



Partisan mobilization, cognitive mobilization and the changing American electorate

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Abstract

The concept of party identification is central to our understanding of American electoral behavior. This research builds upon the functional logic of party identification and asks what occurs if citizens become better able to manage the complexities of politics without relying on habitual party cues. Using the data from the American National Election Studies, we track the distribution of party mobilization and cognitive mobilization within the American electorate. Then, we demonstrate the importance of these alternative mobilization patterns by documenting strong differences in the content of political thinking, voting choice, and electoral change. The results suggest a secular transformation in the characteristics of the American public since the classic images of *The American Voter*, leading to a more differentiated and dealigned electorate.

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One can arguably claim that party identification is the most important concept in modern electoral behavior research. The early University of Michigan election studies demonstrated how partisanship was a core element in political identities and behavior (Campbell et al., 1960, 1966). Since then, party identification is routinely used as a predictor in a wide array of analyses, ranging from voting to participation to predicting issue positions. Indeed, the developers of the concept stressed its functional importance:

The present analysis of party identification is based on the assumption that the ... parties serve as standard-setting groups for a significant proportion of the people in this country. In other words, it is assumed that many people associate

themselves psychologically with one or the other of the parties, and that this identification has predictable relationships with their perceptions, evaluations, and actions. (Campbell et al., 1954: 90)

But just as the authors of *The American Voter* were demonstrating the analytic and predictive power of party identification as a concept, these ties began to weaken. At first, it was not clear whether this was a temporary response to the political controversies of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Now, a quarter century later, partisan attachments remain weaker than during the “stable state” period of *The American Voter* studies. Indeed, partisanship reached a new low point in the 2000 American National Election Study (ANES); 41 percent of respondents claimed to be independents in 2000, compared to barely 25 percent in the 1950s. Even in the highly partisan and highly politicized 2004 election, 39 percent said they were independents.

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105 These trends of weakening partisanship are well
106 documented in American electoral research, but their
107 meaning and interpretation remain widely debated.
108 Some analysts discount the significance of these trends,
109 or even the reality of partisan dealignment (Green et al.,
110 2002; Bartels, 2000; Keith et al., 1992).¹ Others discuss
111 weakening partisanship as due to the depoliticization of
112 electoral politics (Dimock, 1998; Milner, 2002), consis-
113 tent with Putnam's thesis of Americans' decreasing so-
114 cial engagement (Putnam, 2000).

115 This article tests an alternative explanation that
116 begins with the functional theory of partisanship that
117 underlies *The American Voter* model, and then asks
118 how the socioeconomic transformation of American so-
119 ciety during the later half of the 20th century may have
120 altered this logic. Using the long data series from the
121 American National Election Studies (ANES), we demon-
122 strate that social change has reshaped the nature of
123 partisanship and independence among the contempo-
124 rary electorate, with fundamental implications for our
125 understanding of contemporary political behavior. We
126 then illustrate the impact of these changes on political
127 evaluations and behavior.

128 1. A functional theory of party identification

130 Although not initially framed in terms of cognitive
131 theory and heuristics, the concept of partisan identifica-
132 tion was built upon a functional model. At the time of
133 *The American Voter*, most evidence pointed to the limited
134 political skills and resources of the average citizen. Pol-
135 itics was remote to many individuals, and even access to
136 political information was limited. Newspapers and radio
137 were the predominate sources of political information,
138 and the quantity and quality of information available to
139 the public—and the knowledgeable absorption of this in-
140 formation—was limited. Indeed, these constraints were
141 one reason why early electoral scholars were so critical
142 about the conceptual abilities of the electorate at large
143 (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960: 543; Converse, 1964).

144 The concept of party identification offered one expla-
145 nation of how the average individual managed the

147
148 ¹ Many scholars who question whether dealignment has occurred
149 often cite Hetherington's (2001) findings of a marked repolarization
150 of party images by the American public. However, he is not discus-
151 sing party identification. To use Hetherington's own words, it is more
152 accurate to say that he is describing "the increased clarity of party
153 images" over the past decade (2001: 623) based on specific likes
154 and dislikes expressed in open-ended questions. This is theoretically
155 and empirically different from long-term party identification, and the
156 growth of sophisticated non-partisans can actually contribute to
a clearer articulation of party images as we discuss below. For addi-
tional discussion of this dealignment debate, see Dalton (2005).

157 complexities of democratic politics. Without explicitly
158 using the term, researchers described partisanship as
159 a heuristic for organizing political information, evalua-
160 tions and behaviors. The authors of *The American Voter*
161 described partisanship as a "perceptual screen"—
162 through which individuals interpret and evaluate po-
163 litical experiences. Borre and Katz (1973: 79–85)
164 spoke quite directly about the functional value of parti-
165 sanship as a political guide (also Wattenberg, 1998: ch.
166 2; Miller, 1976). This cue-giving function of partisan-
167 ship is strongest for voting behavior, because this in-
168 volves making explicit partisan choices. Moreover,
169 party attachments are relevant to a much broader range
170 of political phenomena than social group cues or other
171 heuristics, because parties are so central to the political
172 process. Issues and events frequently are presented to
173 the public in partisan terms, and nearly all politicians
174 are affiliated with a political party (Fiorina, 1990;
175 Rahn, 1993). Partisan ties also affect political participa-
176 tion. Attachment to a political party draws an individual
177 into the electoral process to support his or her side. In
178 summary, partisan cues are an efficient heuristic because
179 they enable citizens to use their partisan identities to de-
180 cide what policies and candidates "people like them-
181 selves" support and then to translate this into political
182 action.

