

Partisan Stereotypes: Pre-analysis plan

Research puzzle:

Party identification is a central object in the study of American politics, *yet* there remains disagreement about why people identify with a political party, and why these identifications change (or do not change) over time. One theory of party identification offered by Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) posits that individuals identify with a party as a social group, which “exists as a [stable] stereotype in the minds of voters, who in turn harbor a sense of attachment toward this group image” (p. 26) Do voters perceive parties as a stereotype in their minds, and identify with the party whose stereotype most closely matches their own group memberships? If so, do changes in the party stereotype result in changes in the strength of these identifications?

Previous literature

Even before the seminal work of Campbell et al (1954), party identification has been a central topic of the study of American politics. The assertion from the authors of *The American Voter* that party ID is a psychological attachment, formed at a young age which is relatively resistant to change has remained influential in the discipline, despite countervailing claims (see Fiorina 1981, Franklin and Jackson 1983, Erikson, Stimson, and MacKuen 2002) and methodological developments. Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) built upon the argument from Campbell et al (1964), arguing that individuals identify with a party as a social group, which “exists as a [stable] stereotype in the minds of voters, who in turn harbor a sense of attachment toward this group image” (p. 26) They claim that, while some changes in party identification can be caused by changes in individual circumstances and national events, these often then revert to the mean, and instead, major changes in attachments are results of changes in the stereotype associated with each party. However, they do not directly test this theory of stereotype change and group identification as the mechanism behind the development of party identification. This paper aims to address this issue, by attempting to manipulate the partisan stereotypes associated with the political parties, and then test the strength of partisan attachments, thus addressing the central claims of Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002).

Theory (short form)

- People identify with those they perceive as being like them (homophily principle)
- This process of identification is unconscious and automatic

- One aspect of perceiving a person or group as being like oneself, is evaluating whether their demographic characteristics (e.g. race, gender, age, religion) are similar to one's own.
- People form beliefs about the groups to which they belong by observing similarities between themselves and groups. They perceive the existence of a group (e.g. African Americans), then perceive themselves as having similar characteristics to these people (e.g. dark skin), and thus identify with the group themselves (“I am an African American”).
- People form beliefs about the groups that are associated with each political party (forming a stereotype of the party), through media coverage, conversations with others, examples from parents etc.
- Individuals have generally poor knowledge of policy and politics. People do not have the time or the resources to fully inform themselves about politics.
- Demographic characteristics however, are more easily discernible and require fewer resources to identify.
- People perceive whether they are similar or dissimilar to the groups attached to a political party, at least in part, by evaluating those groups demographic characteristics and comparing them to their own.
- People form attachments to political parties based on the extent to which they feel the groups attached to the party are similar to themselves. For example, X perceives African Americans as part of the Democratic party’s stereotype. X identifies herself as being African American. Thus, X perceives the Democratic party’s stereotype to be somewhat similar to herself, and then identifies with the Democratic party.
- Stereotypes are continuously updated as new information is processed about the group.
- An individual’s perception of a party stereotype may change over time. These changes occur through changes in media coverage of the party, or when individuals interact with people who identify as members of that party who may not fit the stereotype.
- As stereotypes change, people automatically and unconsciously re-evaluate the extent to which this new stereotype matches their own characteristics.
- Their level of attachment to the party then varies in accordance with how well the party’s stereotype matches their own characteristics - as the party stereotype becomes more dissimilar, they become weaker identifiers with the party, as the party stereotype becomes more similar, they become stronger identifiers with the party.
- Given that previous research (see Lenz 2009) has shown that individuals select the policy positions of their preferred party, it would be expected that as party identification changes (or the strength of those identifications), so too do policy preferences (or the strengths of those preferences).

Conceptual and operational hypotheses

Conceptual

- Party identification is composed of attachments to the social groups that one attributes to the party's stereotype
- The more congruent a party's stereotype is with one's own characteristics and social groups, the more one will identify with that party.
- The more incongruent a party's stereotype is with one's own characteristics and social groups, the less one will identify with that party.
- Changes in the party's stereotype will result in changes in individual's partisan identifications.
- Changes in the individual's partisan identification will result in changes in the intensity with which they support policies espoused by a given party.

Operational

- Subjects presented with an image of their own party as being more congruent with their own demographic characteristics will show greater levels of identification with the party than subjects in a control treatment.
- Subjects presented with an image of their own party as being less congruent with their own demographic characteristics will show lower levels of identification with the party than subjects in a control treatment.
- Subjects presented with an image of their own party as being more congruent with their own demographic characteristics will show higher levels of support for policies espoused by their party than subjects in a control treatment.
- Subjects presented with an image of their own party as being less congruent with their own demographic characteristics will show lower levels of support for policies espoused by their party than subjects in a control treatment.

