The Twenty-First Century American Voter: The Dominance of Partisanship

Matthew Farrell
Government Department
GOV490A
Date of Graduation: May 17, 2008
Submitted May 2008
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Nearly everyone who studies American politics or has any familiarity with the subject agrees that political parties are incredibly important institutions. However, the scope and nature of the role of political parties is frequently debated. Some argue that the role and configuration of American political parties has changed substantially in the past fifty years, while others argue that political parties have been stable. The debate now also focuses on when and how people choose which party they wish to support. One theory, which is often referred to as “revisionist,” believes that since the late 1960s people have decided where they stand on various issues and choose the party that they feel is closer to them ideologically. The revisionist approach believes that “citizens adjust their partisan self-images as warranted by experience and evidence.”¹ The older position, which was established during the 1950s, argues that support for a party comes first, with specific positions on issues and support for certain ideas and individuals coming later. This “partisan influence” theory argues that “party identification influences value positions” as a result of the ability of party identification to influence perception.² In this paper, I attempt to articulate the current debate about the role of partisanship in America, discuss how the current debate arises from the political history of the United States since 1950, and reach the conclusion that political parties are more important than ideology and generally precede issue positions and the much noted ideology.

² Ibid., 883.
Just as with the debate about the role of political parties, there is significant controversy concerning exactly what is meant by the term political party. In 1770, Edmund Burke made the claim that a political party was simply an organization aiming to promote certain policies. In 1957, Anthony Downs defined a political party as a “coalition of men” that seeks to gain power legally in government. In 1967, William Nisbet Chambers claimed that inspiring loyalty among voters was the defining characteristic of a political party. In 1995, John Aldrich claimed that a political party was an organization involved in politics with rules and durability. All of these definitions contribute to the modern understanding of what a political party is and note important features. However, in this paper, a political party refers to a “group organized to nominate candidates to try to win political power through elections and to promote ideas about public problems.”

A good deal of the debate about political parties is the result of the construction of the political party and its various functions. There is the party organization itself (which is made up of party leaders and activists), the party in government (which refers to the members of a party who are elected to public office), and the party in the electorate, which refers to those in the general population who support and identify with a party. The main focus of this essay is this third group of people, those who feel an attachment to a party and generally support the party, but do not run for office, hold public office, or

---

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 6.
8 Ibid., 7.
work for the party in an official capacity. To these individuals, parties are essentially symbols, meaning “emotion-laden objects of loyalty.” These people can be described as “party identifiers,” meaning that they are “people who feel a sense of psychological attachment to a particular party.” This partisan identification is a purely mental link, and it does not depend on being active, voting in a certain manner, or even holding certain views – it simply means feeling that one is part of this group. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, a person claiming that he or she is a Republican is a Republican, regardless of his or her beliefs or behavior. These party identifiers also help “keep the party alive” by transmitting party loyalties to their children (which is extremely important to remember when comparing the importance of party identification for explaining vote choice to other hypothetical factors like ideology).

This loyalty to a party can be very strong and often acts as a “filter” through which people see and evaluate candidates and issues.

Those who believe that parties and party identification are not the most important factors in vote choice often claim that “ideology” is key to understanding modern American politics. Individuals who highlight ideology generally base their argument on the claim that Democratic and Republican party identifiers have become considerably more ideologically cohesive since the 1960s. However, determining what ideology actually means if difficult. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes define ideology as, “a particularly elaborate, close-woven, and far-ranging structure of attitudes,” which they

9 Ibid., 13.
11 Hershey, Party Politics in America, 100.
12 Ibid.
argue is not just political, “with its parts organized in a coherent fashion.”"\footnote{14}{Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter*, (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1960) 192.} Downs defines ideology as “a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing such a society.”\footnote{15}{Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, 96.} Downs focuses particularly on a left-right spectrum based on beliefs about how much control the government should have in the economy with extreme left preferring a high level and the right preferring a low level, though this could be considered an operational definition to approximate the ideology of a person.\footnote{16}{Ibid., 116.}

Additionally, measuring ideology is as challenging as characterizing it. Authors frequently use the notion of issue consistency (a concept to analyze how well knowing the opinions of an individual on one topic allows the accurate prediction of his or her opinions on other issues), but this is problematic. For instance, just because some individuals believe that abortion should be legal and strongly approve of labor unions while others hold the opposite beliefs would not necessarily mean that there is a coherent system of beliefs behind the opinions of each. However, the frequency with which political scholars discuss ideology itself justifies a close analysis of the role ideology plays in influencing political choices citizens make, and it will frequently be discussed throughout this paper as the dominant challenge to the idea that party identification is the paramount feature of American politics.

In chapter two I will analyze the historical changes of the politics of the United States. The late 1800s and early 1900s were the “heyday” of political machines, where politicians relied on material incentives like jobs to build support and then controlled city
governments. However, this changed by the 1950s. I will primarily build upon the scholarly foundation developed by Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes in *The American Voter*. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes wrote in the 1950s and attempt to describe why Americans voted the way they did in presidential elections. These authors concluded that party identification was the key indicator for vote choice and a host of other political beliefs. Herbert Hyman, writing in 1959, adds to this analysis by finding that party identification is highly correlated with the partisan identification of the parents of a person and that partisan attachment is virtually permanent. Thus, as of the end of the 1950s, there was an academic consensus that to understand American politics, one had to look no further than political parties. This belief was eventually challenged. Whereas the American public of the 1950s was “only mildly involved in politics,” many began to argue that is was more “aroused” and “detached from political parties by the 1960s and 1970s.” Burnham argues that between 1961 and 1979, parties began to lose their role “as an intervener between the voter and the objects of his or her votes.” These beliefs endured for several decades. Sharon Jarvis explains, “The conventional wisdom about party identification developed over the course of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s was that it was weakening, largely endogenous to other political evaluations, and increasingly irrelevant to American political behavior.”

