidates may claim a more general identification with that party, without having anything like the psychological attachment posited by the authors of *The American Voter*. (2000, 46)

That the Michigan Model hinges on the long-term stability of party identification "provides an explicitly political basis for partisanship, and it also accounts for the short-term changes in partisanship" (Whiteley 1988, 965). The political basis for partisanship then lends itself to the support of the endogeneity of party affiliation in the voting function and, consequently, the role of party identification is diminished to one of the interdependent factors of issue evaluation. However, as Whiteley points out, "the stability of partisanship is largely irrelevant to the question of whether or not it has a causal influence on voting behavior" (1988, 965). Briefly stated, this is because the instability can be explained by processes other than issue evaluation. In his article, Bartels launches a test of panel data over three presidential elections that hypothesizes:

> If expressions of party loyalty in the heat of a presidential campaign are significantly contaminated by short-term candidate evaluations or vote intentions, we should observe much weaker relationships between partisanship and voting behavior when partisanship is measured well before the campaign has even begun. (2000, 47)

The results of the test show evidence for a "lag effect" of partisanship and "provide no evidence that the apparent rebound in the electoral significance of partisanship is an artifact of increasing susceptibility of short-term considerations" (2000, 48). This test has serious implications for the assumed endogenous nature of party identification since it

removes a critical component of Jackson's issue and candidate evaluation that leads to vote choice.

The third in the triad of factors to be considered in this essay, candidate traits, has thus far been grouped into issue evaluation. Nonetheless, most scholarly works on the subject treat candidate traits as a part of candidate evaluation. This is a logical assertion because in relation to the vote only those traits which are evaluated by the voter matter. Furthermore, this is not necessarily part of issue evaluation. For the sake of the Jackson model candidate traits are best defined as candidates' particular stances on political issues, since they are a part of an endogenous issue-causal model determining vote choice. This implies that candidate evaluation is centered around the issues.

However, some literature introduces a new dimension of candidate evaluation based on a psychological perception of "personality traits" of the candidates. Psychological candidate evaluation effectively removes political content from the process at the same time removing candidate evaluation from the endogenous whole of the voting function. "This means that judgments about candidates make an independent contribution to determining the vote apart from issue perceptions" (Whiteley 1988, 966). However, facing weak data on its effects, one may well run the risk of inferring a spurious correlation between psychological evaluation of candidates' personality traits and voting behavior. Moreover, this psychological assessment admittedly accounts for a minor part of overall voting behavior (Miller et al. 1986). Thus in relation to the predictive power of party identification for vote choice, psychological evaluation of candidate personality traits is far less important. The circumstances in which these perceptions may be important is when analyzing it based on impression retained about

the candidates that stem from an assessment of political messages. In these circumstances, candidate evaluation is akin to Lodge et al.'s online model of evaluation, which relates political matters to the final candidate evaluation. With this model, evaluation of political messages can go under the guise of psychological assessment of candidates' "personalities" since the rationale behind the evaluation is forgotten.

Since national survey data measures more straightforwardly perceptions on issues, party identification, and the distance between them, it is more pertinent to analyze candidate traits on the basis of one's evaluation of the candidates. As done above, it is most interesting to then interpret candidate evaluation in terms of the issues at stake to determine how it pits against party identification and whether it is important to the vote choice.

The debate is thus restructured to center itself back on the impact of issues on the vote. The arguments above try to nuance party identification into a set of cognitive democratic decisions, but do not take out party identification, as it is difficult to do, to test the extent to which people vote on issues. As Page indicates, on the whole this is because of methodological difficulties since "It is no easy matter to sort out what affects what, among policy preferences, perceptions of candidates' stands, and evaluations of candidates" (1978, 102). The plethora of variables and the unclear direction of causality make the analysis of issue voting a difficult endeavor.

