

The Blinders of Partisanship?¹

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The concept of party identification has a hallowed position in the electoral research field, as demonstrated by this handbook. The concept is often considered the most significant discovery in modern electoral research (Thomassen in this volume; Bellucci in this volume). I have previously written that if one could ask only a single survey question to explain citizen political behavior, choose party identification. Party identities provide voters with a potent cue on how people like themselves generally vote, it guides their views on the issues, and mobilizes them to participate in politics.

This chapter considers another side of partisanship, however. Not as a benefit to voters, but as a constraint on a reasoned, dispassionate view of politics and contemporary issues. If parties or their leaders fail their constituency, do partisans recognize and respond to these failures? If political conditions or party positions change, do partisans react in a meaningful way? Or are the powers of partisanship so strong that they can sometimes blind citizens to the reality of politics and their own self-interest? And under what conditions are the positive/negative benefits most apparent?

The evidence comes from a combination of three sources. First, I draw on cognitive psychology to offer an alternative perspective on how citizens conceptualize politics through a framework of partisanship. Second, I present empirical examples from several nations to demonstrate the persistence of partisan effects even in the face of significant political change. While much of the debate on partisanship has focused on the United States, the same issues exist across other contemporary democracies. Third, the chapter presents examples of how partisanship heavily influences policy perceptions, which implies there is limited Bayesian updating of partisanship in reaction to issue preferences. To an extent, the affective party identity that Angus Campbell and his colleagues (1960) described can act as blinders when viewing the political world.

Feelings of party identification make a positive contribution to democratic representation and accountability in guiding voter choices. However, there are possible limitations to these benefits and a potential negative effect under certain circumstances. It is difficult to draw a clear line in this balance. This chapter takes the contrarian view to ask when party identification reaches these positive limits and then discusses the conditions that may produce partisan distortions.

Why is Partisanship So Valuable?

It is worthwhile to begin by acknowledging the value of partisanship to the study of citizen political behavior. Partisanship obtained a central theoretical position in electoral studies because it

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provided a solution to a conundrum facing electoral research at the advent of the field. Researchers confronted two contrasting patterns (Bereleson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). On the one hand, the seminal studies described the limited political abilities and interests of the average voter. On the other hand, there was a consistency in the patterns of party choice that contrasted with doubts about the political awareness and rationality of voters—something was guiding voting behavior.¹ This guiding force presumably provided a basis for electoral choice that reflects long-term self-interests.

As Angus Campbell and his colleagues (1960) examined how voters made their voting choices, they noted that many people entered the campaign with their decision already made. These researchers described these partisan attachments as a sense of party identification (PID): a long-term, affective, psychological identification with one's preferred political party. Party identification emerged as a central element in their socio-psychological model of electoral behavior. Party identification thus became a partial solution to the paradox of how less-engaged voters function politically.

The concept of party identification reached such a prominence because these orientations affect many different aspects of political behavior. The developers of the concept stressed its functional importance in guiding voting choice, stimulating participation, and ensuring the stability of the party system (Campbell et al. 1960; Campbell et al. 1966). Partisanship also helped citizens navigate the complex world of politics. If one's party favored a policy, it was probably something to support; if a candidate from one's party took a position, it was probably something to endorse (Kosmidis in this volume; McAllister in this volume). Indeed, reviewing the decades of electoral research on partisanship since *The American Voter*, Herbert Weisberg and Steve Greene (2003: 115) concluded that "party identification is the linchpin of our modern understanding of electoral democracy, and it is likely to retain that crucial theoretical position." Similarly, I stated that a "strong case can be made that the concept of partisan identification is the most important development in modern electoral behavior research" (Dalton 2000, 20; also see Holmberg 1994, 2007; Greene, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Rosenblum 2008). This handbook is, in fact, a testament to the importance of partisanship in political behavior research.

Yet, while we have celebrated the benefits of party identification, less attention has been devoted to the limitations of these identities. The remainder of this chapter considers "the rest of the story" as the old saying goes.

Partisanship and Motivated Reasoning

A primary value of partisanship is as a heuristic that cues political choices. Party ties learned early in life presumably are updated by later partisan experiences, and PID becomes a summary of how the individual or people like the individual think about politics. Even the marginally informed voter can know which "team" represents their views, and which to support on Election Day. This heuristic has wide application to candidate evaluations, judging new issues, making electoral choices, and other political phenomena.

The American Voter also recognized that there was a balance between the value of PID cues to fill information gaps in judging political objects, and its potential to act as a perceptual screen that shapes, and potentially distorts, an individual's view of the world (Campbell et al. 1960, 133):

"Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation. The stronger the party

bond, the more exaggerated the process of selection and perceptual distortion will be.”

Party identification represented a worthwhile tradeoff at the time. The political skills and resources of democratic publics were quite limited in the 1950s. Thus, partisanship connected many less sophisticated citizens to the political world. Indeed, research showed that non-partisans were less interested in politics, less likely to vote, and less knowledgeable about basic political facts. Party identification provided a way to integrate citizens into the democratic electoral process.

