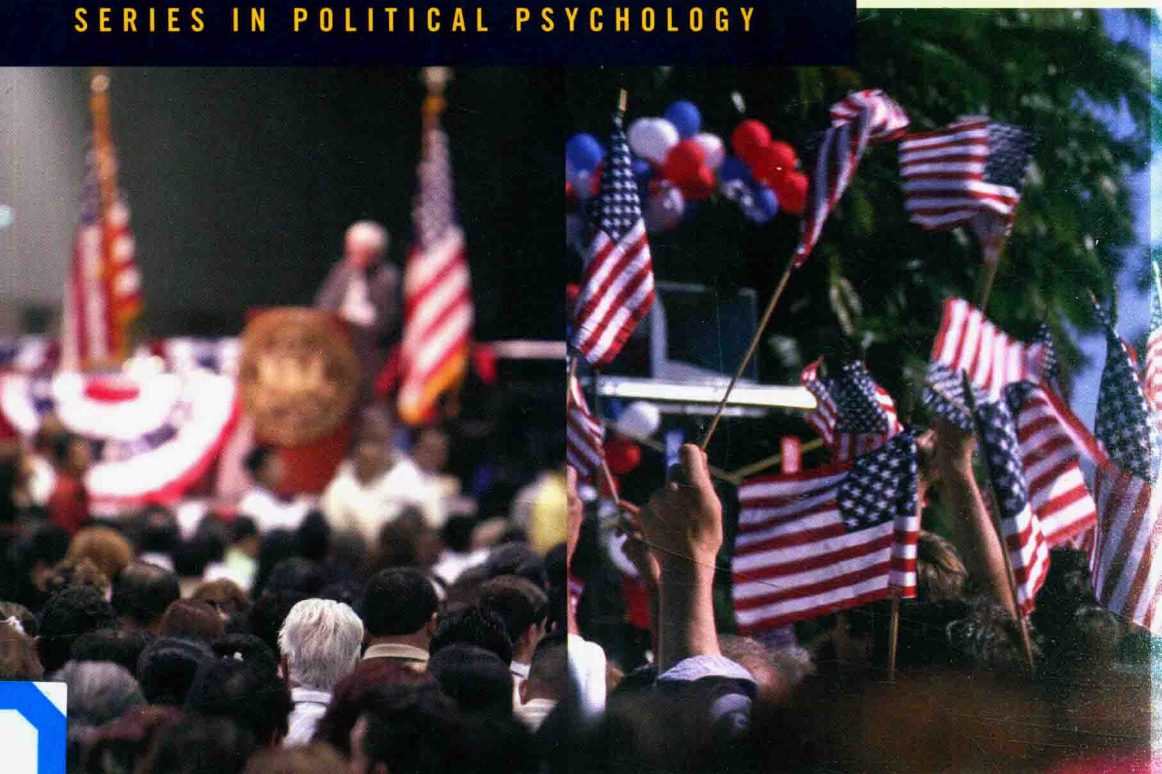


COMPETING MOTIVES IN THE PARTISAN MIND

How Loyalty and Responsiveness Shape
Party Identification and Democracy

SERIES IN POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

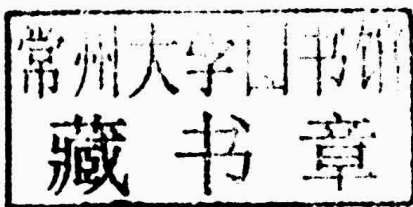


ERIC W. GROENENDYK

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Competing Motives in the Partisan Mind

Eric W. Groenendyk

*To my family, whose impassioned political
discussions inspired me and whose love and
support made this book possible.*

Preface

This book has been long in the making. In some sense, data collection really began decades ago around my family's dinner table. Epic political debates were part of the festivities when we all got together for holiday gatherings. At some point between turkey and pumpkin pie, discussion would inevitably turn to politics, decibel levels would begin to rise, and family members would divide along a predictably partisan cleavage. For my poor mother, who had inevitably spent hours preparing a beautiful meal, this was all quite stressful and unfortunate (though this never prevented her from joining in). But for me, it was exciting! My mild-mannered, middle class, Midwestern family was not the type to engage in heated arguments. But when it came to politics, all bets were off. Though the Republican and Democratic factions were almost identical in terms of socioeconomic status, race, religion, ethnicity, and virtually every other dimension one can imagine, they somehow managed to disagree passionately on nearly every political issue. It was almost as if they felt compelled to disagree, and everyone (except my poor mother) loved every minute of it.