19 Ibid., 1.
However, Thomas Carsey contends that, in recent years, mass partisanship has strengthened, exerts a strong and growing impact on vote choice, is largely exogenous to short-term political evaluations, and plays a fundamental role in shaping other political evaluations." I will describe the arguments that various political scientists make and I will briefly discuss their data. These different theories and the current debate about which better defines the current political environment provide an excellent starting point for an analysis of the presidential elections of the early twenty-first century. In many ways, this paper attempts to bring the analysis that began in *The American Voter* and was continued by *The Changing American Voter* and *The New American Voter* into the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In chapter three, I will use data gathered by National Election Surveys (NES) to test the hypothesis that party identification dominates American electoral politics. The University of Michigan has conducted national Election Surveys since 1952 and, while the questions asked are not entirely consistent from year to year and one could argue that the short time-span limits the deductions that can be made, the NES data is still the best source of information about the American electorate. I will primarily focus on elections after 1992, but I will also look at the correlation between party identification and vote choice in previous time periods. Since the concept of ideology is important as a potential cause of specific vote choice, I will use self-placement on an ideological scale as a control for the relationship between party identification and vote choice, as well as an independent variable itself. Finally, I will include income as a potential factor in


22 Ibid.

influencing vote choice. While using economic class is not especially common in studies of American politics, many political commentators and politicians have discussed a growing division with American society, which warrants consideration in a study attempting the characterize the American electorate. The Republican Party is often described as a party of the rich, while many claim that the Democratic party appeals to poorer individuals. The frequent discussion of which economic groups are favored by certain policies is also very common and justifies the inclusion of income as a potential factor for influencing political decisions.

Whereas chapter three will focus on aggregate-level factors, chapter four will highlight more anecdotal scenarios and attempt to describe other aspects of the current political environment. I will make use of recent polls by Gallup and other organizations to demonstrate that the same factors that influence vote choice in presidential elections have an effect in numerous other areas. James Campbell and Carl Cannon explain this idea generally, saying,

> Today President Bush and his predecessor, Bill Clinton, are routinely described in the press and academia as ‘polarizing’ presidents, as if this is entirely their fault… An alternative explanation suggests itself: the last two presidents inhabited a polarized political environment—and that instead of being its architects, they were its victims.24

Some argue that this polarized environment is one of ideological polarization, but I will attempt to demonstrate that it is better understood as partisan polarization. For example, Hershey explains that despite the beliefs of some political scientists, indicators show that

---

partisanship has increased in the United States since the 1970s.\textsuperscript{25} I will also discuss the argument that twenty-first century American politics is best described as a “culture war.” A culture war, which Morris Fiorina \textit{et al.} define as “the displacement of the classic economic conflicts that animated the twentieth century politics in the advanced democracies by newly emergent moral and religious ones,” contributes to the debate about modern American politics, as many contentious issues currently revolve around notions of morality.\textsuperscript{26} However, economic conflict continues to be important and many aspects of the culture war can be better understood in terms of partisan conflict. Ultimately, I intend to show how partisan conflict is a significant, valuable, and necessary term if one wishes to understand virtually any aspect of modern American politics.

Having demonstrated that party identification and partisan conflict are present and are centrally important for understanding American politics, I will present the two most widely discussed and evaluated theories to explain why this is the case. First, I will discuss the psychological explanations for partisanship. These explanations are generally grouped together under the heading of “social identity theory.” When applied to politics, this theory argues, “people tend to project favorable characteristics and acceptable issue positions onto the candidates of the party they favor and are persuaded to support particular candidates or issues because they are associated with the individual’s party.”\textsuperscript{27} The other theory that is often used to explain the presence and importance of partisanship in modern American politics is derived from economic theories. This section will draw heavily on the work of Anthony Downs, who argues that economics provides valuable

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Hershey, \textit{Party Politics in America}, 105.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Hershey, \textit{Party Politics in America}, 107.
\end{itemize}
tools for political science. These economic theories of democracy primarily focus on the costs and benefits of various political activities, and several more recent scholars have approached politics in terms of costs and benefits as well. For example, Hershey notes that parties simplify issues and elections so voters can make choices without bearing the cost of searching for more information. The authors of The American Voter also discuss the benefits of political parties for making sense of domestic policies since parties indicate a basic position for their adherents to embrace and provide partisans with “cues” to help organize opinions. Psychological and economic theories of why partisanship is important and so prevalent are not mutually exclusive, and both are useful.

In chapter six, I will explain why the rise of partisanship matters to America as a society and to individual citizens. One should not believe that the effects of high-levels of partisanship are entirely negative. Political parties provide valuable tools and help to simplify politics to make it accessible to a large number of people. Parties also serve as a mechanism to link citizens with each other and their leaders and are extremely democratic in many ways. However, “party politics” is a term that usually has negative connotations, and when a person uses the term “partisan” it is generally to express criticism, exasperation, or disgust. Some political scientists worry that “excess partisanship literally inhibits Americans from processing information that challenges their biases,” and note that there are many other problems associated with partisanship. I intend to present and discuss the negative, positive, and neutral results of the current structure of American politics.