In addition, many scholars viewed heuristics in general, and partisanship in particular, in relatively benign terms (Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; Barker and Hansen 2005; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Many researchers saw partisanship as a reasonable summary of an individual’s interests. In addition, Morris Fiorina’s (1981) model of partisanship treated it as a running tally of voters’ partisan experiences (also Gerber and Green 1999). This gave additional value to the concept because new information was incorporated into prior partisanship to more accurately reflect the citizen’s positions. Partisanship was presented as similar to the total on an adding machine, updated by each transaction. Even Philip Converse’s (1964, 1970, 1972) influential writings on the nature of mass belief systems underscored the value of rational decision making with partisanship at its core (or nearby).

Electoral researchers have long accepted the basic tenets of the socio-psychological model of political behavior with partisanship playing a central role, but cognitive research raises basic questions about the balance between the value and limitations of the PID model. Two psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, did path-breaking research that explored how people navigate the constant decisions we face in living our lives (Kahneman 2011; Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Tversky and Kahneman 1981). They changed how we think about thinking. Their research demonstrated that much of human action is guided not by a thoughtful, deliberative calculus of costs and benefits, but by intuitions and feelings developed from previous experience, emotions, moral values, and personal traits. This *fast style* of thinking, which can apply to news and political information, contrasts with the *slow rational style* of citizen deliberation presumed by Converse and successor works in political science. For example, many people decide whether they ‘like’ a candidate based on an often-subconscious fast processing of information, rather than by deeply studying their resume. The candidate’s party is often a potent source of cues.

This research argues that the deliberate reasoning a la Converse’s view of higher levels of political conceptualization is not the standard way that people address most of the decisions in their lives (Lodge and Taber 2013). Deliberative reasoning sometimes occurs, but only under certain conditions. This does not mean that public opinion is necessarily shallow and content-less, but rather the content often comes indirectly through cues, impressions from past experiences, and implicit connections between beliefs. This can be especially relevant to politics which is often tangential to life decisions for many individuals.

A running tally of accumulated information and responses might be a valuable heuristic; however, cognitive research also suggests that when faced with the need to make a judgment—for many topics including politics—a significant number of people selectively retrieve information *to confirm initial intuitive judgments or biases* rather than neutrally collecting and judging information (Kahneman 2012). This is described as “motivated reasoning” (Haidt 2012; Lodge and Taber 2000). As an example, when an opinion survey asks a person to explain why they like a candidate, the individual may assemble a list of things that confirm their affective preferences, and overlook or discount factors that are inconsistent with their biases (Lodge and Taber 2013;

Goren 2012; Goren, Federico, and Kittelson 2009; Fischle 2000). Peter Ditto and his colleagues' (2018) meta-analysis of partisan biases in published experimental research found that partisan cues shifted opinions on virtually all the issues examined—and that bias among Democrats was approximately the same as among Republicans (also see Petersen et al. 2013).

The potential biases in learning are magnified if we consider partisanship as a group identity. Haidt (2012), for example, stressed that collective loyalties including partisan identities are a part of human nature—people instinctively think of themselves as part of a group and differentiate themselves from members of other groups. In the United States, this is simple, you are a Democrat or a Republican—or increasingly neither (Dalton 2008). So the possibility for motivated reasoning is especially relevant for party identifiers because the concept is conceived as a *long-standing affective identity*.² Prior dispositions drawn from partisan loyalties can reinforce the process of motivated reasoning and pull people further away from deliberative reasoning.

The logic of the Kahneman/Tversky framework was not entirely absent from the history of party identification scholarship. *The American Voter* authors (Campbell et al. 1960, 133; Stokes 1966) wrote how partisanship functioned as a perceptual screen, and the funnel of causality treated partisanship as a prior cause of issue and candidate images. But the initial presentation of party identification came well before recent cognitive research on how people think and process information.

If we accept the framework from cognitive research, it raises additional questions about the potential role of party identification. Instead of people adjusting their partisanship in reaction to new learning, as in the running tally model of party ID, motivated reasoning may lead many people to adjust the facts to match their prior partisan loyalties—especially among strong party identifiers. The two-way causal flow between partisanship and other political opinions is thus heavily biased in one direction (Bartels 2002; Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Cf. Fiorina 1981, 97; Weinschenk 2010). In other words, it is as if users of the political adding machine first decide on what total they want, and then adjust the entries to reach this amount.

The theoretical complication is separating the choices that voters make based on *values embedded in their partisanship* from political views *projected by partisanship* with a limited political or factual base. Thus simple correlational analyses of cross-sectional relationships are insufficient evidence of either causal process. Democrats (or British Labourites) *should* like their party's candidates who share their values, and Republicans (Tories) should do the same—but within limits. To disentangle these two forces requires something to change, but substantial changes in political conditions, party positions or voter positions are exceedingly rare.

In summary, initial views of partisanship saw it as a boon for the democratic process. The heuristic approach viewed partisanship as a means for many voters to make reasonable choices based on party identities, updating these identities in the light of new evidence.³ Some partisans successfully follow this pattern and make reasoned and informed political choices which benefit the democratic process. However, cognitive researchers have demonstrated that slow rational evaluation of information and the systematic updating of partisan ties is not how most people process political information and make decisions. Most human behavior is based on fast reactions to stimuli drawing upon existing cognitive frames. And the strongest partisans may feel the strongest tendencies to adjust their perceptions of the world to confirm their loyalties. Thus, we need to reconsider the extent to which partisanship reacts to perceptions of the political world or structures perceptions of this world.