183 Because of this functionalist rationale, and their
184 image of the limited sophistication of the public, *The
185 American Voter* was quite skeptical of those who lacked
186 these partisan ties. Campbell and his colleagues
187 describe independents in the following terms:

188
189 Independents tend as a group to be somewhat less
190 involved in politics. They have somewhat poorer
191 knowledge of the issues, their image of the candi-
192 dates is fainter, their interest in the campaign is
193 less, their concern over the outcome is relatively
194 slight, and their choice between competing candi-
195 dates, although it is indeed made later in the cam-
196 paign, seems much less to spring from
197 discoverable evaluations of the elements of national
198 politics. (Campbell et al., 1960: 143)

199 Based on this logic, an increasing number of inde-
200 pendent would suggest negative implications for Amer-
201 ican electoral politics and American democracy.

202 Embedded in this functional explanation of partisan-
203 ship, however, is the possibility that the functional need
204 for party cues may change. W. Philips Shively (1979)
205 was one of the first to stress that the need for such cues
206 should decline as the political skills of the public
207 increase and information costs decrease. Thus, the tre-
208 mendous socio-economic changes in American society

over the past half century may have lessened the need for party cues by some citizens. For example, at the time of the 1952 election, over two-fifths of the American electorate had a primary education or less, and only a tenth had at least some college education. By 2000, the proportion of the electorate with some college education outnumbers voters with only primary education by a ten-to-one ratio, and those with some college-education make up almost two-thirds of the electorate. While there is not a one-to-one relationship between education and political sophistication, this tremendous increase in educational levels should increase the political skills and resources of the average citizen. Research suggests that education improves the breadth and/or depth of the public's cognitive skills and understanding (Nie et al., 1996; Milner, 2002; Popkin, 1991). Similarly, access to information resources and other prerequisites for informed democratic citizenship have grown by equal measure as the United States has become a more cosmopolitan, advanced industrial, information-based society. We are all aware of these changes in social conditions, but since they have evolved slowly over the past fifty years we have not taken stock of the implications of these cumulative trends for a functional model of partisanship.

One approach hypothesizes that these social trends lead to the *cognitive mobilization* of some voters as an alternative to partisan mobilization (Peterson, 1978; Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1990). Cognitive mobilization involves two separate developments. First, the public's ability to process political information has increased, as a function of higher levels of education and political sophistication among the electorate. Second, the cost of acquiring political information has decreased, such as through the expansion of the mass media and other information sources. Cognitive mobilization thus means that more citizens now possess the political resources and skills that better prepare them to deal with the complexities of politics and reach their own political decisions without reliance of affective, habitual party cues or other external cues. Consequently, the long-term dealignment of American electoral politics may be linked to a parallel process of cognitive mobilization.

The literature on electoral behavior is divided on the relationship between partisan mobilization and this process of cognitive mobilization. The growth of non-partisans in the US appears concentrated among the young, the better educated and the politically sophisticated (Dalton, 2000). Cross-national evidence similarly suggests that cognitive mobilization creates a new group of sophisticated independents, and the proportion of the public that qualifies as these new independents is increasing in Western democracies (Inglehart,

1990: 366).² Wolf (2002) demonstrated a longitudinal growth in cognitively mobilized non-partisans within the American, German and British electorates. Thus, this research argues that a more sophisticated public possesses the skills and resources to follow the complexities of politics and make political decisions on their own, decreasing the need for habitual party ties.

In contrast, Dimock (1998) claimed that the growth of independents in the American electorate is disproportionately concentrated among the less sophisticated sectors of the public. Similarly, Milner (2002: ch. 3) suggested that the erosion of social capital documented by Putnam (2000) should demobilize partisans who are less engaged and less interested in politics. Indeed, Putnam's thesis about declining political engagement apparently contradicts the cognitive mobilization thesis. This perspective implies that weakening partisanship is a sign of political disengagement within the American public.

This article tests these rival hypotheses as a two step process. First, we measure both the partisan mobilization and cognitive mobilization of the American electorate, and track the relationship between these two traits and the changing distribution of mobilization patterns over time. In other words, we are asking whether the cognitive abilities of independents (and partisans) have significantly changed since the original *American Voter* descriptions. Second, we examine the correlates of these different sources of political mobilization on electoral attitudes and behaviors. The results provide a more accurate assessment about whether the social transformation of American society over the past half-century has altered the bases of political mobilization.

2. Measuring party mobilization and cognitive mobilization

Although conceptually distinct, party mobilization and cognitive mobilization are often correlated in the real world. Indeed, the logic of party mobilization is that strong party ties stimulate political interest and involvement, and some causal flow works in the opposite direction (Campbell et al., 1960: 142–145, 250–256).

From our perspective, however, we need to separate these two dimensions to understand the changing characteristics of the American electorate. Fig. 1 presents a mobilization typology based on the cross-classification of both measures (derived from Peterson (1978)

² Inglehart finds sharp generational differences in the patterns of partisan and cognitive mobilization for Europeans, which suggest the distribution of mobilization types will continue to shift as a consequence of generational change. Sören Holmberg's (1994) longitudinal analyses of Swedish partisanship yields similar findings.

		Party Mobilization	
		Independents	Weak/strong PID
Cognitive Mobilization	High	<i>Apartisans</i>	<i>Cognitive Partisans</i>
	Low	<i>Apoliticals</i>	<i>Ritual Partisans</i>

Fig. 1. The mobilization typology.

and Dalton (1984)). This typology yields four ideal groups that represent distinct mobilization patterns and define the basis of our analyses.

“Apoliticals” are neither attached to a political party nor cognitively involved in politics. This group conforms to the independent originally described by Campbell et al. (1960: 143–145). That is, Apoliticals are located at the boundary of politics—they should be less involved in politics, politically less sophisticated, and less concerned about political issues and the candidates of the day.

“Ritual Partisans” represent a functional model of partisanship as a guiding political identity in the absence of cognitive sophistication. Ritual Partisans should support their preferred party and participate in party-related activities such as voting or campaigns. However, their party support should be almost a habitual activity, and political involvement or understanding is less likely to extend to areas where party cues are lacking.