---

28 Ibid., 11.
In chapter seven I will discuss some of the limits of my analysis. Humans have lived in societies for thousands of years, and to analyze a sample from a relatively small society over a mere sixty-year period of time and expect to reach a grand conclusion that will provide useful universal insights concerning the relationships among individuals is extremely ambitious. However, I expect that, despite the problems of survey-based research, American centrism, and human knowledge in general, I will be able to enrich the present understanding of American politics. I will also discuss some interesting avenues of study that my research presents.

My hypothesis is that partisanship is the most important element of electoral politics and public opinion in America. I find that the statement “virtually everything important in American politics is rooted in party politics” is accurate.\(^3^1\) One interesting situation helps to put the influence of partisanship into a simple and understandable context. In a 1980 National Election Survey, respondents were asked to rate both the Democrat Jimmy Carter and the Republican Ronald Reagan in terms of how knowledgeable each was. Democrats overwhelming considered Carter extremely knowledgeable and claimed that Reagan lacked knowledge, while the opposite was true for Republicans.\(^3^2\) Larry Bartels facetiously asks if Democrats and Republicans have different ideas about what “knowledgeable” means.\(^3^3\) This scenario raises the possibility that there are significant differences in the composition of the two parties (even if Bartels finds this extremely unlikely), and it presents an excellent starting point for thinking

\(^3^1\) Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, xvii.


\(^3^3\) Ibid.
about how Americans with the same facts come to opposite conclusions and why.

Another interesting way to begin thinking about the importance of identification and association in politics is to recognize that “American citizens are… open to many liberal policies,” unless these policies “have been coupled with the liberal label.” Political parties (which are essentially labels or teams) and party adherents are extremely important in modern American politics, and I will argue that they are easily the most important feature.

This does not necessarily mean this will always be true. There has been an increase in the number of independent voters, which is a challenge to a system of politics organized around two competing parties. Also, there have been changes to the structure of American politics in the past. However, for the present, partisanship can be considered the key to nearly all political outcomes. Campbell and Cannon state, “the war in Iraq has engendered a partisan antipathy… so pervasive that pollsters know answers to most questions about the president and his policies by the time they ask the first survey question—the one in which respondents identify their political party affiliation.” I argue that it is not the Iraq War that has made party affiliation an indicator of the opinions of individuals, but rather the current nature of American politics.

---

34 Jarvis, The Talk of the Party, 212.
35 Campbell and Cannon, “Polarization Runs Deep, Even byYesterday’s Standards” in Red and Blue Nation? Nivola and Brady eds., 167.
CHAPTER TWO: THE RECOGNITION, DECLINE, AND RE-EMERGENCE OF PARTISANSHIP IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA

An analysis of the role of partisanship in American politics is in many ways a study of history as well as political science. Before the twentieth century, and in some places even well into the twentieth century, American politics frequently revolved around material incentives rather than ideas. As previously mentioned, political machines dominated the political life of many cities and held a monopoly on power. However, American politics eventually morphed into a competition of policies instead of patronage.

In the late 1950s, Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes wrote *The American Voter*, which contains many observations about American politics and why American citizens make certain choices. While *The American Voter* only covers a single decade, its academic legacy has been substantial. The topics and central issues in many monographs and academic articles focusing on American politics can be traced back to the findings and hypotheses of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes. I will first summarize the key findings of *The American Voter* related to the role of partisanship in American politics. I will then continue this historical approach by examining *The Changing American Voter* by Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petroik and *The New American Voter* by Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, both works that can be accurately described as “sequels” to *The American Voter*. These three works find some significant differences in the American electorate and note several changes in American politics. They not only provide a series of hypotheses to test, but also allow a comparison of American politics between 1996 and 2004 with earlier periods.
The authors of *The American Voter* begin their analysis with the 1948 triumph of Truman over Dewey and continue through the 1956 election.\(^{36}\) This book was published in 1960 and attempts to explain what influences voters in presidential elections with a concentration on the elections of 1952 and 1956. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes primarily focus on psychological issues and believe that partisan attachment is extremely important to the decisions people make when they vote. The authors develop and use a theoretical “funnel of causality” to work backwards from the casting of a vote for one candidate and study the effects and timing of many variables. This analysis includes a significant number of factors that are not necessarily dependent on partisan attachment, but Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes find there is almost always some correlation between partisan identification and a factor affecting vote choices.\(^{37}\) They focus on votes in presidential elections, arguing that since “choice of President has been the most important decision issuing from the electoral process, it is natural that the presidential election should attract wider interest than any other.”\(^{38}\) *The American Voter* contains many insightful observations about American politics, and it provides an excellent starting point for discussing the behavior of modern American citizens.

Campbell *et al* note that the Democratic and Republican parties are the “most enduring objects of the American political environment.”\(^{39}\) Though perhaps obvious, this is significant. Campbell *et al* additionally find, “Most Americans, though not officially enrolled as members of the political parties, hold a form of psychological membership in

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 1-11.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 60.
the party that exerts great influence on their political behavior.” ⁴⁰ Both the idea that psychological attachment determines partisan identification and that one does not need to be officially listed as a member of a party are important. In making the argument that partisan identification is a “self-classification” and not necessarily dependent on any “legal recognition,” proof of “formal membership,” or even consistently supporting that party in elections, the authors of The American Voter make the case that looking at votes, the number of voters registering with one of the parties, and other hard numbers can be misleading. ⁴¹ This is particularly relevant when investigating claims based the percentage of voters classified as Democratic, Republican, and independent.