Evidence of Motivated Partisan Reasoning

In normal times, it is difficult to establish the degree to which partisanship reflects citizen's values that lead to reasonable choices, or whether partisanship motivates voting choices and opinions separate from a citizen's values. One solution is to consider cases where dramatic political changes appear to challenge prior partisan loyalties. This section presents examples of the limited variability of partisans' voting patterns across a set of deviating elections that may reflect motivated partisan reasoning. Then, the chapter considers the role of partisanship in shaping issue opinions and views of the political world. We cannot separate what part of these relationships are due to slow rationale decision-making versus motivated reasoning, but the results suggest that both factors are present.

Partisanship and the (Ir)relevance of Elections?

Party identifications should be a strong predictor of voting choice if partisanship is a surrogate for political values and past political experiences. But for some people partisanship may produce blinders that limit vision, especially in exceptional times when their interests or party choices might vary from the past.

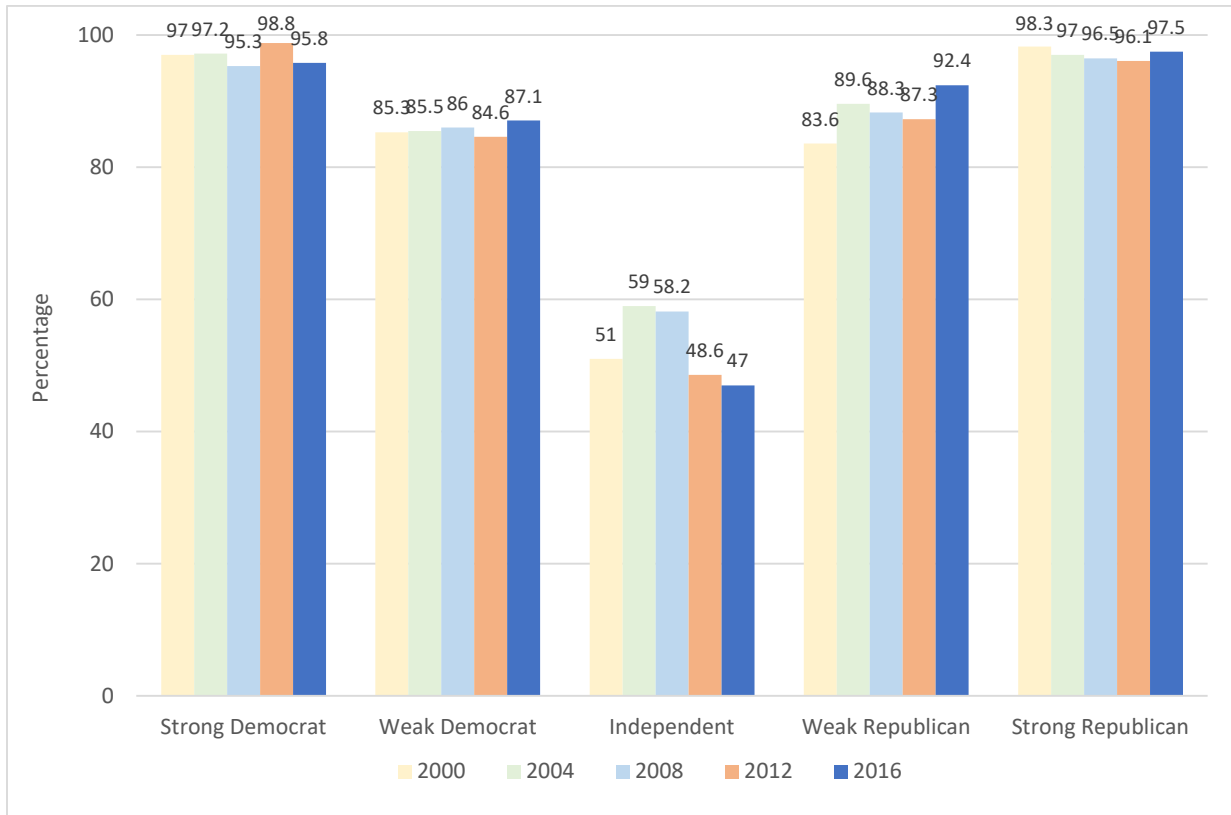
Political scientists describe a "normal election" as when both campaigns are evenly matched in their appeals, and thus voters rely on their long-standing partisan identification to make their voting choice (Converse 1966). But what happens if exceptional circumstances test the ability of partisanship to adjust to a changing political reality?

In 2016, the United States experienced what some claim is the most unusual presidential election in its modern history. The Democrats picked the first woman to run as a major party candidate, while the Republicans selected an alt-right populist who was the first modern candidate who never held an elected office. The tenor of the campaign was unusual, to say the least, battled in 140 character bursts. The results surprised almost every election soothsayer, and even the candidates themselves. But was the voting outcome and the voting pattern of partisans really a major deviation from normal voting results in America?