“Cognitive Partisans” score highly on both mobilization dimensions. Their strong party attachments should stimulate involvement in party-related activities and the use of party as a heuristic. At the same time, this group also possesses the cognitive resources to be involved in politics even when party cues are lacking. Since the partisan and cognitive dimensions overlap, both influence their perceptions and behaviors.

The “Apartisan” group is the focus of this study. They are political independents, but they are independents of a much different sort than the Apoliticals. Apartisans generally possess the skills and resources necessary to orient themselves to politics without depending on party labels. They may participate in elections and other party-related activities, although they are less supportive of party-based politics, and their political involvement may extend beyond the partisan sphere.

The important feature of this typology is that it distinguishes between different types of citizens who are normally combined when either mobilization dimension is considered separately. For example, the *American Voter* described independents in terms that best fit the Apolitical category, but the cognitive mobilization thesis suggests that sophisticated Apartisans now comprise an

increased share of the independents. Similarly, Ritual Partisans and Cognitive Partisans often are combined, although we propose that each group approaches politics in a substantially different manner. Therefore, distinguishing between these four distinct groups should clarify our understanding of contemporary electoral behavior.

To study the groups in this typology, we separately measured party mobilization and cognitive mobilization in the ANES.³ The partisanship dimension is best represented by an individual’s partisan identification using the standard ANES question. We distinguish between those who express a partisan preference on the initial party identification question, and those who do not. The cognitive dimension is somewhat more difficult to operationalize with existing survey data. Cognitive mobilization implies that citizens possess the skills and resources necessary to become politically engaged with less dependence on external cues. In addition, cognitive mobilization implies a psychological involvement in politics so that latent abilities are applied to political decision making. Following a series of prior studies (Peterson, 1978; Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1990: ch. 11), we constructed a cognitive mobilization index by combining education (to represent the skills component) with interest in public affairs (to represent the political involvement component).⁴

³ The data in this research were provided by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research; only the author is responsible for the analyses presented here. Our analyses are primarily based on the version 1 release of the 1948–2000 cumulative file (ICPSR 8475). In addition, we included data on the distribution of mobilization types in Table 1 from the preliminary release of the 2004 ANES.

⁴ Ideally, we prefer a measure that more directly taps political cognition, such as Converse’s (1964) levels of conceptualization. Thus, we reply on an indirect measure of cognitive mobilization, but one that has been widely used in previous research (Peterson, 1978; Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1990; Wolf, 2002). The cognitive mobilization index is based on a simple additive combination of education and general interest in public affairs. The respondent’s educational level was coded: (1) primary or less, (2) high school diploma or less, (3) some college education, or (4) college degree or more. Interest in public affairs was coded: (1) hardly at all, (2) only now and then, (3) some of the time, and (4) most of the time. These two questions were added together to yield a seven point index (2–8). The cutting point on the cognitive mobilization index is an analytic decision. We set a value of 6 or greater as high cognitive mobilization. Over the 1964–2000 period, this scores about 40% of the combined ANES samples as high on cognitive mobilization. If one used the value of 5 as a cutting point, this would have added approximately another 25%, which seemed too generous a definition of high mobilization. The distribution of education is essentially stable for individuals during their adult lifespan, though it has increased dramatically over time for the electorate as a whole. The ANES primarily show significant variability in political interest across elections, with a marked increase in 2004. A trend line would display a slight increase in political interest over time.

Education and political interest are modestly correlated (the tau-b is 0.22 across all time points), but we combine the two items because both make an independent contribution to measuring cognitive mobilization (also see Dalager, 1996). The cognitively mobilized are those who possess both the skills and motivation to grapple with the complexities of politics on their own. A partial validation of this measure is available with a political knowledge battery from the 2000 ANES. Political knowledge is related to both education and political interest; and in a multivariate model predicting knowledge, both have substantial and equivalent independent impact, and their total impact is greater than either taken alone.⁵

It is not clear how the expansion of education and political interest have affected the distribution of these four groups over time. Because party mobilization and cognitive mobilization were positively correlated during the “stable state” period of the *American Voter* study, the growth of cognitive mobilization over time should have strengthened partisan ties if the initial relationship was constant. But partisanship has obviously weakened, and thus the question is whether these new independents are located primarily among the Apartisans or the Apoliticals.

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of mobilization types over time. During the stable state period of 1964–1966, when our series begins, the distribution of groups broadly reflects the patterns that Campbell et al. had previously described.⁶ Ritual Partisans—those with party identifications and low cognitive mobilization—are the modal type (47%). These are the voters who necessarily depend on party heuristics to manage the complex world of politics; if one could push the series back to the 1952 and 1956 elections of *The American Voter* study, this group would be even larger.⁷ In

⁵ The measure of political knowledge is drawn from the 2000 ANES. A regression model predicting knowledge yielded the following results:

Variable	Betaweight
Education	0.387
Interest	0.391
Multiple R	0.621

⁶ The interest in public affairs question was first asked in 1960, but the response categories changed in 1964 and so we begin the series in that year.

⁷ For instance, in 1952 a full 62% of the respondents had less than a high school education; this drops to 45% by 1964. Political sophistication measured by Converse’s levels of conceptualization also grew between the 1950s and 1960s (Knight, 1992).

Table 1
The distribution (%) of mobilization types over time, 1964–2000

Mobilization type	1964–1966	1968–1978	1980–1990	1992–1998	2000–2004	Change (%)
Ritual	47.1	37.4	35.6	29.9	26.0	–21
Partisan						
Cognitive	27.1	26.2	29.1	34.1	35.4	+8
Partisan						
Apartisan	10.0	16.3	14.2	16.5	19.9	+10
Apolitical	16.0	20.1	21.2	19.6	18.8	+3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	

Source: American National Election Studies, 1964–2004. For the construction of the mobilization typology see footnote 4.

contrast, Cognitive Partisans comprise a modest proportion of the public (27%) in the early 1960s.

