



The Common Grounds of Adherence? A Qualitative Analysis of Young Partisans' Collective Identity

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Abstract

While party identification is one of the mostly used concepts for the explanation of vote choice, the components of party identification and the collective identity of party adherents were never explored systematically. After conceptualizing party identification within the social identity approach, we propose a research framework for the analysis of the collective identity of party adherents. Finally, in a first explorative attempt, we use this framework to analyze, as an example, the collective identity of adherents of the German parties SPD and the Greens. Although the two parties are part of the same ideological camp, we found that they both emphasize the importance of shared values, issues and goals as key components of collective identity, but they differ when it comes to the importance of the myth of origin, customs and lifestyle aspects.

Keywords

Collective identity · Party identification · Social identity · Germany

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1 Introduction¹

Since the 1960s, party identification has been one of the mostly used and successful key concepts in empirical election studies. It is a vital factor for explaining individual voting behavior. According to Campbell et al. (1960, p. 121), the concept of party identification is used “to characterize the individual’s affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment”, which means, in this case, orientation to a political party. In general, party identification is measured by a single question that asks for self-classification as an adherent or toward which party an adherent leans (Arzheimer 2006; Johnston 2006; Schoen and Weins 2005).

While the measurement of party identification was heavily discussed (Bartle and Bellucci 2009; Budge et al. 1976; Fiorina 1981; Greene 1999), almost all existing studies focus on party identification measured by a standardized survey question. However, we still do not know exactly what “party identification” actually means to party adherents. So far, the content dimensions, which are a part of the adherents’ party identification and that can be found within the collective identity of partisans, remain unknown. However, these aspects are highly relevant to the persistence of group membership and to the possibility of ideological changes for the political parties.

Our contribution aims to overcome these shortcomings by focusing on the components of collective identity of particular party adherents. In this paper, we analyze the shared commonalities between party adherents by providing an analytical framework for such an analysis. Therefore, we would like to launch a debate on the components of the collective identity of party adherents. Our contribution is threefold: First, we develop an analytical framework that allows us to clearly distinguish between the different levels of identification and to locate our research question precisely within the existing research on partisanship. We base our research on the notion of party identification as part of individuals’ social identity as well as their collective identity – as the shared beliefs and values of a group of adherents. Second, we propose a research design for analyzing collective identity derived from the social identity approach, one of the leading social psychological theories at the moment, and from the works of Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) and Meyer (2002). Last, we use this framework for an exemplified analysis of the adherents of two German parties. Based on focus-group interviews with adherents

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of the SPD and the Greens, we explore the collective identity of these party adherents. As our contribution is meant to launch a broader debate, our application has an explorative character.

First, we start with the theoretical background (Sect. 2). We rely on the Michigan Model for the definition of partisanship and discuss previous studies on the meaning of party identification at the individual level before we define the distinction between the individual and collective level of identity. We also draw on the social identity approach and discuss the components of partisanship arising from this approach. Afterwards, we use the studies from Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995; Eisenstadt 1998a, b) to develop components of collective partisanship and derive a theoretical framework. Next, we introduce the German party system and make guiding assumptions (Sect. 3). After a discussion of focus group interviews as means of data collection (Sect. 4), we explore the results of these interviews based on the analytical framework (Sect. 5). Last, we discuss the implications and limitations of our study (Sect. 6).

2 Theoretical Background

The Michigan Model (Campbell et al. 1960) is one of the most commonly used theoretical approaches for the explanation of individual voting behavior. Its key concept, party identification, denotes a long-standing, affective, psychological link with a political party (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 121). Party identification functions as a perceptual screen and, accordingly, affects the candidates' perception and assessment of the issues, positions and competences, as well as the identifier's voting decision (Campbell et al. 1960, pp. 133–134). Although revisionists questioned this conceptualization – especially the stability of party identification (Fitzpatrick et al. 2012) – this notion can be seen today as the dominant one (Greene 1999). The theoretical foundations of party identification are based on reference group theory (Hyman 1942). While reference group theory was one of the leading theories at the time of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), its inconsistencies and shortcomings were heavily criticized in the 1980s (Singer 1981). As reference group theory cannot convincingly explain the perceptual-screen mechanism of party identification, party identification is more and more conceptualized within the social identity framework (for the US: Green et al. 2002; Greene 1999; Kelly 1988; Weisberg and Greene 2003; for Germany: Mayer 2015, 2017; Ohr and Quandt 2012).

Social identity is generally seen as “[...] the psychological link between individuals and the social groups [...] to which they belong” (Herrmann and Brewer

2004, p. 5). It reflects a shared identity of a collective self in the tradition of Tajfel and Turner (1979). Other authors, often from European identity research, rely more on the term “collective identity” for the same matter (Fuchs and Klingemann 2011; Herrmann et al. 2004). This confusion probably arises from the different research traditions these terms are derived from. Social identity research has its roots in social psychology, while the term “collective identity” originated from social mobilization research. While some authors often use social identity and collective identity as synonyms (Herrmann and Brewer 2004, p. 6), others see collective identities as a part of social identities (Esser 2001, pp. 345–346). A third group uses social identity to denote the link between the individual’s in-group identification and the collective identity of the group as a whole (Klandermans and de Weerd 2000) in the tradition of Social Identity Theory (SIT). Social identity in this case refers to multiple in-group identifications of one individual, while collective identity refers to many people’s in-group identification with one group. We will follow the latter notion within this paper.