The American National Election Studies (ANES) asked Americans about their party loyalties and the strength of these loyalties, which arrays them from strong Democrats to strong Republicans with independents in between. Figure 1 shows what proportion of each partisan group voted for their own party (or independents voting for the Democrat) since 2000.

From 2000 to 2012 the degree of party loyalty is exceptional—even though these elections spanned alternate party presidential victories and the largest economic downturn since the 1930s Great Depression. A full 97 percent of strong Democrats voted for their party across these four elections, and 97 percent of strong Republicans did the same. It didn't matter if the Democratic candidate was a white southerner with a long political resume (Gore in 2000), a liberal senator from New England (Kerry in 2004), or a freshman senator from the Midwest who just happened to be black (Obama in 2008 and 2012). The same pattern exists among Republicans, ranging from Bush to McCain, to Romney. The figure also shows the Democratic vote share among independents; they are more likely to change their voting preferences across elections. These are the sort of patterns that generated the initial concept of partisanship as a guide to voters on Election Day (Bartels 2000).

Figure 1. American Partisans Who Voted for Their Own Party



Source: American National Election Studies

Note: Figure presents the Democratic share of the two-party vote for Democrats and Independents, and the Republican share of the two-party vote for Republicans.

In “normal elections,” it is difficult to separate the influence of party identifications from the shared values of each partisan camp. This is why the 2016 election seems especially valuable. Donald Trump supposedly appealed to a different type of Republican voter, and swung three states from the Democrats’ blue Midwestern wall. Hillary Clinton’s campaign targeted middle-class women, Hispanics, Muslims and members of the LGBTQ community more explicitly than any Democratic candidate in the past. The rhetoric of the campaign seemed to test traditional partisan loyalties. And after the votes were counted, many electoral scholars claimed that racism, misogyny, nativism, or similar views prompted the unexpected result (Sides, Tesler and Vavrack 2018). In almost every way, this was not a normal election. Or was it?

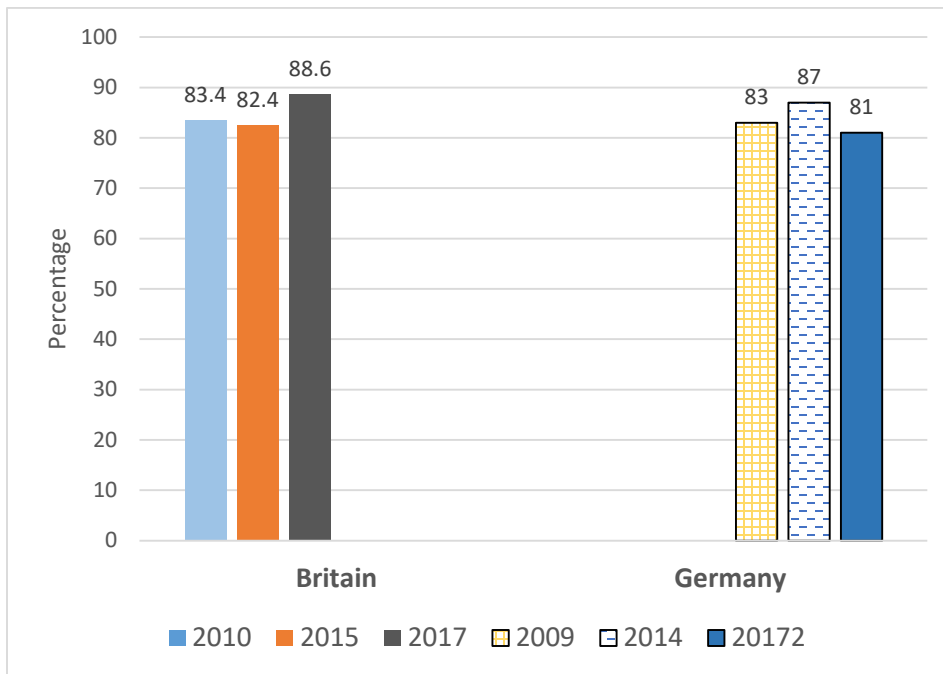
Despite the expectations of partisan disconnects, the 2016 ANES shows a pattern of partisan continuity. A full 96 percent of the strong Democrats voted for Hillary Clinton. Even more striking, 98 percent of strong Republicans voted for Donald Trump. One might argue that partisanship functioned as it should in 2016, guiding Republicans to support the party’s candidate to represent their policy preferences. But Trump’s policy views in the primary and general election often went against Republican orthodoxy (Sides, Tesler and Vavrack 2018; Dalton 2019). He espoused liberal views on social security and Medicare and promised to improve health care for all, he opposed Republican free trade policy, his views of women and the harshness of his

nationalist rhetoric made many conservatives cringe. Trump’s views led the previous Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, to harshly attack the Trump candidacy during the primaries.⁴ And yet, almost 98 percent of the Republican party identifiers who said they voted for Romney in 2012 also voted for Trump in 2016.⁵ Voting patterns across all four elections suggest that partisans are highly resistant to vote switching even in very unusual circumstances (also see Gidengil and Nevitte in this volume).