Among independents, most are initially the traditional Apoliticals (16%) who lack party cues and cognitive skills to deal with politics, and thus remain at the boundary of electoral activity. The proportion of sophisticated Apartisans is much smaller (10%)—the smallest of the four groups in the early 1960s. In these terms, *The American Voter* description of independents was generally accurate at the beginning of this time series (even more so if we extrapolate back to the 1950s).

Over the next three decades, however, the erosion of party ties and the growth of cognitive mobilization transforms the American public. By the 2000–2004 elections (the last column in Table 1), the distribution of partisan types has changed substantially. Cognitive mobilization means that the percentage of Ritual Partisans decreases by nearly half (to 26%). Thus far fewer citizens now rely primarily on habitual party cues as a guide to their behavior, which was the logic of the functional model of partisanship. The number of Cognitive Partisans grows to become the largest group (33%).

Equally important, the decline in identifiers and the rise in cognitive mobilization has altered the nature of non-partisans. Independents were once predominately composed of the less sophisticated Apoliticals, but now Apartisans are slightly more numerous and account for one-fifth of the American public in 2000–2004. Apartisans display the largest percentage increase over this time series. Moreover, this time trend is not simply the consequence of expanding educational levels in the American electorate (although we consider expanding education an important basis of cognitive mobilization). Dalton (2000: 32–33) demonstrated that the growth of independents has been proportionally greater among the better-educated, so change among the better-educated constitutes part of this trend. In addition, if the initial positive relationship between party mobilization and cognitive mobilization from the early

1960s had held constant over time, rising educational levels would have stimulated a slight increase in partisanship. Instead, these new cognitively mobilized citizens have disproportionately turned into Apartisans.

Thus, the contemporary American electorate is significantly different from that studied in *The American Voter*; they are less partisan, but also more likely to possess the cognitive skills and resources to independently manage the complexities of politics. The growth of non-partisans is not primarily a function of limited sophistication and demobilization as some have suggested (Milner, 2002; Dimock, 1998). In contrast, growing sophistication has expanded the pool of Apartisans, as well as Cognitive Partisans. And the proportion of voters who approach each election based on ritual dependence on party cues has decreased dramatically. The mobilization patterns of the contemporary electorate reflect very different traits than the electorate of the 1950s.

3. The implications of changing mobilization patterns

The ultimate value of the mobilization typology is derived from its ability to discriminate between different patterns of electoral behavior. Our discussion of the party and cognitive mobilization theories has alluded to several potential consequences. For example, public images of parties and candidates should vary across mobilization types; Ritual Partisans may focus on party ties as a basis of candidate evaluation, while Apartisans are more likely to be sensitive to issue stances; Apoliticals may struggle to articulate a basis for their images because of their limited political sophistication and engagement.

Moreover, recent scholarship points to other differences in political behavior as a function of mobilization patterns. Sniderman et al. (1991) demonstrated that the better educated and the politically sophisticated place more weight on issues as a basis of their electoral decision making; less sophisticated voters rely more on partisanship and social cues. Wolf (2002) showed that mobilization patterns affect voting consistency and volatility. Dalton (1984) found that cognitive partisans tended to possess higher levels of political sophistication and use different modes of political action.

Indeed, the mobilization typology should have a wide range of potential consequences on citizen political behavior. To give some focus to our analyses, we concentrate on three areas that Campbell et al. (1960: ch. 6) initially linked to the functional value of partisanship. We first examine differences in the content of political evaluations as a function of mobilization patterns.

Then we consider differences in the correlates of electoral choice. Finally, we examine the consequences of mobilization patterns on electoral volatility.

4. Political evaluations

As noted earlier, Campbell et al. stressed the importance of party identification as a perceptual screen that helps individuals understand and evaluate political phenomena. Using partisanship as a guide, citizens have a basis for judging candidates and determining their positions on the issues of the day. The commonness of such party links made party identification a valuable heuristic for voters who lacked the ability to make such judgments on their own. In contrast, the cognitive mobilization thesis maintains that sophisticated individuals should have a richer basis of political evaluations, going beyond party affiliations to consider policy positions and other substantive factors.⁸

We test for these contrasting patterns of party and cognitive mobilization by examining candidate images. Presidential candidates are the de facto leaders of their respective parties, and thus party identification provides a potent guide on which candidate to support. But the impact of mobilization patterns should also run deeper, touching the factors that individuals cite in evaluating candidates and judging their worthiness for office.

Ritual Partisans should emphasize party cues, and relatively less often cite policy criteria or ideological factors in judging the candidates. Apartisans should be a mirror image; they should place less weight on party cues as a basis of candidate evaluation and instead give more weight to policy criteria. Moreover, because of their higher level of sophistication, we expect Apartisans to have more content to their political evaluations when compared to Ritual Partisans. Cognitive Partisans benefit from the cues provided by their party ties and their cognitive level. Like Ritual Partisans, they may

⁸ These contrasting bases of political behavior between partisans and cognitively mobilized independents were recognized by *The American Voter*:

Presumably, among people of relatively impoverished attitude who yet have a sense of partisan loyalty, party identification has a more direct influence on behavior than it has among people with a well-elaborated view of what their choice concerns ... the voter who knows simply that he is a Republican or Democrat responds directly to his stable allegiance without the mediating influence of perceptions he has formed of the objects he must choose between (Campbell et al., 1960: 136).

However, *The American Voter* stressed the low number of sophisticated citizens, and argued that these levels would not change dramatically.

judge candidates in terms of their party affiliations; and like Apartisans, policy should also be an important basis of evaluation. At the other extreme, Apoliticals should have the shallowest basis of evaluation, since they lack either party cues or cognitive traits that could provide bases of evaluation.