Campbell et al also find that the partisan preferences of Americans are very stable over time. ⁴² This is crucial because it supports the theory that the preferences of voters are anchored in something fairly permanent. Campbell et al also explain why there is this stability. They argue,

Once a person has acquired some embryonic party attachment, it is easy for him to discover that most events in the ambiguous world of politics redound to the credit of his chosen party. As his perception of his party’s virtue gains momentum in this manner, so his loyalty to it strengthens, and this fact in turn increases the probability that future events will be interpreted in a fashion that supports his partisan inclination. ⁴³

If this is true, then those who identify with the Democratic Party and those who identify with the Republican Party can see the same event differently. This strengthens the notion that partisanship is based on a psychological attachment since there is a difference between the way Democratic Party identifiers and Republican Party identifiers interpret

---

⁴⁰ Ibid., 295.
⁴¹ Ibid., 121-122.
⁴² Ibid., 120.
⁴³ Ibid., 165.
events, even if both observe the same thing. The evidence of Campbell et al demonstrates that, in the 1950s, partisan identification had a greater effect on attitudes toward political events than attitudes toward political events had on partisan identification.

The authors of *The American Voter* also highlight a high level of correlation between party identification of parents and the party identification of their children throughout their lives.\(^{44}\) Thus, parties are essentially self-sustaining as those who identify with one party are able to imprint this identification onto their offspring. This supports the theory that party preferences are based on views and experiences early in life and once formed act as a filter that determines how individuals will interpret certain events and react. Campbell et al state that their data shows that “Merely associating the party symbol with [the name of a candidate] encourages those identifying with the party to develop a more favorable image of his record and experience, his abilities, and his other personal attributes.”\(^{45}\) In the 1950s, party identification had a major effect on the opinions of voters and how they acted, particularly with regard to vote choice.

Campbell et al make several other contributions to a study attempting to assess the nature and size of partisanship in American politics. For example, Campbell et al base their work on the idea that partisanship is not a dichotomy but a continuum.\(^{46}\) One could be a strong Democrat, strong Republican, or somewhere in between. Additionally, the authors of *The American Voter* emphasize that there are results of having a strong partisan preference that go beyond opinions and vote choices, such as increasing the

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 147.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 128.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 123.
likelihood that a person will be politically active. Campbell et al find, “the probability that a person will vote depends on the strength of [his or her] partisan preference.”

_The American Voter_ serves as a foundation on which many works are based. This does not mean that all political scientists who study the American electorate believe that the conclusions of _The American Voter_ can be applied to other time periods. Campbell et al ultimately argue, “the stable qualities of the public’s response to political affairs have to do primarily with long-term loyalties to the parties rather than ideological commitments against which current acts or policies of the parties could be evaluated.”

In many ways, _The Changing American Voter_ can be understood as arguing that this changed and that by the late 1960s and 1970s ideology became much more important. Still, despite numerous challenges to their ideas, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes are the framers of the modern debate of what causes voters to behave as they do.

Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik claim that American politics changed dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. They find that many of the key findings _The American Voter_, particularly the role of partisan identification, are no longer valid. However, they begin by admitting that in the 1950s and early 1960s, partisanship was strong, inherited, and seemed to mobilize voters to participate.

The main theme of Nie et al is the “change” of the American electorate. As a result, they claim that there are substantial differences between voters in the 1950s and voters in the 1970s. _The Changing American Voter_ includes evidence of a decline in consistently voting for a party, a smaller percentage of the electorate being affiliated with a party, and an increase

47 Ibid., 97.
48 Ibid., 550.
50 Ibid., 289.
in frequency of voting against the party with which one identifies among those who do have a partisan identification.\textsuperscript{51} Nie \textit{et al} believe that the evidence concerning the decline in the importance of party identification as well as other trends they present demonstrate that ideology is the key to understanding modern American politics. They state that this change is the result of “Race, Vietnam, the urban crisis, Watergate, and the economic recession of the mid-seventies” being “issues that cut across the old alliance patterns of American politics.”\textsuperscript{52} Thus, Nie \textit{et al} present not only an argument that American politics became centered around ideology, but also an unstated theory that political and social turmoil can lead to dramatic changes in the structure of American politics

Nie \textit{et al} believe that ideology was unimportant before the 1960s because voters in 1950s did not have coherent ideological beliefs to which parties could appeal.\textsuperscript{53} For example, in the 1950s, the position of a voter on one issue was not found to be consistent with positions on other issues.\textsuperscript{54} In other words, the voter of the 1950s was not found to have a coherent mental framework that guided him or her and would allow the accurate prediction of his or her positions on other issues. Also, according to Nie \textit{et al}, knowing the position of a voter on one issue would not indicate the position the voter took on other issues, which is frequently referred to as issue consistency. In an attempt to be more specific about exactly what ideology means, the authors of \textit{The Changing American Voter} attempt to articulate the preeminent ideologies they feel dominate American politics. They state that traditional ideology refers to “attitudes on social welfare, minority rights, and governmental control over the economy… civil liberties, and the

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 123.
rights of political dissenters.” They support this claim with data showing “substantial correlations among domestic and cold war issues, strong relationships between positions on these issues and attitudes on the civil liberties of dissenters, and a moderate to strong relationship between all these issues and the new social issues.” Their data also shows that voters are more ideologically consistent on domestic issues than other issues.