The 2016 results may have been an anomalous election, but the electoral history of U.S. presidential elections underscores the power of party loyalties even in deviating elections. In Lyndon Johnson’s blowout victory over Barry Goldwater in 1964, 90 per cent of strong Republicans remained loyal to Goldwater; in Ronald Reagan’s massive victory over Walter Mondale in 1984, 89 per cent of strong Democrats remained loyal to Mondale. The only modern presidential election that showed a modicum of doubt among partisans was the 1972 Nixon-McGovern race.⁶

Another possibility is that U.S. elections are exceptional because of the structure of the electoral system and the duopoly of Democratic-Republican competition. Evidence from recent British and German elections illustrate the persistence of partisanship effects across similarly ‘deviating’ elections. In 2017, the Labour Party selected Jeremy Corbyn as party leader, despite opposition from a large proportion of the established parliamentary Labour Party.⁷ Nevertheless, figure 2 shows that Labour partisans gave Corbyn even greater loyalty than the two previous party leaders. A full 94 percent of Labour partisans who voted for Ed Miliband in 2015 supported Corbyn in 2017. Substantial changes in the party’s program and leadership seemingly had little impact on Labour partisans.

Figure 2. British and German Partisans Who Voted for Their Own Party



Source: 2010-2017 British Election Studies; 2009-2017 German Longitudinal Election Studies.

Similarly, Germany faced a possibly deviating election in 2017. Reactions to the 2008 recession, conflicts within the European Union, and the massive influx of immigrants in 2015 polarized the nation. Angela Merkel had boldly charted the national course through these troubled waters that evoked mixed reactions from conservatives. The two governing parties (CDU/CSU and SPD) suffered large drops in their vote share, and the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the third largest party in the Bundestag. We find that 81 percent of CDU partisans voted for the party in 2017 (second vote), which might reflect the tumult of the election and the rivalry of the AfD.⁸ But this degree of party loyalty in a multiparty PR system is barely different from the 2009 (83 per cent) and 2013 (87 per cent) German elections (Wessels et al. 2014).

In addition, various evidence suggests that a strong relationship between PID and vote are not the result of partisans switching the loyalties to match current vote preferences. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) assembled several ANES panel studies to demonstrate that party identifications are extremely stable across elections, and much of the small variability is attributable to measurement error rather than real change. Cross-national panel studies also show the persistence of partisanship even if voting preferences changed between elections, which argues for the autonomy of partisan cues (Holmberg 1994; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Dalton 2019).

Something seems amiss. If such diverse candidates/parties with varied policy positions still receive such overwhelming allegiance from their partisan supporters, did the election matter? The answer is: of course it did, but only at the margins for party identifiers who see politics through partisan lenses. For the majority of strong partisans, the election is virtually over before it begins. This does not mean electoral change does not occur, but the bulk of the change comes from non-partisans and those with only weak party ties—especially sophisticated non-partisans (Dalton 2008).

Guiding Perceptions and Issue Positions

The power of partisan cues extends beyond elections. PID is a valuable heuristic because candidates and public policies typically have a large partisan component. Partisans favor candidates from their “team” and policies advocated by their team. If parties represent the interests of people “like themselves,” then this heuristic is a valuable reference source.

Extensive research argues that partisanship colors many voters’ perceptions of policy issues. The clearest evidence has come in terms of perceptions of economic conditions and the political responsibility for the state of the economy. Numerous studies demonstrate strong correlations between economic opinions and party preferences (e.g., Santoso in this volume; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck and Peldam 2000).⁹

However, the causal direction of such relations is open to question. Panel studies in several nations have attempted to disentangle this PID-economic perceptions relationship. This research shows that the predominant causal flow is from partisanship to economic perceptions: supporters of government incumbents hold more favorable views of the economy and the future course of the stock market than partisans of the opposition (Bartels 2000; Evans and Anderson 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Schaffner and Roche 2017). Moreover, citizens’ assignment of political responsibility for the state of the economy—a crucial step in making electoral decisions—is potentially even more susceptible to partisan loyalty because it involves judgment of parties’ performance rather than economic conditions per se (Bisgaard 2015).

Other panel studies examined how economic perceptions change when a government changes hands. Supporters of the incumbents become less optimistic about future economic

conditions if they lose the election, and supporters of the new government become more optimistic (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Anderson et al. 2005). These results similarly suggest that views about the economy are heavily colored by party loyalties, rather than the partisanship serving as a running tally of economic evaluations.

The effects of PID on economic opinions also carries over to other issue areas. Matthew Levendusky (2010), for example, examined the cross-influence of partisanship and issue positions across the 1990-1992 ANES panel waves; he concluded that the impact of partisanship largely drove changes in issue positions, with a much weaker counter-flow (also see Bartels 2002; Barber and Pope 2018).¹⁰ Aaron Weinschenk's (2010) analysis of the 2000-2004 ANES panel found generally similar results. Experimental field studies suggest direct persuasive efforts have a minor, albeit statistically significant, impact on party attachments (Gerber, Huber, and Washington 2010). Shanto Iyengar et al. (2019) reviewed how this partisan influence extends beyond politics to private behavior such as residential, job and dating choices.