By the time I eventually entered graduate school at the University of Michigan, I had a pretty strong sense that I wanted to study political psychology. As an undergraduate, I had written an honors thesis comparing the effects of interest group-sponsored ads with those of candidate-sponsored ads, and I had become quite interested in information processing and persuasion. Initially, however, I had no interest in taking on the subject of party identification. In fact, I viewed the party identification debate as a can of worms that I didn't want to open. But, as I continued my studies, I found myself returning to party identification time and time again. It was not until well after I had collected the data for the experiment reported in Chapter 2 and begun writing the National Science Foundation grant proposal that would eventually fund much of the research for this book that I finally recognized the project was really about the motivations underlying party identification. Without realizing it, I had begun a 7-year investigation into my family's dinner table

debates. As it turned out, what I had initially believed to be a number of disparate concerns came down to two closely related questions: How could party allegiances create such a fierce divide within my mild-mannered, middle-class Midwestern family? And if these allegiances could have such an effect on my family, could party cues really serve as efficient shortcuts for voters attempting to decide how to vote?

Writing this book has been a fantastic and rewarding experience. The moments of revelation made the hours of frustration worthwhile, and the wonderful conversations with friends and colleagues in Ann Arbor, in Memphis, and at conferences around world made the process fun and enlightening. Several people deserve special thanks for their help along the way. First, I thank the members of my dissertation committee (Ted Brader (co-chair), Nick Valentino (co-chair), Vince Hutchings, Don Kinder, and Norbert Schwarz) for all of their valuable advice during the development of this project. Nick and Ted have been mentors since my undergraduate days, and without the encouragement and careful feedback they provided on numerous drafts of the manuscript, it would not be nearly the product that it is today. In fact, it may never have gotten off the ground in the first place if Nick had not inspired me to pursue a career in political science and Ted had not given me work as a research assistant before I began graduate school. I will be forever indebted to them both.

In addition, I want to acknowledge my brilliant friends in graduate school—especially Antoine Banks—who helped me work out my ideas over countless cups of coffee, pints of beer, lopsided games of one-on-one basketball, and 2-hour phone conversations. My wonderfully supportive colleagues at the University of Memphis also deserve thanks for their encouragement and help in refining this project as it transitioned from a dissertation into a book. I also thank Abby Gross, John Jost, and the book's anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and guidance as I learned about the publication process. Adam Hogan, Ashley Jardina, David Plunk, and the staff at YouGov/Polimetrix deserve thanks for their excellent research assistance, and the National Science Foundation, Gerald R. Ford Fellowship Program, Marsh Center for Journalistic Performance, and Rackham Graduate School deserve acknowledgement for assistance in funding this project.

Finally, I thank my family for the support, encouragement, and inspiration they provided. From the political discussions on the porch with my Dad (Gary), to the stressed-out phone conversations with my Mom (Jill), to the methodological consultations during car rides home with my sister (Allison), I cannot imagine what this book (or I) would be without them.

August 17, 2012

Introduction

The language and imagery of sports abounds in American politics. From the start of the “race to the White House” to the “passing of the baton” from one president to the next, each campaign is a match in the ongoing competition between America’s two parties. Along the way, fans cheer, wave signs, and even paint their faces, while, in an awesome barrage of mixed sports metaphors, candidates “throw their hat into the ring,” “compete in the horse race,” “score points with voters,” and occasionally “play hardball.” Each side even has a mascot (elephants versus donkeys) and a team color (red versus blue). Like box scores, the latest tracking polls appear in the morning paper, and political pundits, like ESPN personalities, spend each day on cable television and talk radio endlessly debating which team will come out on top when the campaign season concludes. In the end, politics becomes sport, and this seems to be just the way we like it. After all, government and media are obliged to give the fans what they want.

But why is it that we get so caught up in the game? The answer is simple: At its heart, politics *is* a competition, and political parties *are* essentially teams. Therefore, in politics, as in sports, citizens get swept up in the competition, rallying behind the Red Elephants or the Blue Donkeys just as they rally behind the Red Sox or the Blue Jays. While this political fandom may seem innocuous enough, it has vital consequences for democratic accountability.