Nie et al present 1964 as a transformative year. In 1964, partisan voting starts to erode, “pure party voting” declines, and Barry Goldwater represents a clearer ideological choice for voters. Nie et al explain the importance of Goldwater saying,

There is no way to confirm precisely that voters in 1964 were responding to the cues presented by the candidate, Barry Goldwater. But it is likely that his appeal, based as it was on a fairly consistent conservative position, let to a crystallization of the political views of Republicans and Democrats.

To the authors of The Changing American Voter, 1964 represents the year that Democrats became the more liberal party while the Republicans became conservative. They support this claim by providing evidence that issue consistency among voters had increased substantially by 1972.

While the notion of the formation of purer ideological parties is interesting, there are some shortcomings to the manner in which Nie et al present the concept of ideology. First, determining whether a person has a solid guiding philosophy influencing his or her political preferences and actions is difficult. A strong argument can be made that issue consistency by itself does not provide support for notions of competing ideologies. In

55 Ibid., 130.
56 Ibid., 135.
57 Ibid., 148.
58 Ibid., 307.
59 Ibid., 198.
60 Ibid., 123.
dividing the purported ideological beliefs of American citizens into a “liberal” category and a “conservative” category, Nie et al risk oversimplifying the diversity of thought within the American electorate. In many ways, the terms liberal and conservative have come to mean little more than a specific set of preferences that often resemble a tautology. What often seems to happen in American politics is that a group of voters will be classified by using a term like liberal or conservative. The position on issues these people generally hold will then also be described as liberal or conservative by virtue of their being supported by people who are liberal or conservative. Eventually, these positions will then be used to classify other individuals as liberal or conservative and the process will continue. Hence, there is little support for the idea of competing worldviews, coherent beliefs about the appropriate role or government, or different images of a good society. Additionally, confirming the growing levels of issue consistency and the development of ideology were not the byproducts of party identification is difficult. As the quotation from Nie et al above shows, the conservative position taken by Goldwater may have caused the electorate to adopt certain ideologies because of their identification with one of the parties. There is a strong possibility that elites within the party (those in the party as an organization and those holding public office) altered the positions of the party, making it more consistent, while most identifiers simply continued to support the party. If a party becomes more consistent across issues and voters continue to support it, there will be the appearance of ideology forming among the voters when their identification with a party is still the dominant factor in terms of shaping their voting behavior and beliefs. Determining whether cohesive ideology among American voters led to the Democratic and Republican parties becoming more ideology distinct or the
Democratic and Republican parties becoming more ideologically distinct led to the creation of cohesive ideology among voters is difficult.

Nonetheless, Nie et al use more than the increasing importance of ideology to support their argument that partisanship was less important in the 1960s and 1970s. They find that in the late 1960s and 1970s, “fewer citizens have steady and strong psychological identification with a party.” 61 Their data also show, “Party affiliation is less of a guide to electoral choice… Parties are less frequently used as standards of evaluation… Parties are less frequently objects of positive feelings on the part of citizens… [and] Partisanship is less likely to be transferred from generation to generation.” 62 However, the authors of The Changing American Voter do not make the claim that party identifiers moved away from their parties. Instead, Nie et al find evidence that the noted decrease in partisan behavior results from the entrance of new voters with weak partisan attachments. That authors explain how these younger voters of the 1960s comprised a large and increasing part of the electorate and the partisan attachment they do have tends to be weaker than older voters. 63 This raises the question of how the composition of the American electorate influences American politics and emphasizes the importance of early party identification if the identification is to endure. Still, not all of the findings of Nie et al challenge the claims of The American Voter. For example, the authors of The Changing American concede, “Partisanship does appear to be a long-term, habitual commitment of individuals.” 64 Nie et al do not argue that the

61 Ibid., 48.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 65.
64 Ibid., 73.
theories of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes are inaccurate, but rather that these ideas did not accurately describe the American voter of the 1960s.

*The Changing American Voter* concludes with the application of its various hypotheses to the 1976 presidential election. The authors find that 1976 conforms to their expectations, but note that “Party voting appears to have had a resurgence, coupled with a decline in the significance of issues.”65 They also find that “[party identification] gains some importance,” but they conclude that this significance “does not return to pre-1964 levels.”66 In several ways, the 1976 election shows that many of the theories presented concerning the 1960s and 1970s are not particularly strong in terms of their applicability to American politics in other times. However, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik present both a refinement of the ideas originally discussed in *The American Voter* and several alternatives ideas that can be explored when analyzing American politics.

*The New American Voter* by Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks advances the analysis of *The American Voter* and *The Changing American Voter* even further. The *New American Voter* begins with the 1980 defeat of Jimmy Carter by Ronald Reagan and ends with the 1992 Bill Clinton victory over George H. W. Bush.67 Like *The American Voter* and *The Changing American Voter*, it draws heavily on the NES (National Election Surveys) done by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan and both the Survey Research Center and the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. The main argument of Miller and Shanks is that “party identification is the most enduring of political attitudes, responsible for shaping a wide

---

65 Ibid., 373-378.
66 Ibid.
variety of values and perceptions. As a result, they generally find a situation consistent with the ideas and claims of *The American Voter*, as Miller and Shanks believe that in the 1980s and 1990s partisan identification re-emerged as the most important factor in determining vote choice and other political positions, though they argue partisanship is not as important in the 1990s as it was in the 1950s. Still, the most important trend identified in *The New American Voter* is the reemergence of partisanship.