We tested these expectations with the open-ended questions on what respondents liked and disliked about the presidential candidates in 2000.⁹ The responses to the likes and dislikes questions were coded into a set of standard categories, and these are displayed in Table 2 for Gore and Bush. Certainly Americans should have had an extensive store of information on which to judge Al Gore, since he had served as vice president for eight years and then ran for president. But the first obvious pattern in Table 2 is the variation in the richness of political evaluations across mobilization types. Out of a total of ten possible likes or dislikes, both Apartisans and Cognitive Partisans express a diversity of opinions, mentioning 2.93 and 2.90 items respectively. At the other pole, Apoliticals gave a mere 1.32 responses; 38% gave no meaningful answer on what they liked or disliked about Gore.

Even more illuminating are the criteria that different mobilization types cite in evaluating Al Gore. Ritual Partisans are most likely to use party-related criteria, cited by 31% of this group; in contrast, they cite policy criteria nearly as infrequently as Apoliticals. The personal qualities of candidates also loom large in the images of Ritual Partisans. Apartisans provide the contrasting pattern of mobilization: the majority of Apartisans cite at least one policy factor as a basis of their evaluations of Gore, as well as candidate characteristics such as ability and personal qualities. Cognitive Partisans are very similar to Apartisans, although one group possesses a party identity and one does not; they cite a diverse array of criteria in judging Gore, including policies and personal qualities.

The lower panel of the table displays the comparable data for evaluations of George W. Bush, and the overall patterns are similar to Gore's image. Party criteria are most often used by Ritual Partisans. Apartisans and Cognitive Partisans most frequently cite policy criteria in evaluating Bush. Many Apoliticals (39%) lack any substantive evaluations of Bush; and they are least likely to cite policy as a criteria.

⁹ At the time of this writing, only the preliminary release of the 2004 ANES was available, which lacked some of the variables in our analyses. In addition, we suspect that the 2000 election provides a setting where voters were seeking cues on the candidates, since neither was an incumbent.

Table 2
Sources of likes and dislikes about Gore and Bush

Criterion	Ritual Partisan	Cognitive Partisan	Apartisan	Apolitical
<i>Gore</i>				
Candidate abilities	24	33	34	21
Personal qualities	30	44	43	23
Group ties	8	9	11	4
Government management	6	11	9	4
Party factors	31	27	30	16
Policy factors	27	57	56	25
No content	23	11	14	38
Total (%)	149	192	197	131
Mean responses	1.99	2.90	2.93	1.32
<i>Bush</i>				
Candidate abilities	18	34	37	18
Personal qualities	34	44	44	26
Group ties	8	13	15	4
Government management	4	8	8	4
Party factors	26	23	19	12
Policy factors	37	58	54	29
No content	28	9	13	39
Total (%)	155	189	190	132
Mean responses	1.78	2.85	2.80	1.38

Source: 2000 American National Election Study. Table entries are the percentage of each group that use each criterion at least once in discussing their likes and/or dislikes of the two presidential candidates. Totals exceed 100 percent because multiple responses were possible.

In summary, two important patterns emerge from these data. First, non-partisans now includes two strikingly different groups that are nearly equal in size but polar opposites in their characteristics. Apoliticals conform to the traditional notion of independents as lacking political sophistication and/or engagement, which is displayed in the large number who express no substantive comments about the major party presidential candidates. Apartisans, in contrast, have extensive views about the candidates, especially evaluating them in policy terms, much as we would expect of a rational independent voter. Second, the patterns of partisan and cognitive mobilization generally shape both the extensiveness of the information that citizens have about political actors—such as presidential candidates—and also the content of this information. Moreover, presidential candidates are extremely visible political actors, where interested citizens have easy access to a wide array of information. In lower salience offices or on matters where information is not so accessible, we would expect even larger variations across mobilization types.

5. From evaluations to preferences

The next step in our analysis considers how mobilization patterns affect citizens' decision making processes. How do different types of voters weight the evaluations we have just described in choosing between candidates, as one example of how evaluative criteria are translated into electoral preferences.

Our theoretical expectations are a direct extension of our prior discussion about the nature of party and cognitive mobilization. We expect, for instance, that Ritual Partisans are more likely to rely on party criteria in making their electoral decisions because their party identities provide a decisional guide, and these voters are less likely to have sophisticated information about the issues or candidates of a campaign. This leads Ritual Partisans to habitually support "their party" and to begin each campaign with these predispositions. Conversely, by definition Apartsans are likely to discount the importance of party cues. Their higher level of cognitive mobilization should lead to greater attention to policy criteria and candidate characteristics as a basis of their electoral preferences. This is consistent with the Sniderman et al. (1991) finding that better educated citizens place a greater weight on issues when making their voting decisions.

Expectations for the other two mobilization types are more ambiguous. Apoliticals are not likely to have well-structured political choices since politics is a distant activity; they neither feel strongly attached to the parties competing in the election nor have the sophistication to effectively monitor the details of the choices to be made. Indeed, since Apoliticals lack knowledge about the candidates or the issues; to the extent these are cited as criteria of evaluations, the content may be a quixotic mix of information. Cognitive Partisans should represent the contrasting pattern. They can use their party identities as a decision making cue, but they also may link these party ties to meaningful information on the issues and candidates of the campaign. Cognitive Partisans have the richest information field from which to make their eventual electoral choices.