Another illustration of partisan persuasion comes from the turbulent nature of contemporary politics when political leaders change party cues. One of the most striking examples comes from Americans' images of Russia. For most of the US's post World War II history, Republican elites and voters have been more critical of Russia/USSR than are Democrats. Donald Trump's positive comments toward Putin and Russia dramatically changed this pattern in a relatively short time period. For example, in 2015 Republicans were more likely than Democrats to see Russian power and influence as a major threat to the United States by an 11 per cent margin. Post-Trump Republicans are less likely than Democrats to perceive a Russian threat by a 25 per cent margin (Pew 2017a). Republican orthodoxy for a half-century or longer was eroded by a year of Trump's positive tweets about Russia.

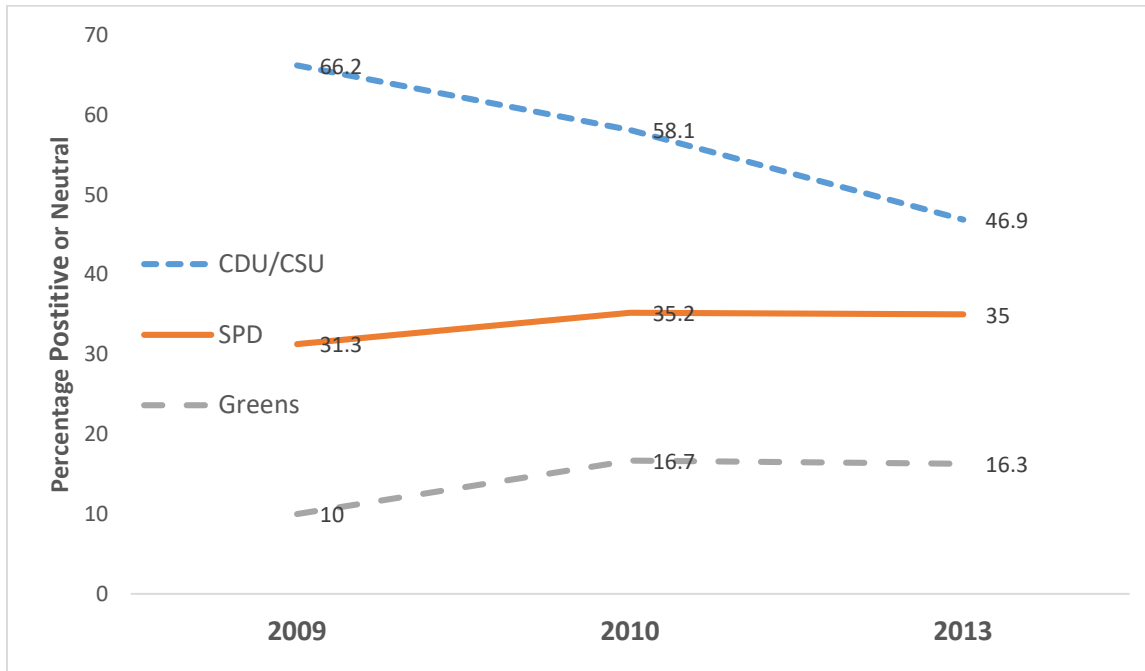
This is not an isolated incident. It is unusual that a party reverses its position, but when it does, this provides a natural experiment to test the influence of party cues. For example, several panel studies demonstrated how policy changes by Danish parties produced subsequent opinion change among the party faithful (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Slothuus 2010). Nicole Satherley and her colleague (2018) showed how partisans' positions of changing New Zealand's national flag diverged when party leaders took opposing positions.

Another example comes from the German party system. In the Fall of 2010, Angela Merkel's government implemented a policy to delay the SPD/Green government's phase-out of nuclear power generation (Meyer and Schoen 2017). Figure 3 shows that two-thirds of CDU/CSU partisans endorsed her support for nuclear power in the 2009 election. Within days of the Fukushima nuclear accident in March 2011, Merkel reversed her position. The same 2009 partisans were re-interviewed in the 2013 election, and a majority of CDU/CSU partisans were now skeptical of nuclear power. This was not a general reaction to Fukushima; Social Democrats and Greens had actually shifted slightly toward more support for nuclear power. This is another example of when party leaders reverse their positions, the faithful often follows.

Taken together, these studies support a view of partisanship as often functioning as an example of motivated reasoning, rather than as a Bayesian summary of political learning. Partisanship generally reflects citizens' values, but it also colors political perceptions and evaluations. This is not inconsistent with the views of partisanship as a heuristic as first presented by the authors of *The American Voter*. Donald Stokes (1966: 127), for example, wrote: "for most people the tie between party identification and voting behavior involves subtle processes of perceptual adjustment by which the individual assembles an image of current politics consistent

with his partisan allegiance.” But the concept of motivated reasoning and related theoretical elements offer a fuller realization of the implications of this heuristic.

Figure 3. Party Identifiers Pro-Nuclear Power Sentiments Over Time



Source: 2009-2013 German Longitudinal Election Studies Panel Survey.

Note: The figure shows the percentage who scored 1-6 on the 11-point scale where 1 was continue building nuclear power plants and 11 was immediately close down all plants.