Nevertheless, the authors of *The New American Voter* do not claim that the conclusions Nie, Verba, and Petrocik reached concerning American politics in the 1960s and 1970s were inaccurate. Miller and Shanks agree that new voters in 1968, 1972, and 1976 were more non-partisan than more experienced voters. This supports the idea that party identification is weakest when voters are younger and that specific issues or tensions in American politics can prevent or slow this type of political socialization. Miller and Shanks also assert that from 1960 to 1988 there appears to be a decline in party identification as a result the partisan realignment of the South. However, they note, “partisan identifications respond very slowly to voters’ impressions of current party leaders, their policies, and their success or failure in handling government.” Thus, the “realignment” of the South from a Democratic monopoly to a more politically even split that tends to favor the Republican party “occurred over a span of more than three decades.”

---

68 Ibid., 117.
69 Ibid., 154.
70 Ibid., 23.
71 Ibid., 495.
72 Ibid.
Miller and Shanks also provide some analysis of other limits to partisanship. They find that when people vote for a candidate of the party with which they do not identify, this is usually the result of “short-term, election-specific forces” overcoming personal identification.\textsuperscript{73} For example, they argue that in 1992, many voters disapproved of the way George H. W. Bush handled the economy and this affected for whom they voted.\textsuperscript{74} Still, in some ways they underrate the support that the 1992 election provides for the position that party identification is the most important variable. While the analysis provided in \textit{The American Voter} is heavily based on psychology and briefly discusses differences in perception as a result of psychological predispositions, Miller and Shanks do not raise many questions about how identifying with the Democratic or Republican Party can affect how voters interpret and react to short-term forces. Still, even without including a discussion of the role of psychology, Miller and Shanks find evidence to support the theory that partisanship is the most important feature of American politics.

\textit{The New American Voter} also uses information collected by NES to compare the importance of party identification to ideology. In various elections, the data shows that partisanship is of much great importance than ideology. For instance, in the 1992 election between Clinton and Bush, the effect of partisanship on vote choice (when controlled for all other factors) was more than three times as large as the effect of ideological self-designation on vote choice (when controlled for all other factors).\textsuperscript{75} Therefore, Miller and Shanks find, “Party identification is clearly the most important unique source for individual differences in the vote.” However, they add that party identification is not all-

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 110.\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 327.\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 476.
important since liberal/conservative self-identification, predispositions toward morality, predispositions toward equality, and evaluations of the how successfully a candidate would handle the economy all play a role. Miller and Shanks end their analysis by stating, “the general thesis that party ‘dominates’ American presidential politics clearly needs substantial modification,” even though it is the most important individual factor.

_The American Voter, The Changing American Voter, and The New American Voter_ all attempt to describe what shapes the behavior of the American electorate. _The American Voter_ analyzes the 1950s and concludes that partisanship dictates the structure and outcomes of American politics. _The Changing American Voter_ focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, and contains the argument that the importance of partisanship is diminishing while ideology is beginning to dominate American politics. _The New American Voter_ basically occupies the middle ground, arguing that partisanship is the most important factor individually, but that other factors, many of which are discussed in _The Changing American Voter_, are important. In many ways, this study is a continuation of this series of works concerning the American voter. This study analyzes the presidential elections after 1996 and attempts to determine which characterization of the American electorate is the most accurate while testing many of the previously discussed theories. I focus on partisanship, and I attempt to explain both the causes and ramifications of its central position in American politics. I will also address how well ideology can explain differences in political choices and beliefs. Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, Donald Stokes, Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, John Petrocik, and Merill Shanks have created a solid foundation on which virtually any analysis of the American voter can

---

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 487.
draw. Many of their theories are still relevant in 2008 and, despite many changes since the 1950s, American politics continues to revolve around partisanship.
CHAPTER THREE: EVIDENCE OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PARTISANSHIP IN MODERN AMERICAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

To begin, I will analyze the period from 1952 to 2004 and discuss how the data reflect the theories of the major works concerning the American electorate. As noted previously, first, Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, the authors of *The American Voter*, find that in the 1950s American politics was dominated by the concept of partisanship. Then Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik, the authors of *The Changing American Voter*, find that during the 1960s and early 1970s, the importance of partisanship diminished and ideology became extremely significant. Finally, Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, the authors of *The New American Voter*, analyze the 1980s and early 1990s and find that ideology remained important, but partisanship increased from its nadir of influence during the early 1970s and has re-emerged as the most important single variable for understanding American electoral politics at the end of the twentieth century. I find that the evidence generally supports all of these previously mentioned authors. To their analyses, I add an investigation of the presidential elections in 1996, 2000, and 2004, and find the trends that were identified in *The New American Voter* have continued and strengthened. Partisanship is even more important in twenty-first century American politics than it was during the 1950s. However, ideology, the key concept included in the study of the American electorate conducted by Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, has also become more indicative of how a person will vote if one merely looks at the correlation between ideology and vote choice (liberal individuals have become more likely to vote for the Democrat while conservatives are more likely to vote for the Republican). This
correlation is occasionally extremely high, but if controls are included, particularly party identification, the relationship disappears entirely or weakens substantially.