In stark contrast to the notion of politics as a sporting arena, scholars often draw analogies between politics and the marketplace. Just as firms supply products to fulfill consumer demands, parties supply policies to fulfill voter demands. Like consumers, voters are assumed to be selective, so parties are forced to compete for vote share. This competition not only ensures that parties respond to voters’ demands but also encourages policy innovation as each party attempts to gain an electoral advantage. In short, these theories suggest that we are able to achieve democratic accountability because voters demand quality from parties and respond to changes in their policy offerings. However, the implications change dramatically when voters act more like sports fans than consumers. If party loyalty gets in the way of citizens’ willingness to

respond to changes in parties' policy offerings, then accountability is clearly lacking.

Although brand loyalties are common in the marketplace, they differ markedly from the party loyalties we see in politics. For example, many consumers buy iPhones, iPods, and iPads because they associate the Apple brand with quality. Hence, the brand serves as a helpful shortcut for consumers as they make purchasing decisions. Consumers can be reasonably confident that they are getting a good product when they see the Apple logo, so they need not spend hours reading product reviews. Of course, if Apple were to start producing defective products, this brand loyalty would quickly erode. This would occur because consumers feel the consequences of their purchasing decisions. The same is not true in politics. As Caplan (2007) explains:

Democracy is a commons, not a market. Individual voters do not "buy" policies with votes. Rather they toss their vote into a big common pool. The social outcome depends on the pool's average content (p. 206).

In other words, each citizen has only one vote to cast. Therefore, unlike a purchasing decision, an individual's voting decision has very little impact on the product she actually receives. Regardless of whether she supports the Republican or the Democrat, she knows that her vote is extremely unlikely to affect the outcome of the election. Therefore, unlike consumers with brand loyalties, voters have relatively little incentive to change their party loyalties to reflect variation in the desirability of the products parties offer. In fact, the more the Republican and Democratic parties seem like rival teams, the more likely partisans will be to cling to their allegiances regardless of what the parties offer. Thus, while brand loyalties help consumers make efficient decisions, party loyalties may actually lead voters astray.

With party elites more polarized than they have been in decades (see McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Theriault 2008), the line dividing the parties is clearer than ever and the rivalry more heated. Although many of America's foremost political scholars once advocated stronger and more internally cohesive parties as a remedy for democracy's ills, many contemporary observers have come to question this wisdom. Proponents of the "responsible parties thesis" reasoned that, if parties could maintain greater discipline over their members, voters would see a greater distinction between parties and have an easier time holding them accountable for their policies (see Ranney 1954). However, now that the parties have achieved greater internal cohesion, it appears that proponents of the responsible parties thesis overlooked the "partisan rancor," "political polarization," and "policy stasis" inherent in such

a system (Rae, 2007). In short, they failed to recognize that a clearer delineation between choices also means a clearer distinction between teams. The challenge for contemporary scholars is to determine how party competition plays out in the mind of the voter, because our assumptions about the mind of the voter shape our understanding of democracy.

This book develops a theory of party identification in which individuals have potentially competing motives. On one hand, they feel duty-bound to hold parties accountable, but they are also driven to maintain their party allegiances. Whether parties help guide citizens to sound decisions or undermine democratic accountability depends on which motive wins out.

THE FAN

In politics, as in sports, loyalty is imperative once a person declares his or her allegiance to a team. True devotees hate “fair-weather fans.” If you grew up on the North Side of Chicago, you probably root for the Cubs—as your parents did before you and your children will after you—despite the Cubs’ century-long losing streak. Fans may admit that rival teams possess more attractive qualities (exciting players, a more stimulating style of play, greater physical or mental toughness), but team loyalties tend not to be rooted in these types of evaluations. Instead, fans’ allegiances develop out of regional, cultural, and familial traditions.

At the end of every season, frustrated fans of teams such as the Chicago Cubs feel like giving up on their franchise. They feel as though they simply cannot bear the pain of supporting such an awful team for another year. But the next season, when springtime rolls around, they find themselves right back in the stands cheering for their team and hoping once more that this might be their year. When it comes down to it, they simply cannot bring themselves to root for someone else. They grew up as fans of the team and they will probably always root for their team, because it is part of who they are. When they don their sweat-stained Cubs cap, they feel a connection to their family, their community, and the generations of Cubs fans who suffered before them. When the team occasionally wins a game, it feels like a personal victory, and when they lose a game, it feels like a personal loss. The team’s embarrassments are their embarrassments, and when they discuss sports with others, they refer to the team as “we,” as in “We lost again.”

Readers familiar with identity research may recognize these attributes. To refer to one’s group as “we,” to feel wins and losses for one’s group as wins and losses for the self, and to experience group embarrassments as personal embarrassments are all tell-tale signs of social identification (Greene, 1999).