First, we distinguish different foci of party identification research to precisely locate our research question and present the specific benefit of our paper. Afterwards, we look at the question of what collective identity actually means and what its facets are.

2.1 Foci of Party Identification Research

For structuring the existing research on party identification, we draw on Kaina and Karolewski’s (2013) distinction of research foci of European identity research. Additionally, we rely on Roccas and Brewer (2002) as well as Herrmann and Brewer (2004). Although Roccas and Brewer’s (2002) study focuses on multiple identifications at the individual level, they use a meaningful distinction that we can apply to our case, namely the components of young partisans’ identity and in-group membership.

First, it is important to distinguish between the collective and the individual level for the exploration of party identification. At the individual level, social identity answers the question “Who am I?” and “What am I?” with the “I” seen as a shared collective self. At the group level, collective identity can answer questions such as “Who are we?” and “What are we?” Second, the composition of the in-group and the contents of identity are two distinct and important aspects of identity at both levels (Herrmann and Brewer 2004, p. 6; Roccas and Brewer 2002). Based on the levels and the aspects of identity, four foci of party identification research can be distinguished (see Table 1). Although these four foci of research are interrelated

Table 1 Foci of party identification research

		Level of identity	
		Individual level	Collective or group level
Aspects of identity	Composition	A The individual's self-concept and his attribution to a party > <i>Who am I (in terms of a shared collective self)? Who am I not?</i> Party identification	B Collective self-image of party adherents > <i>Who are we? Who are the others?</i> Collective identity of partisans
	Meaning and justification Content	C Contents of and reasons for the individual's identification with a party and its adherents > <i>What am I (in terms of a shared collective self)? Why am I an adherent?</i> Meaning of party identification	D Contents of and reasons for self-representation of party adherents as a "we" > <i>What are we?</i> Meaning of party adherents' collective identity

Source: Authors' own. Adapted from Kaina and Karolewski (2013, p. 19)

(i.e. the composition of a group is connected to the meaning of collective identity), Table 1 allows us to precisely locate our research questions.

The composition aspects of party identification (cells A and B in Table 1) describe the perception of the self and the differentiation from others for "me" as a shared collective self, and for "we" at the collective level. The content dimension (cells C and D) includes reasons why a person or a group identifies with a group as well as the components of this identification, e.g., the components of collective identity could include attributes, values and symbols that are used to define the prototypical group members as well as the group in general (Herrmann and Brewer 2004, p. 6).

Using this framework, we can see the existing gaps in research. The answers to the questions in Cell A are regularly measured in all major (election) studies. It is this cell that includes what is actually called "party identification" by Campbell et al. (1960, p. 121): the orientation of the individual toward a political party. Respondents are asked in the United States for their attribution to a group, "Do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat/Republican?" In Germany, the question wording is slightly different and asks about leaning towards a party: "Many people in the Federal Republic lean toward a particular party for a long time, although they may occasionally vote for a different party. How about you?"

The other three possible research topics (represented in cells B, C, and D) are mostly overlooked. There are a few studies on the meaning of party identification at the individual level (cell C), such as for Germany, Gluchowski (1983) and Mayer (2018), and for Denmark, Borre and Katz (1973) which used closed- or open-ended survey questions. However, the collective self-image and the group definition (cells B and D) of party adherents are unknown, as analyzing these dimensions needs methods that consider the importance of group context. As these aspects seem highly relevant for the persistence of group membership and the possibility of ideological changes in the political parties, we will focus on the collective level to close existing research gaps.

Although both dimensions of collective identity are underexplored and yet still offer valuable insights, we will especially focus on the components of collective identity (cell D), the shared common grounds of adherence, as we believe that these aspects are most relevant for the persistence of group membership. In addition, it is this dimension that moderated the possibility for ideological change in the parties.

2.2 Common Grounds of Adherence: Social Identity Theory and Beyond

As mentioned above, we believe that the aspect of shared common grounds is relevant for the persistence of group membership. This leads to the question: What is the common ground for party adherence? According to *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960, pp. 133–136), party identification is acquired during primary socialization and remains mostly stable throughout life. The reference point for partisan identification is unknown as Campbell et al. (1960) do not refer to this explicitly. In the existing literature, three main points of reference are named: party identification may refer to the party organization/elite or the general image of the party. Furthermore, it is also possible that adherents identify either with the group of party adherents or with social groups that are linked with the party (Bartle and Bellucci 2009; Green et al. 2002).

Only a few studies actually include references to the meaning of party identification (e.g., Borre and Katz 1973; Gluchowski 1983). Borre and Katz (1973) distinguish three motivational patterns of identification: a pragmatic type or partisan, mainly interested in electoral outcomes, an ideological type, that bases its identification on ideological values and positions, and a symbolic type, for whom partisanship mainly has an affective value. In addition, Gluchowski (1983) identifies five major facets of partisanship: affective and habitual reasons; a sense of

belonging to a party; stability, and the use of partisanship as a heuristic to save information costs. However, these studies only focus on the meaning of partisanship at the individual level, and do not discuss the shared commonalities of partisans. So, if we want to explore how partisans construct identity and the boundaries between in-group members and outsiders, we need to look elsewhere for developing a framework which can be used for structuring the analysis of partisan collective identity. First, we explore the potential of the social identity approach for deriving dimensions of commonalities because nowadays party identification is mostly analyzed as a social identity. Second, we draw on sociological studies, especially those of Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) and Meyer (2002).