The criteria used in making electoral choices are complicated, and the modeling of voting choice can yield extremely complex statistical models. But our goal is much simpler than building a comprehensive model to explain the maximum variance in voting choice. Instead, we want to see if the relative weight of these factors differs as a function of mobilization patterns. Thus we rely on a very simple model that we believe captures the essence of voter decision making. We used the candidate like/dislike questions analyzed

above to create measures of three core factors that might influence electoral choice: partisan cues, candidate images, and policy preferences.¹⁰ We then used these statements about the candidates from the pre-election wave of the 2000 ANES to predict Gore–Bush preferences in the post-election wave.¹¹ This is a simple model of candidate preferences, but it reflects the core of our research interests.

Table 3 presents the regression models using these three predictors of candidate preferences in 2000. The first analyses are based on the total sample, the next four models are run separately for each mobilization type. The total sample model indicates that these three predictors are fairly effective in predicting Gore/Bush preferences, explaining 50 percent of the variance. Each of the three potential predictors—partisan cues, candidate images, and policy preferences—carries a substantial weight. The relative impact of each predictor is less central to our research, however, because this depends on how one attributes meaning to the responses to the likes/dislike questions.¹² Instead, we want to focus on how the weight of these three factors varies across our four groups.

Our clearest expectations involve the relative weight of party cues between Ritual Partisans and Apartsans. As we expected, the weight that Ritual Partisans give to party cues ($b = 13.84$) is nearly twice as great as

¹⁰ For each of these three areas we followed a very direct measurement strategy. For instance, for party cues we counted the number of times the respondent mentioned party criteria as something they liked about a candidate or disliked about their opponent. Then the difference between the Gore and Bush party criteria gave an overall measure of whether party cues leaned more toward one candidate or the other. This procedure was replicated for the policy responses, and the candidate abilities and qualities criteria. In principle, each scale is a count of the relative candidate advantage on each dimension, with a theoretical maximum of +10 (pro Gore) and a theoretical minimum of –10 (pro Bush).

¹¹ Instead of predicting voting choice, we measured candidate preferences as the difference between Gore and Bush ratings on the thermometer scale. The thermometer difference is closely related to vote choice, but it has the additional advantage that it is available for non-voters, who are a large proportion of the Apolitical category. It would be problematic to include Apoliticals in an analysis based on vote. In addition, the thermometer difference scale provides a continuous metric for our dependent variable, ranging from +100 (pro Gore) to –100 (pro Bush).

¹² See, for example, Rahn (1993). Even this simple model illustrates the complexity of modeling candidate preferences. For instance, the simple statement of a policy like or dislike is not sufficient evidence that this is an informed statement about the candidate's actual policy stance. And policy preferences may be a projection of party preferences for some voters. Thus, we do not make claims about the relative weight of the three predictors for the total electorate based on this model.

Table 3
The correlates of candidate preferences

Predictor	Total sample		Ritual Partisan	Cognitive Partisan	Apartisan	Apolitical
	β	b				
Partisan cues	0.23	12.65 (1.02)	13.84 (1.94)	11.96 (1.59)	7.51 (2.26)	19.25 (3.39)
Candidate images	0.35	8.43 (0.46)	9.70 (1.22)	8.83 (0.68)	8.06 (0.88)	5.56 (1.26)
Policy preferences	0.40	9.16 (0.44)	8.83 (1.19)	9.36 (0.58)	8.52 (0.91)	11.57 (1.52)
Constant		-2.74 (0.88)	1.59 (1.88)	-5.73 (1.47)	-5.01 (1.83)	0.13 (1.93)
R^2		0.50	0.45	0.62	0.46	0.33

Source: 2000 American National Election Study. Table entries are the unstandardized regression coefficients using the responses from the likes/dislike questions to predict differences in the Gore minus Bush thermometer scores. Standard errors are in parentheses. For the total sample we also present the standardized coefficients (β).

Apartisans ($b = 7.51$). Cognitive Partisans also give considerable weight to party cues ($b = 11.96$), although this factor does not dominate their decision making as it tends to do for Ritual Partisans. Also as expected, Cognitive Partisans have the richest source of political cues and thus the most structured behavior; the model explains nearly two-thirds of the variance for Cognitive Partisans, compared to under half for Ritual Partisans and Apartisans.

The obvious anomaly, however, is the model for Apoliticals. On the one hand, the three predictors are less effective in predicting candidate preferences, explaining only a third of the total variance. On the other hand, the slopes for partisan cues ($b = 19.25$) and policy preferences ($b = 11.57$) are stronger than for any other group. One might claim that without much political knowledge, Apoliticals have to turn to something as a basis of their candidate choices (at least for the minority who do vote), and partisan cues are the most accessible source of information about Gore and Bush. But we also previously demonstrated that Apoliticals are least likely to cite partisan criteria in evaluating either candidate (Table 2). Similarly, while policy preferences are strongly related to candidate preferences for Apoliticals, we also found that Apoliticals are least likely to make policy references about either candidate (and we suspect these policy references have less substantive content).

The pattern for Apoliticals led us to reconsider how to judge the weight of each predictor in explaining candidate preferences. Measuring the impact of a variable in the context of our research is like measuring force in physics. Force is a function of the mass of the object and the velocity it is traveling. The “mass” of each predictor can be represented by the amount of information existing in each of the three categories, which we measure by the total number of likes and dislikes for both candidates in the category. That is, the “mass” of party cues is the total number of party references given in the questions about likes/dislikes of Gore and Bush. The “velocity” of a predictor is its strength as estimated

by the slope in the regression models in Table 3. Thus, the total impact of party as a basis of decision making is the product of “mass” times “velocity”.¹³ This is analogous to Donald’s Stokes (1966) method in calculating the components of electoral decision making.