The Implications of Motivated Partisanship

Despite the supposedly dramatic and surprising outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Lynn Vavreck (2017) gave a simple explanation for the outcome: “[People] will ask: What’s the single best description of Trump supporters?” My answer often disappoints them. It’s quite simple: They’re Republicans. When they ask about Clinton supporters, the answer is similar: They’re Democrats.” Most partisans vote for their team, rather than the coach, which dulls the potential impact of events, issues, and other predictors of the vote.

There is a theoretical and empirical tension regarding the role of party identification in political behavior. The traditional view stresses partisanship’s functional value as a heuristic in guiding policy preferences, voting behavior, and electoral participation. There are real benefits from using partisan cues to simplify and verify political choices.

This chapter discussed another strand of research that emphasizes the potential for partisans cues to blind citizen judgments in pursuit of cognitive consistency. Motivated reasoning makes partisans less open to learning from new events or new conditions. This also generates the potential for a misrepresentation of interests if voters follow party cues that do not reflect their positions or intent (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Heuristics have value, but can also be exploited by cue-givers pursuing their own interests.

Reality inevitably involves a mix of both processes, for the individual and for the public as a whole. There is no simple and complete answer of how much party identification acts as a benefit or a curse for electoral politics—this depends on the political context and the traits of the individual. Yet, this review provides a basis to discuss the implications of past research.

One might expect that the skills and resources of an individual will affect the degree of motivated partisan reasoning, but the nature of these effects is unclear. The politically sophisticated are more expert at collecting and retrieving political information, but there is mixed evidence on whether this limits or facilitates motivated reasoning. Several studies find that the more engaged citizens display increased perceptual bias (Lodge and Taber 2013; Kahan et al. 2017), but others find little difference (Bartels 2002). This is an area where further research is warranted.

Reasoned electoral change seems more likely when a combination of factors coexist. Citizens with weak or no party ties are less subject to motivated reasoning. And reasoned choices are more likely when these same individuals display high levels of cognitive mobilization: a combination of higher levels of education and political interest. In other work, I have labeled this group as Apartisans, and demonstrated that their numbers have grown substantially over time (Dalton 2008).¹¹ Apartisans decide later in a campaign, vote more on the basis of issues, and are more likely to vary their vote between elections as the context changes. This contrasts to strong partisans, who begin the campaign with their decision already made, and vote regularly for their party almost regardless of the candidates or their policies. Sophisticated partisans may actually assemble more factors to support their predispositions, while less sophisticated partisans may ritually follow their partisan loyalties.

The biases of motivated partisanship may also vary with the nature of the issue. Complex judgments, such as candidate or party affect, are very susceptible to partisan projections because there is often an abundance of conflicting information available from which the voter chooses. Perceptions of the national economy may follow a similar pattern. On less precise matters—such as judging the veracity of a politician or the efficacy of a policy—there is more room for motivated partisan judgments. In contrast, research suggests that moral issues or broad values, such as opinions on abortion, may be less responsive to partisan persuasion (Levendusky 2010; Goren and Chapp. 2017; Evans and Neundorf 2018; Mader and Schoen 2019.). In these cases, two identities—such as partisanship and religious identity—may be rivals.

I do not want to imply that partisans completely fit the “unmoved mover” image as sometimes presented in the literature; individual partisanship and the aggregate balance of partisanship can change over time.¹² Cognitive research provides a different perspective on these patterns, however. Changes in opinions among partisans are more likely when interacting with colleagues, friends, and neighbors who have their own experiences and judgments (Haidt 2012, ch. 4; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Other people can see the strengths and weaknesses of our opinions better than we do. We are also more likely to accept information from sources we consider reliable.

This is potentially important in identifying the factors that constrain motivated reasoning. Social networks and diverse external cues are important contributors to reasoned judgments and changing opinions. But to the extent that we increasingly live in a political bubble—either through interpersonal contact, information sources, or social media interactions—this lessens the potential for receiving information that disconfirms prior beliefs. The world according to a regular viewer of Fox News is much different than for a regular viewer of MSNBC (or the varied partisan newspapers in Europe). Hence, true party identifications change only slowly since many partisans are insulated from discordant information.¹³

These patterns also might vary across nations as a function of their party systems and party history.¹⁴ For instance, the volatility of some party systems might limit the potential for stable partisan identifications to develop. The French case is a notable example because of the continuing turnover in the party choices across elections. The majority of votes in the 2017 French elections went to parties that did not exist five years earlier. Nations with a large number of competing parties may also restrain party loyalties because voters see more than one party that shares a significant part of their political preferences which is illustrated in coalition governments. In contrast, the majority party systems of the United States and Great Britain should facilitate the development of enduring party identities that guide perceptions of the political world.

A possible silver lining to this story is that honest and reliable political cues by candidates and party can improve the value of this heuristic. In addition, to the extent that the polarization in contemporary politics is driven by polarized elite rhetoric, a shift to more temperate and less exploitive rhetoric could improve the civility of political discourse. Polarization and partisan hostility are not inevitable; they are linked to cues that political elites provide. The real challenge is to convince party elites to act more responsibly and not exploit extreme rhetoric for their own gain.