A myriad of measures is available for the different dimensions of the individual's group-belonging that emphasize the aspects of in-group identification (see Leach et al. 2008 for an overview), such as the centrality of identification to the self-concept or the feeling of solidarity or being tied to other in-group members. However, the social identity approach does not focus much on the components of identity. According to SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979), social categorizations are cognitive instruments that are used to systematically order the social environment into in- and out-groups. An individual's social identity is "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1981, p. 255). In this sense, party identification is the knowledge that one actually is an adherent of a party combined with some affective/emotional value of this sense of belonging. When party identification becomes salient, the individuals try to relate to a prototypical group member to maximize the differences between their own party and a relevant out-party. Individuals try to stereotype themselves and try to come close to their cognitive representation of the group prototype; their notion of an ideal or real existing group member (Turner et al. 1987). These group prototypes are shared and agreed on by the other group members. They are relational as they depend on which group is perceived as a relevant out-group at that moment. Often-used prototypes are internalized by the individuals. Group prototypes consist of "a fuzzy set of attributes that are meaningfully interrelated, and simultaneously capture similarities within the group and the differences between the group and other groups" (Hogg and Smith 2007, p. 94). These shared group prototypes form the collective identity of party adherents, the attitudinal and behavioral patterns that are generally agreed on and are relational to a particular situation. However, the specific components of group prototypes are rarely part of research and, so far, have not been explored for partisans. One could assume that prototypes of party adherents may encompass attitudes toward certain issues (which distinguish the party from others),

value orientations, references toward past events and/or distinguished leaders, but also behavioral patterns how such members of this group should act.

For analyzing collective identity, the social identity approach does not offer useful categories, as the concept of a group prototype contains a vague, unsystematic set of attributes. As the concept of (collective) identity has deep roots in social psychology and in sociology, we will draw on the influential studies by Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) and Eisenstadt (1998a, b) for dimensions of the components of identity. It is our understanding that the studies of Eisenstadt and Giesen can be consistently integrated into the social identity framework for our purpose. Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995, p. 74) acknowledge that collective identity is not generated naturally but is instead socially constructed, depending on some “attribute of ‘similarity’ among its members”. They also recognize the fundamental role of in- and out-groups for the construction of social boundaries that are elementary for the production of collective identity². They develop a general model for analyzing collective identity and distinguish three types of ideal-typical codes that are essential for the distinction between the in-group, “we”, and the out-group, the “others”: primordial, civic, and cultural (Eisenstadt 1998a, p. 140). As these codes represent ideal types, “real codings always combine different elements of these ideal types” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 76). We assume the importance and components of the dimensions of collective identity vary between the parties, but not between the dimensions of collective identity itself. Furthermore, adherents of the same party may also vary, depending on age, origin, and status, and with regard to the social groups, specific values, beliefs, past accomplishments and leaders they refer to, especially if the party has different factions. However, the structure of collective identity, i.e. the codes they use, should remain the same. Hence, we expect to find a common structure of collective identity that is based on the three codes for a vast majority of partisans.

The primordial code refers to natural distinctions like gender, generation, race or kinship. “This boundary, though constructed, is perceived as naturally given” (Eisenstadt 1998b, p. 232). Here the distinction between “we” and “others” is deeply rooted in existing structures of the social world (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 77). This code links the in- and out-group to unchangeable social characteristics with a “basic natural similarity of its members” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 79). The explanation of the emergence and persistence of partisanship can be based on Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) cleavage theory. According to Lipset and Rokkan, European party systems were shaped by historical events such as

²Interestingly, they do not refer to the much earlier works of Henri Tajfel and John Turner.

state building and the industrial revolution which created persisting bounds between social groups and political parties. Conflict between the social groups led to an antagonism between the parties opposing each other at the poles of the cleavage (Bartolini and Mair 1990). From time to time, party systems still change and new divisions emerge (e.g., Dolezal 2010; Hooghe and Marks 2017). Even though the linkage between social groups and parties has lessened considerably over time (e.g., Franklin 2010), we assume that party adherents still see certain social groups as linked to the party and being part of the in-group (e.g., Bartle and Bellucci 2009).

The civic code captures “the routines, traditions and institutional or constitutional arrangements of a community” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 80). The civic code is somehow special, because it challenges the individual to actively engage in group activities in order to be accepted and to make it into the inner circle of the community (Eisenstadt 1998a, p. 140). This leads to a hierarchy within the community (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 82). The individual has to learn about customs and has to assimilate the rules. The basis for a community linked by civic codes is oftentimes some sort of epic event that creates a “myth of origin” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 82). This can be passed on within a community and serve as some kind of historical glue. Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995, p. 81) see certain virtues in the center of a community linked by civic aspects of collective identity. This allows for the construction of an ideal member who embodies all of these virtues. Hence, we expect that the collective of partisans shares a certain myth of origin, which may be an historical event or an accomplishment from the past which is passed on through the years.