V. O. Key argues that voters could discern party differences on the issues if the parties states clear positions (1966). The current literature on the subject of issue voting heads in this direction. Beck et al. take into consideration the transmission of political information in a social context to demonstrate that "citizens are embedded in social

contexts that join with personal traits in shaping their voting decisions" (2002, 57). This examination eliminates much of the confusion created by methodological difficulties of determining the degree to which people employ issue voting and holds constant the import of personal attitudes. Through a manner of reversed deduction that alleviates some of the pressure on the citizen under Jackson's model to correctly evaluate issues, this shows the importance of issue evaluation to the vote choice. Furthermore, it includes the rationalist theories of voter utility recognizing that "the willingness to undertake a comprehensive search [for political information] is limited by the high costs" (Beck et al. 2002, 57).

The results of Beck et al.'s investigation of "the role of social intermediaries in contemporary presidential voting" are two-fold (Beck et al. 2002, 68). Firstly, the social context, in particular personal networks and groups, proves to be a substantial source for party cues. If these cues have bearing on the vote choice, then this has specific implications to the conventional wisdom in regards to the interpretation of party identification, which holds that party identification is a result of pre-adult and pre-politically consciousness socialization. Secondly, Beck et al. find that "partisan cues have a direct influence on voting behavior" (2002, 68). Thus, the social context sets up an evaluation of political messages that affects the vote choice. Conventional wisdom would have it that this issue evaluation has little effect on partisanship, the best predictor of voting behavior. Beck et al. do not argue otherwise but instead put these fixed personal characteristics in a dichotomy with social context. The duality of personal attitudes, of which Beck et al. say party identification is a part, and social contexts form voting decisions. This implies that party identification plays a secondary role. Unlike in

Jackson's model, however, this social calculus allows for an independent and exogenous function of party identification.

In order to fully discuss the importance of factors other than party identification in regards to vote choice, it is meaningful to look at the evolution of the role of party identification itself. If conventional wisdom holds true and party identification remains the most important determinant of voting behavior, then there is little room left to argue that issues and candidate traits are more important factors. Some scholars have investigated the presence and supposed volatility of partisanship and have come up with reinterpretations of it in light of new political contexts. They have generally found that their interpretations of party identification continue to have strong influences in voting behavior, oftentimes increasing its importance.

Specifically, Bartels examines the distribution of partisanship particularly in response to the noted increase in the number of independents and the corresponding decrease in the number of people who identify themselves with the Democratic or Republican parties. This evidence in favor of the thesis of partisan decline has the implication that the electorate may become increasingly more independent or non-identifying as older voters who are more partisan pass away (Bartels 2000, 36). However, Bartels makes the distinction that "Declining partisanship among non-voters may leave the distribution of party identification in the voting booth unchanged" (2000, 37). Indeed, in every presidential contest since 1952, voting partisan identifiers have out numbered non-voting ones, the latter experiencing a marked downward trend compared to the former. This is an important distinction when relating partisanship to voting behavior and this reinterpretation comes to strengthen the conventional position. The

conclusion is that the public has slipped "into an era of increasingly vibrant partisanship" (Bartels 2002, 44). However, one weakness of this model is one of the explanations as to why it reaches this conclusion: "One plausible hypothesis is that… [it] represents a response at a mass level to increasing partisanship at the elite level" (Bartels 2000, 44). This begs the question of where the elite level cues are coming from and whether Beck et al.'s social context, as discussed above, does not put it into check.

Responding to the analysis of the distribution of party identification, Miller's study assesses its volatility in relation to short-term forces. The results demonstrate that across regions and party affiliation, with the exception of the 1964 and 1972 presidential contests, "there has been no across-time decrease in the extent to which the national presidential vote is a party vote" (Miller 1991, 565). This conclusion certainly leaves little room for issue voting.

Party identification accounts for a great deal of the logic that determine voting behavior. Since the conception of the relationship between party identificaion and the vote, several scholarly works have attempted to downplay its importance as a predictor. In order to investigate the importance of issue and candidate evaluation in the vote, party identification is included in the triad of determining factors. The most persuasive point of argument in the revisionist theories include the social context of issue and candidate evaluation that lead to vote choice. Other theories reinterpret the role of party identification to find that it is just as important as before and often strengthened. Overall, party identification remains the most powerful determinant in voting behavior, but social context remains the key element with which one can discuss the opposing end of the spectrum.

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