As with *The American Voter*, *The Changing American Voter*, and *The New American Voter*, the data used in this analysis come from a series of American National Election Surveys. The University of Michigan has conducted American National Election Studies (NES) since the early 1950s, and the data collected by the University of Michigan is available on their website at http://www.electionstudies.org. Between 1948 and 1976, the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research carried on a series of studies of the American electorate during each presidential election and several mid-term elections. In 1977, the American National Election Study become a permanent and self-sustaining project and has continued to collect and make available data relevant to American politics. The NES is based on a series of interviews, one occurring before the election and one after the election has taken place. The surveys are generally given to more than 1,100 people and, even though some questions have been added or altered over the years, this information is still helpful and provides insight into American politics and the behavior of American voters. The NES information has been collected by the University of California, Berkeley and is available in conjunction with a data analysis program known as “SDA: Survey Documentation Analysis.” This website not only has data from NES but also General Social Surveys and other archives with data concerning American politics. SDA allows basic bivariate data

---

79 Ibid.
analysis with or without controls, as well as multiple regression analysis, all of which are used in this study.

Figure 1 shows the correlation between party identification and the party for whom a person voted. Kendall’s tau-c is used to measure this correlation and ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 meaning there is no relationship and 1 meaning there is a perfect relationship between the variables. In this study, a value between 0 and 0.33 is considered weak, a value between 0.33 and 0.67 is considered intermediate, and any value greater than 0.67 is considered strong. As figure 1 demonstrates, there is generally a strong relationship between party identification and vote choice. In only two of the fourteen elections between 1952 and 2004 did the tau-c value drop into the intermediate range, and even then the value was near the level required for a strong relationship. Figure 1 also supports the major theories of *The American Voter*, *The Changing American Voter*, and *The New American Voter*. In the elections of the 1950s, there was a strong correlation between the party with which a person identified and the presidential candidate for whom he or she voted. Strong Democrats nearly always voted for the Democratic candidate, weak Democrats usually voted for the Democratic candidate, weak Republicans normally voted for the Republican candidate, strong Republicans voted almost exclusively for the Republican candidate, and non-identifiers generally divided much more evenly. If the high correlation of party identification and vote choice in the 1968 presidential election is ignored, there is also a decrease in the significance of party identification in terms of dictating vote choice in the 1960s and early 1970s, which is the trend identified by Nie, Verba, and Petrocik. The strength of the relationship between party identification and

---

vote choice does not return to the levels of the early 1950s until 1980. Not including the 1968 election is justified to some degree because George Wallace ran as a third party candidate, capturing more than thirteen percent of the popular vote as well as forty-six electoral votes.\textsuperscript{81} Candidates who are not running as a nominee of one of the two major parties and those who vote for them are not generally included in a statistical analysis of presidential elections due to their traditionally limited impact and tendency to obscure larger patterns. The large tau-c value for the relationship between party identification and vote choice in 1968 may appear to disprove the trend of a decreasing correlation between party identification and vote choice, but this may be merely the result those who would

Figure 1.\textsuperscript{82}

---


\textsuperscript{82} All figures in this chapter were created using SDA: Survey, Documentation and Analysis. “SDA Archive.” \textit{Study Documentation and Analysis, CSM}. Available online at http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm (accessed 13 February 2008).
likely vote against their party identification being excluded from the analysis. There is also evidence of the trend Miller and Shanks discuss as the strength of the correlation increases from 1972 through the 1980s and into the 1990s. This supports their argument that party identification became more relevant in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, while this data show the continuance of the trend Miller and Shanks identified, that of the increasing correlation between party identification and vote choice, it also indicates that Miller and Shanks may have exaggerated the extent to which party identification has been displaced by other factors. There is a clear and relatively consistent increase in the strength of the relationship between party identification and vote choice from 1976 onward. The presidential elections of 1976 and 1980 show a level of correlation that is very similar to the levels seen in the 1950s. After the 1980 election, the tau-c values for the relationship between party identification and vote choice are higher than the values for any election in the 1950s. This does not support the hypothesis of Miller and Shanks that party identification did not reach the importance it had the 1950s at any time during the 1980s and early 1990s. Still, a major component of the argument Miller and Shanks make is based not only on the strength of the correlation between party identification and vote choice, but also on the increasing correlation between other factors and vote choice, particularly ideology, which is discussed below. While the trend depicted in figure 1 does not entirely support the findings of Miller and Shanks, it does not necessarily disprove it either. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of understanding twenty-first century American politics, there is a clear indication that party identification is increasing in importance and becoming an even more accurate indicator of for whom a person will vote. The strength of the
relationship between party identification and vote choice has been strong since 1976 and has become even stronger in every election since 1972. The importance of partisanship is at an level unprecedented in the history of the NES, and if this trend continues, one would expect that the relationship between party identification and vote choice would become nearly perfect, with all Democratic party identifiers voting for the Democratic candidate and all Republican party identifiers voting for the Republican.