The third “cultural” code links the relation between “us” and the “others” to some “unchanging and eternal realm of the sacred and the sublime” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 82), may it be “God” or core concepts such as “progress” or “rationality”. The boundaries between the groups can be crossed, unlike the primordial code, and should be crossed, e.g., by communication. Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995, pp. 83–84) perceive an inherent missionary attitude as part of this code; the in-group feels superior, based on their “faith”, and wants the “others” to overcome their errors. Meyer (2002, pp. 117–119) proposed a way to further distinguish the cultural code by referring to three central levels of cultural identity: the way of believing (the personal beliefs one holds)³, the way of life (the private

³As the way of believing refers to personal beliefs and does not deal with the collective level, we will only use the way of life and the way of living together for our framework.

life's esthetics, practices, eating habits etc.), and the way of living together (the shared social and political core values). Thus, we suppose that party adherents share distinctive routines and practices that are agreed on as a specific way of life for the collective. Furthermore, specific shared core values are a central part of the cultural code. As parties nowadays are neither so much rooted in social structure nor based on their historical alliance to certain groups anymore, but more often follow a programmatic approach to attract voters and adherents (Jun 2013), this should be one of the crucial features of adherence. Therefore, we expect in our case that young party adherents may easily identify a common set of values and principles that refer to the general principles of the political party.

3 The German Case: Guiding Conjectures for Young Adherents of the SPD and the Greens

For our case, we will first provide some remarks on the German party system in general and then the two selected parties. We will also provide conjectures for our illustrative case study of young adherents. Afterwards, we will present considerations regarding our sample of young party adherents and point out benefits and limitations of our research design.

The German party system can be classified as a moderate, pluralistic party system (Ismayr 2009). The 2017 parliamentary election reinforced the impression based on the 2013 election that two parties are still able to mobilize considerably more voters than all the other parties combined (Niedermayer 2018). However, this asymmetry becomes more marked with the CDU/CSU taking a lead of more than 12 percentage points. The system's dimensionality can be approximated with the left-right dimension (Bräuninger and Debus 2012; Stöss et al. 2006). The German party system is frequently grouped into ideological camps, with the CDU/CSU and the FDP forming the conservative/center-right camp, and the SPD and the Greens forming the center-left camp. The position of the Left party is still unsettled as its vote shares and its acceptance differ widely between the East and the West of the country. Especially in the West, the Left party is often not seen as part of the center-left camp (Stöss et al. 2006). Elections in the East German state of Thuringia and the city-state of Berlin in 2016, and the following coalitions with the SPD and the Greens in these states, suggest a different tendency in some of the East German states. After the 2017 federal election, the right-wing populist AfD (Alternative for Germany) entered the German parliament.

For our explorative analysis, we chose the Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens because they are usually grouped together and they share a similar ideological base. However, these parties have different historical backgrounds and traditions. The SPD is one of Germany's oldest parties. Adherents are traditionally located in blue-collar environments although this was never exclusive. Besides the Communist party KPD which was banned in 1956, the SPD was the only party that openly took a stand against Hitler's NSDAP. It was re-founded on this basis after the Second World War.

The Greens emerged during the 1970s out of new social movements on peace, women's rights, ecology/anti-nuclear energy and were elected to the national parliament, the Bundestag, for the first time in 1983. They especially voice environmental and social issues. The comparison between the SPD and the Greens is particularly interesting for the analysis of adherents' collective identity due to the parties' ideological closeness. So far, collective identity and its meaning have never been analyzed in relation to party adherents. By drawing on the three ideal-typical codes from Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995, pp. 77–84), we propose five conjectures for the codes that construct the collective identity of young partisans of the Social Democrats and the Greens. First, we generally assume that the importance and specific components of collective identity differentiate the party groups, but we expect to find a common structure of collective identity.

Conjecture 1: Young partisans of both parties can relate to the codes in a meaningful way and therefore share a common structure of collective identity.

Second, we focus on the primordial code which is closely related to the natural structure of society and which links the in- and out-group to unchangeable social characteristics. We assume that young party adherents see certain social groups as natural parts of the in-group because of long-standing relationships between parties and these groups; e.g., the SPD and the workers. However, the Greens only emerged in the 1980s, when these social structural bonds were already declining. Consequently, there is no single social structural group that is known as being closely linked to the Greens (Probst 2015; Spier and von Alemann 2013), even though certain social characteristics (young, urban, highly educated) are proposed as the stable social sub-groups (Dolezal 2010).

Conjecture 2: Young adherents of the SPD share a perception in which social groups are part of the partisans' own in-group, especially workers/the common man. No such linkage to societal groups can be named by GREEN adherents.

Third, drawing on the civic code from Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995, pp. 81–82), we expect that the collective shares a certain myth of origin. Most parties in the German party system were founded outside the parliament. Historically, the foundation of a new party is often related to some kind of crisis or to certain issues that challenged the political system, and to which established parties failed to offer adequate solutions (Niedermayer 2013, p. 66). One example of this is the emergence of the Greens from the new social movements – such as the peace and the feminist movement but especially the ecological and the anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s. Other examples are the re-founding of the SPD after its enforced dissolution during the Third Reich, and the emergence of the WASG (Wahlalternative Soziale Gerechtigkeit; Electoral Alternative Social Justice) as a split-off from the SPD, when many of its adherents and members were dissatisfied with the welfare state reforms of the SPD-led government.

Conjecture 3: Young adherents of the SPD and the Greens recognize a myth of origin for their own party. Because of the SPD's long history, this myth of origin is more accessible to these SPD adherents.