In other words, part of a fan's identity is wrapped up in his or her sense of association with the team. Even if fans evaluate rival teams more positively than their own, their team identity is part of who they are, for better or worse.

Like identification with a sports team, identification with a political party entails much more than being fond of or agreeing with a party. It means seeing one's self as a Republican or a Democrat. Although the concepts of attitude and identity are often used interchangeably in the political science literature, attitudes toward parties are nonetheless conceptually distinct from identification with a party (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Groenendyk, 2012; Rosema, 2006). Whereas attitudes are *evaluative* in nature (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), identities are rooted in *self-conceptualization* (Monroe, Hankin, & Vechten, 2000).¹ In short, an important distinction exists between *liking* and *being*. In fact, this was the reason for conceptualizing partisanship as an identity in the first place (see Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954).

In characterizing the relation of individual to party as a psychological identification we invoke a concept that has played an important if somewhat varied role in psychological theories of the relation of individual to individual or of individual to group. We use the concept here to characterize the individual's affective orientation to an important group object in his environment.... We have not measured party attachments in terms of the vote or evaluation of partisan issues because we are interested in exploring the influence of party identification on voting behavior and its immediate determinants. When an independent measure of party identification is used it is clear that even strong party adherents at times may think and act in contradiction to their party allegiance (Campbell et al., 1960, pp. 122–123).

The distinction between attitude and identity plays out in important ways as we observe public opinion and political behavior. Being part of one's self-concept, an identity is something one is motivated to defend. Like our sports team loyalties, we tend to inherit our party identities from our families and our communities, and party images are often interwoven with our understanding of local culture and history. For many years, being a "true Southerner" meant being a Democrat, almost regardless of one's issue positions, and this is only one of numerous examples in which regional, cultural, racial, religious, and occupational identities have become entwined with party identification. Because party identity has such deep roots, change does not come easily. Like

1. For this reason, the terms *attitude* and *evaluation* will be used interchangeably throughout this book.

the sports fans described earlier, partisans may find that their political attitudes increasingly conflict with their identity, yet they continue to feel the pull of their party. Whether this pull is sufficient to compel continued loyalty depends on the strength of one's competing motives.

THE GOOD CITIZEN

Throughout American history, politics and government have been shaped by tensions between party loyalty and the ideals of objectivity and pragmatism (Schudson, 1998). Although partisans often act like sports fans, they view themselves quite differently. No one wants to admit that their team loyalty clouds their evaluations, and few are willing to confess their motivation to maintain their party identity even when they disagree with their party's policies. Rather than viewing themselves as fans, they see themselves as good citizens bound by civic duty to evaluate parties objectively. To maintain this self-image, they must sustain the belief that their party identity is grounded in reason and not mere affect. Of course, psychological conflicts are bound to arise as *the good citizen* and *the fan* attempt to coexist within the mind of the partisan.

For example, imagine a Democrat who, along with then-candidate Barak Obama, opposed mandatory healthcare coverage for individuals during the 2008 presidential primaries. This was one of the few substantive differences between the platforms of Hillary Clinton and Obama. Our Democratic partisan has thought a lot about this issue and has become committed to her position. However, by 2010, she discovers that her party—including President Obama—has unified in favor of an individual mandate. She now faces a dilemma. She may regain cognitive consistency by changing either her attitude or her party identity to match the other, but neither option is particularly attractive. To knowingly change her attitude about mandatory healthcare coverage to reflect her Democratic identity would constitute partisan bias and thus violate norms of political objectivity and pragmatism. On the other hand, to weaken her Democratic allegiance to reflect her disagreement would also entail a psychological cost. Thus, the optimal solution is to find some way to justify maintaining her Democratic identity despite the disagreement (see Abelson, 1959).

Of course, partisans need to be both motivated and able to construct these types of justifications. A partisan may lack the cognitive resources necessary to justify continued identification with her party, or her partisan motivation may simply be insufficient to warrant the effort. If either of these is the case, she will likely update her identity to reflect the disagreement with her party.

A number of works suggest that at least some partisans update their party identity to reflect their political evaluations some of the time (Allsop & Weisberg, 1988; Brody & Rothenberg, 1988; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Dancey & Goren, 2010; Fiorina, 1981; Franklin, 1984, 1992; Franklin & Jackson, 1983; Highton & Kam, 2011; Jackson, 1975; Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012; MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 1989; Markus & Converse, 1979; Page & Jones, 1979). Even Campbell and colleagues, who stressed the enduring nature of party identification, acknowledged that it is “firm but not immovable” (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 148). Thus, the challenge is to determine the conditions under which partisans are more likely to change their identity to reflect disagreements with their party and those under which they are more likely to rationalize away disagreements to maintain their party allegiance.