Fig. 2 presents our estimates of the causal force of the three factors—party cues, candidate image, and policy preferences—for each of the four mobilization types. Now, the information deficit of Apoliticals is apparent. Even if a cue has a strong weight, there is little mass to exert much force. Thus all three predictors exert relatively little impact on the candidate preferences of Apoliticals. At the same time, the contrasting bases of evaluation for Ritual Partisans and Apartisans is now even more clearly apparent. Party cues exert more than twice as much force for Ritual Partisans than for Apartisans. Conversely, the impact of candidate image and policy preferences is substantially greater among Apartisans (which reflects a comparable causal weight but a much greater mass of such references among Apartisans). Finally, Cognitive Partisans present a pattern that straddles the two previous groups; the force of party cues nearly matches Ritual Partisans, and the force of issues and candidate images nearly matches that of Apartisans. This suggests that Cognitive Partisans may come closest to Fiorina’s (2002) model of partisanship as a rational summation of political positions, where a high volume of issue preferences and strong candidate images may alter partisan identities. Lacking

¹³ We first counted the total number of times each criterion was used in evaluating either the likes or dislikes of both Gore and Bush; the resulting scales thus run from zero to a theoretical maximum of 20 (five possible mentions of likes and dislikes for two candidates). We then multiplied the mean on each of these scales times the unstandardized regression coefficient in Table 3. For instance, the total force of candidate images for Apartisans is 7.51 (the regression weight from Table 3) times 0.56 (the mean number of mentions of partisan cues by Apartisans); this equals 4.43 which is plotted in Fig. 2.

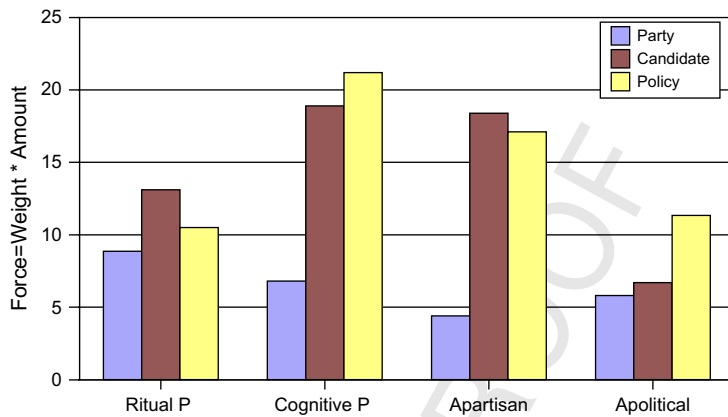


Fig. 2. Information base for candidate evaluations. Source: 2000 American National Election Study.

such political content, the partisan identities of Ritual Partisans may be less mutable.

6. Mobilization patterns and electoral change

Since the correlates of candidate preferences differ across mobilization types, this has implications for electoral change in America. For example, other research has demonstrated that voters are making decisions later in the electoral cycle and that electoral volatility is increasing over time (Wattenberg, 1998; Dalton, 2000: ch. 3). This may partially reflect changes in the bases of political mobilization. The decrease in the number of Ritual Partisans and the increase in Cognitive Partisans and Apartisans should shift the sources of voting choice from long-term habitual party ties toward more weight for short-term factors such as the issues and candidates of the campaign. In other words, the shifting bases of mobilization should contribute to the increasing electoral volatility over the past several decades.

We can test the impact of mobilization patterns on electoral change with three examples: when voting decisions are made, party vote switching between elections, and split ticket voting. The first panel of Table 4 describes the percentage of each group that says they decided their presidential voting preference after the nominating conventions. These data demonstrate that citizens mobilized by partisan forces routinely enter the campaign with their preferences already decided. In the 1964–1966 surveys, for instance, only 31% of Ritual Partisans said they decided after the conventions; most Ritual Partisans are the “yellow dog Democrats” (and their Republican equivalents) who decide who to vote for before the campaign even begins. Conversely, the majority of Apoliticals and Apartisans say

they decided during the campaign, although we have seen that these two groups vary greatly in the information they use in deciding their preferences.

A second indicator of growing electoral volatility is the percentage of voters who say they switch their votes between elections. While recall data are imprecise, this imprecision should be relatively constant over time; yet the percentage of the public who report switching their party choices between elections has been increasing (Wattenberg, 1998). The second panel of Table 4 reports the percentage of each group who report switching their two-party presidential vote in adjacent elections. Again, Ritual Partisans and Cognitive Partisans are the most stable across the four time periods in the table. Apartisans and Apoliticals display somewhat higher levels of vote switching, but it is worthwhile to consider the contrasting processes of these two non-partisan groups. Apartisans possess more information and more conceptual tools for judging the candidates at each election, thus vote switching is more likely to evolve from a deliberative decision making process. Apoliticals, in contrast, have a limited store of political knowledge and limited information about each campaign; indeed, the majority of Apoliticals do not vote in both elections. Rather than reasoned choice, voting switching among Apoliticals may reflect their lack of political grounding.

The third panel in Table 4 displays the percentages who report split-ticket voting between their presidential and congressional voting choices. These data display the now familiar contrast as a function of party mobilization. Ritual and Cognitive Partisans both report relatively low levels of split-ticket voting; for the former because of their need to rely on party cues as a base of choice, for the latter because their partisanship is reinforced by more extensive political information. In

Table 4
The relationship between mobilization types and electoral change

Mobilization type and voting behavior	1964–1966	1968–1978	1980–1990	1992–2000
<i>Decide during campaign</i>				
Ritual Partisan	31	38	36	41
Cognitive Partisan	31	36	30	31
Apartisan	49	49	54	54
Apolitical	45	54	48	61
<i>Switched two party presidential vote between elections</i>				
Ritual Partisan	16	22	17	14
Cognitive Partisan	18	16	12	9
Apartisan	22	26	22	20
Apolitical	25	31	24	27
<i>Split presidential/congress vote</i>				
Ritual Partisan	12	21	24	17
Cognitive Partisan	18	24	21	17
Apartisan	23	32	34	25
Apolitical	11	29	33	29

Source: American National Election Studies, 1964–2000. For the construction of the mobilization typology see footnote 4.

contrast, Apartisans and Apoliticals are both more likely to divide their party support between presidential and congressional offices.