Last, drawing on the cultural code, we propose two further conjectures. Concurring with what Meyer (2002) calls the way of life, we assume that party adherents share distinctive routines and practices. Because of their origins, the Greens are deeply connected to certain lifestyles (e.g., acting in an eco-friendly way, taking an active part against nuclear power), and do not refrain from suggesting new practices for the population, such as the highly controversial plan right before the 2013 federal election (FAZ 2013) to introduce a vegetarian day per week in cafeterias. In earlier days, the SPD was deeply entrenched in the lives of its adherents from cradle to grave and offered a myriad of semi-party organizations and clubs, libraries, choral societies, sport clubs etc. However, their programmatic change to a catch-all party in the 1960s and 1970s was accompanied by a weakening of this strong link and a focus on social class. Nowadays, the SPD is characterized by a substantially broader programmatic approach, for laborers and employees, owners and workers (Spier and von Alemann 2013, pp. 454–458). Hence, no common perception about a specific way of life may be found.

Conjecture 4: Young adherents of the Greens have a shared perception of common practices and routines. No such perception can be found for SPD adherents.

Furthermore, core values that are agreed on by the group are central to the cultural code. Therefore, we expect that party adherents may easily identify a common

set of values and principles that refer to the general principles of the political party. This picture may also be affected by the party itself and the emphasis that is put on the communication of specific core values, e.g., the SPD's 2017 government program was named "Time for more [social] justice".

Conjecture 5: Young adherents of the SPD and the Greens agree on specific core values that are deemed defining for the party.

4 Data and Methods

To address our guiding conjectures introduced in Sect. 3, we conducted several focus-group interviews with young adherents of the SPD and the Greens in 2014 and 2016. We decided on focus-group interviews to analyze the collective identity of party adherents, as collective identity may not be measured well using a standardized survey (Duchesne 2013). Focus-group interviews have already been adopted a few times in political science (e.g., Bartle 2003; Duchesne 2013; Goerres et al. 2019; Goerres and Prinzen 2012). However, none of these studies has focused on the collective identity of partisans. As focus groups are still fairly new to political science, we first give an overview of the advantages and limitations of the method, and then we describe the focus-group participants and the process of data collection.

Focus-group interviewing has become a frequently adopted method for qualitative research in the social sciences. Previously part of market research, focus-group interviewing entered the social sciences about 30 years ago (Morgan 2006, p. 142). Focus-group interviews can be defined as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan 1996, p. 130). Morgan also identifies three components in this definition: (a) the goal is collecting data by using (b) group discussion as the source, taking into account that (c) the researcher has an active, directing role in this discussion.

These components come with caveats; the success of the focus group depends on the cooperation of the group. Due to the low number of cases, this method does not allow estimations at the society level, though it is perfectly suited for getting to the detail of a topic, as the researcher is able to direct the attention of the group to details while conducting the interview. The focus group offers a flexible setup in which concerns and questions arising during the interview can be addressed immediately. Especially for complex social phenomena, such as the meaning of collective identity of party adherents, focus-group interviewing seems

to be an excellent means of seeing how individuals are aware of their own identity and how they reflect that identity.

The 30-year tradition of focus-group interviewing in the social sciences has led to useful information about best practices (Krueger and Casey 2009). Based on these recommendations, we conducted four group interviews (groups A, B, C, and D) for illustrative purposes. Two group interviews included young adherents of the SPD (June 2014, group A and June 2016, group B) and two young adherents of the Greens (August 2014, group C and June 2016, group D). Group C consisted of four students, and group D of five students identifying with the Greens, while Group A consisted of six students, and group B of four students identifying with the SPD. Participants were recruited among students at the University of Mainz. We acknowledge that this research design comes with limitations for our results: students of social sciences are a very specific group in terms of their high level of political interest, their young age, their socio-economic status and their skills to reflect on political topics. However, there are benefits of focus groups consisting of students – especially for the research on party identity. Students are first- or second-time voters and therefore do not identify with a party out of habit. They recently had to consider their voting decision for the first time, which makes it more likely that they spent time and thought on the matter. Since our sample consisted of social science students with a high level of interest in politics, their voting choice is more likely the result of careful consideration. Therefore, we are able to learn more about the quality of the early stages of partisanship: for instance, is there already evidence for a collective identity? Although not representative of (young) partisans, students are a well-suited group for our explorative study.

During the recruitment process for the focus groups, the standard question for party identification was asked to select suitable participants for the interviews; only respondents who indicated a party affiliation with the SPD or the Greens were asked to participate.

Each group was homogenous in terms of age (20- to 25-years-old), social status (student) and party affiliation (strength ranging from moderate to very strong), but was mixed with respect to gender. All students were majoring in social sciences. We neither expected nor observed any difference in the participants' willingness to debate because of their high level of political interest; they were familiar with discussing political content and party ideology. This was helpful, because we quickly reached a comfortable atmosphere for our discussion and students felt confident expressing their political ideas with no hesitation and they shared very personal views. In order to enhance the students' willingness to participate, an incentive (a ten euro-voucher) was offered to the groups in 2014 (groups

A and C). Participants for the later interviews (2016) were recruited without an incentive. We invited adherents to the interviews with a week's notice. For the participants' convenience, interviews took place in a conference room on campus. In order to create a comfortable atmosphere, we proposed the use of the German informal "Du" to address each other. Participants were asked to choose a different first name to remain anonymous. We used three different stimuli to initiate the debate: several statements on party identification had to be ranked; an A to Z list of party adherents' attributes had to be filled out, and at the end of the debate participants were asked to draw a picture of an ideal-typical adherent. The meetings lasted about 70 min for each group and were documented with a voice recorder. The interviews were transcribed by a student assistant. We developed a coding scheme based on theoretical considerations from Sect. 2 and coded the interviews separately. Afterwards, we discussed diverging codings. After describing our course of action for the focus-group interviews, we analyzed the components of the party adherents' collective identity.