Data

- Subjects will be recruited from undergraduate political science classes at UC Davis. Extra credit may be offered for participation in experimental studies at the discretion of the instructor of each class, but is not specified as compensation for the experiment.
- Roughly 180 subjects are expected to participate.

Experimental design

- Upon agreeing to participate in the study, subjects will be asked a brief set of questions on their demographics, religious beliefs, political engagement, and political knowledge, including their party identification (Democrat, Republican, or Independent). The respondents will then be randomly sorted into one of three treatment groups, and will be asked to read a short fictional study about the supporters of a particular party (the party will always be their self-identified party).

- Within this study, the demographic groups associated with the party will be manipulated. In the control treatment group, the demographic characteristics in question (age, race, gender, and religiosity) will be mentioned but with no detail. In the ‘congruent’ treatment group, these characteristics will be manipulated such that supporters of the party will be portrayed as being more like the subject than previously expected, in the ‘incongruent’ treatment group, these characteristics will be manipulated such that supporters of the party will seem less like the subject than previously expected. That is, absolute information about the relative prevalence of demographic characteristics among the party’s supporters will not be given, instead the treatment states that these characteristics are more or less prevalent than the authors of the fictional study expected.
- Following this article, the respondents will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding their partisan attachments, their attitudes towards the political parties, their evaluations of particular groups and individuals, their stances on policy issues (in which subjects will be randomized into two conditions, one in which information about party positions is provided, another in which this information is omitted), and their responses to the article. This second treatment, the randomization of party cues, is intended to test whether the effects on policy preferences of changes in party stereotype are more substantial when individuals are asked to think about the party when giving their policy positions.
- The primary dependent variable is the strength partisan attachments and identifications of subjects in the post-treatment survey. If my hypotheses are correct, those in the congruent treatment condition should display stronger levels of partisan attachment, and those in the incongruent condition should display lower levels of partisan attachment, than those in the control condition. Simple t-tests should suffice to determine whether results are statistically significant. The analysis will also be conducted at differing levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and attention paid to the article (measured using four screener questions post-treatment).
- Secondary dependent variables include levels of support for particular policy positions espoused by the parties (with and without party cues present), evaluations of some of the groups mentioned in the treatment, and measures of the underlying partisan stereotype, all measured post-treatment.

Measurement of key variables

- All measures are based on self-reported responses to survey questions.
- For demographic measures, see attached survey.
- Strength of party attachments will be measured through a 4-item measure based on Huddy, Mason, and Aroe’s (2015) expressive partisanship measure, as well as the traditional 7-point scale and a further 4-item scale, see attachment for exact questions. Using different measures allows for multiple tests of the hypothesis.

- Policy agreement will be measured through a 5-item scale, with responses coded to run in the direction of the subject's party's policy positions (e.g. Strongly in favor would be coded as in favor of the party's position, not necessarily in favor of the policy itself).
- Four screener questions are used such that the analysis may be run at differing levels of attention paid to the experiment.
- Political knowledge is measured using a 6-item scale based on factual recall questions.
- Political engagement is measured using two questions regarding the interest in politics and attention to politics through the media.
- Finally, a series of 10 manipulation check questions measure whether the treatment effectively altered the partisan stereotype for the individual. This is measured by testing whether the manipulated demographic characteristics (age, race, gender, religiosity) are perceived as being more (less) like the respondent within a party in the congruent (incongruent) group as compared to the control group.

Data analysis plan

- A series of ANOVA tests, including pairwise t-tests, will be conducted to determine whether the treatment has the intended effects.
- If the party identification hypotheses are proven correct, the mean of the party identification scale in the congruent treatment group should be significantly larger (indicating a stronger level of partisan identification) than that of the control group, while the mean should be significantly smaller (weaker level of identification) for those in the incongruent group.
- If the policy agreement hypotheses are proven correct, those in the congruent treatment group should show a greater level of policy agreement (as measured by the mean of the policy agreement scale) than the control group, while the incongruent group should show a weaker level of policy agreement than the control group. However, this effect may be moderated by the presence of party cues, with a stronger effect expected when cues are present, and a weaker or absence of an effect when cues are absent.
- Analysis will be conducted at different levels of political knowledge, as this may mediate the effect of the treatment - those who have a greater level of knowledge about politics are likely to have a more concrete partisan stereotype in their minds, and thus be less affected by the treatment.
- Analysis will be conducted at different levels of political engagement, as this may mediate the effect of the treatment - those who have show a deeper engagement with politics are likely to have a more concrete partisan stereotype in their minds, and thus be less affected by the treatment.
- Missing or those who responded with 'don't know' to relevant questions will initially be excluded from the analysis. Values will then be imputed using both the mean values for each variable, and the k-nearest neighbours method, to determine if this materially changes the results.

- Non-compliance will be tested using the four screener questions. The analysis will be conducted at different levels of compliance.