The various indicators of electoral change in Table 4 are generally consistent across mobilization groups. By and large, these differences also seem to be fairly stable over this four decade period. Thus, the evidence of weakening party voting over time—later decisions during the campaign, more volatility between elections, and more split-ticket voting—can at least partially be traced to the changing distribution of mobilization patterns within the American electorate. The decrease in Ritual Partisans over time, and the concomitant increase in Apartisans, shifts the basis of electoral choice to short term factors, such as issue preferences and candidate image, and leads more voters to base their choices on the content of the campaign. The result is the evidence of spreading partisan dealignment during the last several decades.

7. Cognitive mobilization and electoral change

The American Voter was truly a seminal study on the nature of American political behavior. The concept of party identification was a central part of that framework, and a potent factor in shaping citizen behavior and the macro-level electoral process. Party identification remains a key element in our understanding of electoral behavior (Miller, 1991; Green et al., 2002: ch. 8).

The evidence presented here, however, argues that the electorate described by Campbell and his colleagues no longer exists. They described a reality that existed fifty years ago, but a process of cognitive mobilization has gradually changed the composition of the American public and their electoral behavior. These trends are quite apparent in the changing patterns of partisanship. At mid-century, the majority of the public were Ritual Partisans: possessing limited political skills or resources to manage the complexities of politics, and thus relying on habitual party loyalties as a guide for their behavior. Party identification was more than a party preference for these Ritual Partisans, it was a cue that enabled them to manage a complex political world that might otherwise be beyond their conceptual abilities or interests.

The modernization of society over the past five decades has transformed the American public.¹⁴ Expanding educational levels, increased access to political information through the media, and even the growing role of government have produced a process of cognitive mobilization that expands the political skills and resources of the average citizen. Consequently, fewer individuals must rely on party loyalties passed down from their parents and reinforced by habitual support for the same party. Instead, more Americans approach politics with a greater ability to judge the candidates and issues independent of habitual party loyalties. This has expanded the group of new independents, Apartisans, who are cognitively mobilized but who lack partisan ties. These Apartisans are nearly the polar opposite of the traditional image of non-partisans presented in *The American Voter*. They are better educated, knowledgeable about politics, and politically engaged, even if they remain somewhat distant from political parties.

This shifting balance between Ritual Partisans and Apartisans encapsulates a fundamental change in the characteristics of the American electorate during the later half of the 20th century. The basis of political mobilization is shifting from long-term, habitual party cues that were used as a heuristic by an unsophisticated public, to a more evaluative and

¹⁴ Studies of partisan trends in the United States typically focus on this single national experience, which tends to encourage nation-specific explanations of these trends. The cognitive mobilization thesis presented here, however, involves broad factors of social change that are generally affecting advanced industrial democracies. Thus additional support for this cognitive mobilization thesis comes from the recent comparative research demonstrating similar longitudinal trends in other advanced industrial democracies (Dalton, 2000; Wolf, 2002; Holmberg, 1994; Inglehart, 1990: ch. 10).

sophisticated electorate that makes their electoral choices on the issues and candidates of the campaign only partially based on partisan affiliations. Concomitantly, this contributes to the growing volatility and fluidity of electoral politics in America. As we have shown, the rise in split-ticket voting, inter-election volatility, and decision making later during the campaign can at least partially be traced to the shifting sources of political mobilization within the electorate. Such trends contribute to the on-going partisan dealignment of American electoral politics.

The process of cognitive mobilization has produced an electorate that is divided in their basis of mobilization, and our findings thus strongly argue for a disaggregated view of the American public. Compared to the 1950s when Ritual Partisans accounted for a large majority of the electorate, all four mobilization types described in this article are now roughly comparable in size in 2000 (only the Cognitive Partisans account for a disproportionately larger share of the public). These four types of citizens bring much different decision making criteria into their electoral choices, and this should carry over to other aspects of political behavior. For instance, the remaining Ritual Partisans still place heavy reliance on habitual party cues, but this behavioral pattern is now less applicable to other sectors of the public. Similarly, the force of candidate image on Gore/Bush preferences in 2000 is nearly three times stronger among Apartisans than among Apoliticals; and the weight of policy preferences are twice as strong among Apartisans.

Such group differences need to be integrated into models of electoral and political behavior, and a homogenized model of citizen choice appears to violate the reality of how citizens think and act. Apoliticals and Apartisans have different political images of the world and decision making processes—even though both are political independents—just as there are basic differences in how Ritual Partisans and Cognitive Partisans relate to the political world. Such heterogeneity within the electorate, and the need for differentiated campaigns that recognize these differences, should be an element of American elections for a considerable period.

Finally, we do not want to overstate the findings, because understanding the world of politics is still a difficult task for many voters. And yet, the shift in cognitive mobilization has the potential to move the electoral process toward the ideal of democratic theory—voters making independent judgments on the candidates and issues of the day, rather than voting on the basis of habitual party loyalties inherited

from one's parents. The authors of *The American Voter* recognized this ideal, and then dismissed its applicability to the American electorate.¹⁵ Yet, our data suggests that the growth in Apartisans (and Cognitive Partisans) has moved the electorate closer to that normative ideal.

Uncited references

Converse, 1976; Ferejohn and Kuklinski, 1990; Miller and Shanks, 1996

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¹⁵ Preceding the description of independents quote in Section 1, Campbell et al. (1960: 143) described this ideal: “The ideal of the Independent citizen, attentive to politics, concerned with the course of government, who weighs the rival appears of a campaign and reaches a judgment that is unswayed by partisan prejudice, has ... a vigorous history in the tradition of political reform.” They concluded that this normative ideal poorly fit independents.

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