5 Exploring the Components of Collective Identity of Young SPD and Greens Adherents

By examining all three codes by Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) in this section, we will explore the conjectures that we deduced from these codes in Sect. 4. We make the conjecture that these components differentiate between the different party groups, but we expect to find a common structure of collective identity. First, we focus on the primordial code and analyze whether certain social groups are considered by the adherents as part of their own in-group. Afterwards, we take a look at the myth of origin which is related to the civic code. Considering the cultural code, we further examine the participants' common way of life (common practices and routines) as well as their way of living (sets of values and issues giving meaning to their identity). Finally, we will compare commonalities and differences between young adherents of the SPD and the Greens and discuss the accuracy of our conjectures.

5.1 The Primordial Code and the Perception of the Own In-Group: Linkages to Certain Social Groups

For young SPD adherents, there are clear perceptions about which social groups are part of their own in-group. In both interviews, they named several groups,

which are traditionally related to the SPD such as union members, the common people or the typical (industrial) worker. A few statements pointed to the effects of declining class distinctions and more heterogeneity inside the SPD:

On the one hand we find union members who are the strong core, people who really identify with the party and also engage in the party's youth organization. And then there are those who somewhat share the goals. The young social democrats who generally think social democracy is a good thing. Those are not strongly involved. And, then there is for sure the classic worker. Although this was recently discussed, because the "classic" worker does no longer exist. It is rather technicians or skilled workers. The SPD does not really have the classic collective anymore, I think, there is a lot of change (David, SPD, group A).

Although students and academics, as new social groups, were sometimes mentioned, the commitment of the SPD to benefit the "common man" with a low income was still seen as a clear distinction from the Greens as an academically oriented party with a strong focus on environmental issues.

The Greens represent the typical intellectual middle class. In contrast to this, the SPD is still a party for what I call the common people – here, union members and workers are represented and social issues are raised (Anna, SPD, group B).

Similar to the SPD adherents, the young Greens stated that their in-group consists of educated, economically well-off people, nevertheless, they do not mention a connection to bigger social groups such as officials, entrepreneurs etc. Instead, they described groups that are characterized rather by common issues ("opponents of nuclear power") or by common practices ("cyclists", "vegetarians"). One participant referred to "educated classes" ("Bildungsbürgertum") as a social group that identifies with the Greens. However, she put this into perspective instantly by referring to rather cultural aspects (way of life):

Well, we do see a lot of opponents of nuclear power plants and, well, somewhat educated classes. [...] They theoretically like the ideas of the Greens. But then there is also the conflict: well-educated citizen vs. Greens partisan, because on the one hand they are usually affluent and take a plane to their holiday destination twice a year, but on the other hand [they] go grocery shopping at Alnatura [a grocery store that sells local and organic food] (Jasmin, Greens, Group D).

This vague connection to societal groups was explicitly emphasized by one of the Greens' adherents:

Identifying groups of adherents – I find it very difficult, especially in Germany. Compared to the Greens' adherents, I have a much more uniform picture of adherents of other parties (Adrian, Greens, group C).

5.2 The Civic Code: Myth of Origin

In Sect. 3, we expected myth of origin to be an essential part of the collective identity of SPD adherents because the SPD is the only German party with a long-standing, proud tradition dating back to the 19th century. However, during both sets of interviews with young SPD adherents we had to hint at this aspect twice to trigger answers on this matter. We assume that this might be due to the age of our participants. When pushed into this direction, all of them had comprehensive knowledge of the SPD's history ("this big history", Horst, SPD, group A; "the good old times", David, SPD, group B) as well as the milestones in the SPD's trajectory. One historical event that was key to the party's image was its open resistance to the Hitler regime during the Third Reich: "I think the behavior during the Third Reich matters to quite a share of adherents. It was the only party that resisted against it" (Horst, SPD, group A).

Members of the SPD left the country during the Third Reich and returned later. Willy Brandt even became chancellor in the 1960s and is remembered as an icon today. When we asked Jonas to specify what he meant by "good old days" he referred to Willy Brandt:

When they fought for the workers, when they had social matters in their focus [...] and people with a clear opinion who enjoyed respect – like Willy Brandt. Even today he seems to be an idol, especially for young SPD adherents (Jonas, SPD, group B).

Among the young Greens adherents, the myth of origin was more present and was spontaneously mentioned by the participants from the beginning of the interviews. All participants mentioned somehow the anti-nuclear movement along with the environmental movement as the origins of the Greens: "that to a certain degree the environmental movement is common history" (Adrian, Greens, group C).

In both sets of interviews (2014 and 2016) the Greens party adherents were also influenced by a more recent event: the protests against Stuttgart 21⁴, which brought back the idea of grassroots democracy and civil disobedience to the agenda. These were thriving ideas in the early days of the Green party.

Stuttgart 21: awesome! I was part of that. Conservative parties rarely have moments like these, simply because of the nature of these parties; because they are all about keeping things calm (Lorentz, Greens, group D).