For decades, the party identification literature has been preoccupied with the question of whether party identification is predominantly stable or inherently changeable. By developing a *dual motivations theory* of party identification, this book attempts to push the debate toward the more pertinent underlying question: When is party identification more likely to help and when is it more likely to hurt democracy? The answer lies in examining voters’ motivation to hold parties accountable versus their motivation to maintain their team allegiances. Party identification has the potential to help citizens navigate their way through politics, but this requires a willingness to update their party identity. If they do so, their party identity will serve as a running approximation of their evaluations and thus function as an efficient information shortcut.² If they fail to update, then their party identity will likely lead them astray.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book is organized around a series of predictions—each of which is the focus of at least one chapter. These predictions are derived from the dual motivations theory of party identification developed in Chapter 1. The dual motivations theory posits that two competing psychological forces shape party identification: partisan motivation and responsiveness motivation. On one hand, partisans are driven to maintain party loyalty, but on the other hand, they are motivated to be responsive to their political environment. When individuals disagree with their party, they will attempt to develop justifications

2. Because citizens possess incomplete information, they will often make errors in choosing the party with which to align themselves. However, errors attributable solely to incomplete information can be assumed to be random and therefore to cancel out in the aggregate (see, for example, Page & Shapiro, 1992).

for maintaining their party allegiance despite that disagreement.³ Party identification change occurs when a justification cannot be found or if responsiveness motivation is simply too high.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide evidence of partisan motivation. Although verification of partisan stability is easy to come by, there is relatively little evidence to suggest that this stability is actually driven by partisan-motivated reasoning (Green et al., 2002). I look for evidence of party identity justification as an indicator of the influence of partisan motivation. If individuals attempt to rationalize away disagreement with their party, we can be assured that partisan motivation does exist. Otherwise, there would be no reason to produce such justifications. Chapter 2 focuses specifically on the notion of “lesser of two evils” identity justification. As partisans’ attitudes toward their own party wane, they may nonetheless justify continued identification with that party if their attitudes toward the other party remain even more negative. Chapter 3 investigates identity justification via issue reprioritization. When partisans come to evaluate their party negatively on a particular issue dimension, they may simply reweight their priorities in favor of issues on which they do agree with their party.

Chapter 4 considers whether partisan stability is actually contingent on one’s ability to justify his or her party identity. If partisan stability is contingent on the ability to justify maintaining party identity, then, absent the ability to justify one’s identity, we should see evidence of party identification change.

Chapter 5 investigates the psychological tension between partisan motivation and responsiveness motivation within the context of public opinion surveys. Whereas much of the existing literature on party identification debates whether partisans update their identity to reflect their evaluations or whether such findings result from measurement error, Chapter 5 seeks a partial reconciliation. Surveys create psychological tension by making inconsistencies between party identification and political attitudes salient. Because respondents feel a need to maintain cognitive consistency without violating

3. Throughout this book, disagreement will be operationally defined as taking an issue position closer to that of the opposition party than to one’s own party. People sometimes take positions that are more ideologically extreme than that of their party, and this may be reasonably characterized as disagreement with one’s party. However, because this position is still closer to the position of their own party than to that of the opposition party, this type of disagreement causes relatively little cognitive dissonance (and therefore relatively little pressure to adjust one’s identity). For the purposes of this book, such people are considered to be in agreement with their party.

norms against overt partisan bias, they update their identity to reflect their evaluations. However, these changes are undone as individuals rationalize away the inconsistency and seek new justifications for their original identity over the course of the survey. Therefore, variation that might otherwise be called measurement error offers important insights into the dynamics of party identification. The psychological tensions at play within the survey context are the same as those that exist in the real world.

Chapter 6 asks, regardless of how motivated people are to change their party identity, what is the root of this responsiveness motivation? Do partisans change their identity because they wish to identify with the party that offers them the most policy benefits, or do people update their identity in order to conform to norms of civic duty and pragmatism? In other words, is partisan updating instrumental to the attainment of policy benefits, or does partisan updating result from the need to express one's pragmatism?

Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the implications of the dual motivations theory for understanding of the role of party identity in democracy. Particular attention is paid to the efficiency of party identification as a voting heuristic, implications for parties' institutional role in government, and what to make of the polarized state of contemporary American politics.

Competing Motives in the Partisan Mind