Viewing partisanship as a source of motivated reasoning also can influence how we think of the classic belief systems literature (Converse 1964, 1970; Converse and Markus 1979). The emphasis on partisanship as an organizing device for sophisticated political thought seems less persuasive from the perspective of motivated reasoning. Some partisans may develop their issue positions by slow, rational deliberation; but others adopt positions because they uncritically follow party cues—this is especially likely among partisans with limited political skills and resources.¹⁵ Thus, issue consistency among strong partisans potentially has two very different interpretations.

Similarly, when party identification is strongly related to voting choice, this may reflect reasoned choice by engaged partisans, or motivated reasoning to confirm prior biases. Thus partisan consistency is not clear evidence for sophisticated political thought among mass publics, but may reflect strong patterns of motivated reasoning.

The same caution applies to comparing issue constraint for citizens and elected officials. Converse (1964; Converse and Pierce 1989) maintained that the structured belief systems of political elites reflect their higher levels of political sophistication. Less issue constraint among mass publics is interpreted as evidence of limited sophistication that impedes rational choice. However, *political elites play the game of motivated reasoning at the expert level*, which can make them even less likely to objectively perceive the political world separate from their party loyalties. We are all familiar with elected officials appearing on television to almost blindly support their party's current talking points--and then reversing their talking points if the party changes its position or its governing role.¹⁶ Several of Haidt's (2012) clearest examples of motivated partisan reasoning come from political elites. Motivated partisan reasoning among elites—to the degree that it exists—is probably even more problematic than similar patterns among the general public.

In summary, I believe partisanship is more of a plus than a minus, and these benefits are addressed by other chapters in this collection. But there are times and conditions where partisanship can act as blinders to reasoned political choice. At these times the negative aspects of party ID may exceed the positive. The challenge is to identify the conditions when this balance can be tilted toward the positive and avoid the negative.

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Endnotes

¹ Bereleson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) relied on the “index of political predispositions” based on socio-demographic categories to explain this stability.

² Campbell et al. were sensitive to the potential of party identification’s perceptual screen, but without the rigor of later cognitive studies. For example, in describing the public’s ability to identify party positions they wrote (1960, 186): “the strong partisan who lacks any real information permitting him to locate either party on a question of policy may find it relatively easy to presume that his chosen party is closer to his own belief regarding that policy than is the opposition.”

³ Even Kahneman and his colleagues felt that reliance on heuristics improved the quality of citizen decision making (Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky 1982).

⁴ In a nationally televised press conference, Romney stated: “Donald Trump is a phony, a fraud. His promises are as worthless as a degree from Trump University. He’s playing the American public for suckers: He gets a free ride to the White House and all we get is a lousy hat. His domestic policies would lead to recession. His foreign policies would make America and the world less safe. He has neither the temperament nor the judgment to be president. And his personal qualities would mean that America would cease to be a shining city on a hill.” (<http://time.com/4246596/donald-trump-mitt-romney-utah-speech/>). Trump won the Republican nomination despite opposition from the party’s prior two presidential candidates and much of the party establishment.

⁵ Sides, Tessler and Vavrack (2018, p 159) use the 2012-2016 VOTER panel to show that 89 per cent of 2012 Romney voters supported Trump in 2016, and 86 per cent of Obama voters supported Clinton. So there is little evidence that voters changed their reported partisanship to produce the strong PID patterns in 2016.

⁶ Even in the highly politicized environment in 1972, McGovern still won 73 percent of the vote from strong Democrats. This was the low point for voting loyalty among strong partisans over the entire ANES timeseries.

⁷ For example, following the resignation of around two-thirds of Corbyn’s Shadow Cabinet, Labour MPs passed a no confidence vote against Corbyn (172 votes to 40). Yet Corbyn remained party leader because of his support by new rank-and-file members.

⁸ Of the CDU partisans who said they voted for the CDU/CSU in 2015, 91 per cent said they also supported the party in 2017.

⁹ This relationship is contingent on characteristics of the individual and the political and partisan context, so the strength of economic voting varies over nation and time (Anderson 2007).

¹⁰ The one exception was the abortion issue, where the cross-effects of issue positions and partisanship were approximately the same. This might arise because abortion taps strong religious/secular identities that match party identities.

¹¹ The logic is similar to Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen’s (2012) discussion of the positive traits of ambivalent partisans.

¹² A large component of electoral change comes from those with weak party motivations, non-partisans, the young, and newly engaged voters.

¹³ Even with the dramatic partisan realignment of the American South because of desegregation in the 1960s, the party identities of white southerners evolved more slowly and with a large generational component (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002, ch. 6).

¹⁴ This is difficult to determine empirically because most cross-national studies ask about feelings of party closeness which fall short of an enduring party identification. For instance, despite its creation for the 2017 elections, 57 per cent of En Marche! voters felt “close” to the party.

¹⁵ Dalton (2008) refers to these voters as ritual partisans, who are loyal to their party but with little political content.

¹⁶ For example, during the Obama administration Democrats endorsed Obama's use of Executive Order to circumvent a sclerotic legislative process, and Republicans complained. When Donald Trump used Executive Order procedures in his administration, the parties reversed their positions. Party positions on increasing the national debt show a similar reversal between these two U.S. administrations. Comparable examples exist in most party systems.