For both, young SPD and Greens adherents, charismatic leaders were associated with the success of the party. Joschka Fischer, the former German vice chancellor and foreign minister, has become a living legend among young party adherents as he symbolizes the development “to the minister from the stone-throwing rioter” (René, Greens, group C). Willy Brandt seems to be the counterpart for the SPD adherents. Surprisingly, Gerhard Schröder, the former German chancellor (1998–2005), was not named as a central figure, despite his major accomplishments in the rebuilding of the SPD in the recent past. Instead, there were remarks that indicated disappointment in him:

My father used to be a member of the SPD for a long time: [he] became a member at the time of Willy Brandt and left the party at the time of Schröder – classic case (Anna, SPD, group B).

More recently, Malu Dreyer (minister president of the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate) seems to have become an admired figure amongst young SPD adherents. They appreciate the same character traits in her that were connected to Willy Brandt: honesty, not being ashamed to have an own opinion, and with a clear vision of policy goals.⁵

⁴The protests against Stuttgart 21 is a local social movement that questioned the decision-making process in Baden-Wuerttemberg in the case of the new main train station in Stuttgart. The Green party sympathized strongly with the social movement and was able to win the following state election.

⁵We cannot say for sure if this prominence of Malu Dreyer is due to the sample of students from Rhineland-Palatinate where she became minister president in 2013 or her general presence in the German media and her prominent role as a coalition committee member of the SPD.

[...] during the last campaign one leaned – or at least I leaned – towards Malu Dreyer; not necessarily because she is such a friendly person, but also because the content was clear and she is a stringent person with a stringent position. [...] Yes, she is a confident social democrat who makes social democratic politics (David, SPD, group B).

5.3 The Cultural Code: The Way of Life and Living Together

Two sub-dimensions mentioned in Sect. 2 are of importance for the cultural code: the way of life, including common lifestyle practices and routines, and the way of living together, i.e. a shared set of values and issues that give meaning to identification. For the analysis of common practices and routines, a certain lifestyle, vaguely named as an “alternative life model”, seems crucial for the collective identity of adherents of the Greens. A certain district of Berlin (“Berlin-Prenzlberg”, Anna, Greens, group C) was agreed as being the typical representation of this concept of life; well-known beyond Berlin’s boundaries. As already described, this lifestyle is connected with a variety of groups (e.g., cyclists, vegetarians, vegans, townspeople, consumers of organic and fair goods, protesters, and academics). Group D critically reflected that these lifestyles require a considerable status of wealth since addressing all these “luxury problems” (Jasmin, Greens, group D) needs a surplus of time and money.

During the interviews with young SPD adherents, the connection to a certain concept of life was not as pronounced as in the case of the young GREEN adherents. Participants related this to the SPD itself as a very heterogeneous party that “represents an average of German society” (Kevin, SPD, group A). The terms “workers” and “labor unions” were the only marks of a common life concept. Hence, the young adherents do not share a specific way of life but rather a deep understanding of people in different circumstances. A unifying moment seems to be the custom of being on first name terms when SPD members approach each other. This seems to create a low-hierarchy image for adherents to the identity. We started both interviews with the request to name features of ideal adherents of the respective party. While the Greens group did not have any difficulties painting a stereotypical ideal adherent in colorful terms (“long-haired, bearded, knitting”, René, Greens, group C), surprisingly, the SPD groups struggled to describe a stereotypical ideal SPD adherent and did not come to an agreement. It was, rather, a common base of shared values that adherents saw as a characteristic similarity.

When asked about what made up these values, young SPD adherents quickly agreed that solidarity was the main feature along with social justice and an awareness of social issues.

Liberty, equality, solidarity. Considering these three key words, it is the common foundation that one shares with other social democrats. That is the connecting piece for me (Thomas, SPD, group A).

The first term I wrote down is justice, because on the one hand it is a key word that always comes up in connection with the party, but on the other hand I believe adherents and members honestly represent it (Emma, SPD, group B).

I see the SPD kind of as the ‘justice party’ that originally stood up for the workers, for families (Anna, SPD, group B).

The young adherents of the Greens agreed on a common foundation as well, although they did not label this as values but as a common theme. This common theme is connected with post-materialism. As thematic aspects, sustainability and ecology were named by all participants. For female adherents, gender equality and family policy were seen as central topics. Furthermore, the adherents pointed out their image of humanity: the equality of all men as well as their pacifist attitude. In addition, concrete policy issues like the “Energiewende” and the end of nuclear-power-usage were stressed.

The way a party places itself in terms of specific economic and social policies seems to be vital for SPD adherents, while the more general term “GREEN policies” was used as a synonym for a mixture of policies without mentioning any specifics. Adherents of both groups frequently referred to values and issues as key components of their collective identity.

First of all, it's the policy-level; simply the issues (René, Greens, group C).

For me, issues [come] before anything else (Guido, SPD, group A).

I think the difference between Greens and Conservatives is that Greens are much more value-oriented (Lorentz, Greens, group D).

So for me, the important thing are common values. Then there is no difference between workers and academics (Horst, SPD, group A).

5.4 Common Terms and Differences

With respect to the conjectures we proposed in Sect. 3, we sum up the following observations based on our interview material: We expected in conjecture 1 that the importance and components of the dimensions of collective identity would vary, but not the structure of collective identity itself. Indeed, we found young partisans of both parties able to relate to the different codes in a meaningful way, even though the specific components varied.

According to Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) the primordial code is important for collectives to differentiate between in- and out-groups. However, we assumed in conjecture 2 that only adherents of the SPD would have a clear perception of social groups, since the Greens had emerged at a time when bonds between societal groups and parties had already declined. This conjecture corresponds with our analysis of group interviews with both party groups. SPD adherents could easily name groups like union members, workers or the common man, while Greens rather described groups of people who are related to a common way of life, not to social characteristics. These societal groups were still connected to the SPD by the participants, although change in the composition of the adherents was also mentioned.

When analyzing the civic code, as indicated by the myth of origin, we found that the party history was more present and easier to recall for Greens adherents, who named the anti-nuclear/environmental movement as the founding event. History was not a central aspect of the collective identity of the young SPD adherents; only when hinted at they acknowledged the importance of the role of the SPD in the Third Reich. This supported conjecture 3 that adherents recognize a common myth of origin for their own party. However, this perception was less pronounced for the young SPD adherents, contrary to our conjecture.

For the way of life and customs (cultural code), we assumed that mostly young adherents of the Greens would be able to agree on a certain lifestyle. Indeed, we again found differences between the groups: only the adherents of the Greens were able to agree on specific customs and lifestyles, probably because the party's values are deeply connected with individual activism and a certain ("ecologically responsible") way of life. The younger Green party seems to be linked with a certain lifestyle that was associated with the terms "alternative", "nonconforming", and "post-materialism". Common symbols include the party's newspaper *Griinspecht* (green woodpecker) and the picture of the protesting stone thrower of the late 1970s. The young SPD adherents had major difficulties in agreeing on a common concept of life, which may result from its very heterogeneous base.

This finding matches conjecture 4 that the adherents of the Greens have a shared perception of common practices and routines due to the more homogenous set-up of the party.

Finally, our findings show that a common value foundation (cultural code) seems to play a major role in the construction of the meaning of “we” for both young SPD and young Greens adherents, as we expected in conjecture 5. Solidarity and social justice are key goals of social democratic collective identity, whereas sustainability and ecological accountability matter most to the Greens adherents.

6 Conclusion

While we know a great deal about the effects of party identification on vote choice and political attitudes, the collective identity of party adherents has not been explored so far. Our study demonstrates that this topic is fruitful for research and that it is relevant for further scientific engagement. We analyzed the commonalities between party adherents by using a novel framework adapted from work done by Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) and Meyer (2002). We showed that partisans base their identity on the three codes described by Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) for the construction of social boundaries, although the importance of the different codes varied between the parties. This variation seems to be a logical consequence of the parties’ different origins and organization types.⁶ On the one hand, our findings show that a common value base and agreement on central values are both seen as the major aspect of party identification in both groups. On the other hand, we saw major differences in the linkages to social groups, the accessibility of the party’s history and the identification of a stereotypical way of life. Therefore, our analytical framework promises to be a fruitful approach to the analysis of partisan identity.

Although our sample was well-suited for a first investigation, further studies are needed to show that our results are generalizable. So far, we have only analyzed the SPD and the Greens, both of which come from the same ideological camp. Furthermore, our sample of West German students is highly educated as well as very interested in politics. This has the advantage that we can show that a common structure of collective identity can be found even for younger partisans

⁶We already know about the heterogeneity of voters (e.g., Schultze 2016), and it seems plausible that the same holds true for adherents as well.

for whom partisanship is quite fresh. However, we still need to learn more about the collective identity of adherents before a statistical testing of our hypotheses becomes possible. The next research steps should involve focus-group interviews with participants who represent other societal groups. Follow-up research should focus on young party adherents and the question of whether collective identity is based on different aspects within this group. Younger adherents have a weaker partisanship. That is why it will be necessary to learn more about the aspects of collective identity from older partisans who have a more consolidated party identification.

For future research, a measurement instrument based on our results could be developed and included in a large-N survey. This could be incorporated as a follow-up to the party identification standard item. As the three codes are ideal types that are not mutually exclusive, we would suggest using four statements measured on a 5-point rating scale: statement 1) adherents of this party share the same way of life; 2) adherents of this party place the same importance on certain values; 3) adherents of this party belong to the same social groups, and 4) adherents of this party agree about important events in the party's past.

First, this would allow for comparisons of partisans' collective identities that are not restricted to a few parties. We could then see if there are sub-groups of identifiers within the parties (e.g., partisans within the SPD who base their identity on being a worker or on the SPD's historical linkage with labor unions and workers, or others who base their identity on the SPD's position toward social justice etc.). Second, this could also help to show parties their potential for ideological change – the more partisans agree on shared ideological positions and values, the more dangerous for partisan stability it is to change the party's position.

Even with this homogenous sample of a student population and two parties from the same ideological camp, our results interestingly show differences between the collective identities of the two groups of party adherents. They also confirm the importance of party goals, values, and norms as common grounds of adherence. As party identification is the key concept within the Michigan Model and one of the most used indicators in empirical election studies, enhancing our understanding of its components would help us to explore this valuable concept more thoroughly. By shedding more light on the collective identity of party adherents, we would also enhance our knowledge of key aspects of party identification, and about the restrictions of party transformation. If parties try to change their ideological position – their brand essence – as the SPD did in the early 2000s, the effects on adherents who base their identity in large part on these principles and values may be disastrous.

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