While the correlation between party identification and vote choice indicates that partisanship dominates American electoral politics and that the previously mentioned series of works advancing the ideas of *The American Voter* may have underestimated the importance of partisanship, there is additional data that show the relationship depicted in figure 1 is not as clear as indicated. Although party identification is important, there have been notable changes in the number of people holding a certain type of identification. Table 1 and figure 2 present the percentage of the electorate in terms of seven exclusive categories of identification – strong Democrat, weak Democrat, independent-Democrat, independent-independent, independent-Republican, weak Republican, and strong Republican. The basic trend presented is that the percentage of strong and weak party identifiers has decreased (though the weak Republican identifiers did not have as significant a decrease as strong and weak Democrats, and strong Republicans compose a larger percentage of the electorate in 2004 than in 1952), and all independent categories of identification increased. Thus, while almost every strong Democratic party identifier votes for the Democratic candidate and almost every strong Republican party identifier votes for the Republican candidate, if there are fewer of these strong identifiers, saying that party identification has become less dominant in American politics can be somewhat
correct even if the correlation between party identification and vote choice increases in strength.

**Table 1: Partisan Breakdown of American Electorate By Year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2:**

*Party Identification*
However, as figure 2 presents extremely well, the changes in the percentage of voters in each category has changed, but these changes have not been drastic. The number of Democratic party identifiers (strong and weak Democratic identifiers combined) has decreased, the number of Republican party identifiers (strong and weak Republican identifiers combined) has essentially remained the same, and the number of independents has increased, but by small amounts. Even though these changes slightly weaken the argument that American politics of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century is more political party-centric than even the 1950s, the changes in party identification certainly do not disprove it. In addition, independent-Republicans and independent-Democrats still overwhelmingly rate the Republican and Democratic candidates respectively. There are also several theories that postulate these changes reflect a party “realignment” rather than a decrease in levels of partisanship. For example, Marjorie Hershey posits that the decline could be the result of an exodus of Democrats in the South. She states, “As the national Democratic Party showed greater concern for the rights of African Americans in the late 1960s and 1970s, and particularly as the Voting Rights Act greatly increased the proportion of African-American voters in southern states, conservative southern Democrats became increasingly estranged from their national party.”83 The trends in table 1 and figure 2 could result merely from changes in identification in one region of the United States. This would explain why the major decrease is among Democratic Party identification. Nevertheless, this does indicate that party identification is not impervious to change and that major policies and social

---

Changes can alter the percentage of the American electorate holding certain party identifications.

The major innovation Nie, Verba, and Petrocik include in their analysis is the idea of ideology. However, as figure 3 indicates, the NES did not ask respondents to classify themselves in terms of ideology until 1972. This is unfortunate since it does not allow a direct comparison between periods such as the early twenty-first century with the 1950s, when Nie, Verba, and Petrocik argue that ideology did not play an important role in American politics, or with the 1960s, when Nie, Verba, and Petrocik claim that ideology became extremely important for understanding American politics. Yet, these authors developed a process by which they were able to construct their own measure for the strength of ideology. Their approach uses surveys that asked the same questions at various times and codes the positions as conservative or liberal. They argue that individual issues moved to the center of politics during the 1960s and created “coherence” in the attitudes of citizens. Consequently, the numbers developed for investigating the importance of “ideology” during the 1950s and 1960s are actually a measurement indicating levels of issue consistency. According to their analysis, ideological coherence (issue consistency) of voters increased during the 1960s and reached a significantly high level by 1972. As mentioned in the introduction and the discussion of *The Changing American Voter*, this is problematic since issue consistency is not synonymous with having organized views of how the world works and how it should. For example, if ideology is treated as a desire for change, as some conventional definitions claim

---

85 Ibid., 97.
86 Ibid., 123.
(conservative being a position that does not want change and liberal referring to a position of desiring change), there is no direct relationship between partisanship and level of what is often considered American conservatism.\(^{87}\) Still, their findings are an excellent starting point for analyzing the influence of ideology on American Politics.

As stated previously, ideology refers to a “particularly elaborate, close-woven, and far-ranging structure of attitudes” that includes a world view that is “organized in a coherent fashion.”\(^{88}\) Figure 3 shows that by 1972 the relationship between ideology and vote choice was of intermediate strength, which lends some support to Nie, Verba, and Petrocik. The other important feature of the relationship between ideology and vote choice is that, other than the slight decrease in correlation during the 1980s and 2000, ideology has become even more indicative of how a person will vote. In 1992 and 1996, the values of tau-c are 0.62 and 0.64 respectively, which is on the boundary between what

**Figure 3:**

---

\(^{87}\) Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, *The American Voter*, 210-211.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 192.
is considered a relationship of intermediate strength and one that is considered strong. In 2004, the correlation between ideology and vote choice is clearly a strong relationship. Since the 1970s, liberals have become more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate and conservatives the Republican candidate in presidential elections. Interestingly, like party identification, ideology is also becoming a more accurate indicator of for whom someone will vote.

Figures 4 and 5 show the percentage of the American Electorate that claims to hold a certain ideology – extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative. The percentage of the American electorate in each ideological category since 1972 is impressively consistent, and this consistency is even greater than the previously analyzed party identification. The only significant changes are a small decrease in the percentage of those considering themselves moderates between 1976 and 1980, and the percentage of conservatives overtaking the percentage of slightly conservative individuals. Another interesting feature, which figure 5 shows particularly well, is that there have consistently been more conservatives (a combination of the extremely conservative, conservative, and slightly conservative categories) than liberals (a combination of the categories of slightly liberal, liberal, and extremely liberal), but never by more than fifteen percent. An additional important feature of the ideological arrangement of the American electorate is that the moderate category is always the largest individual category. Since the categories have had approximately the same percentage of the electorate in each year, there is not a great deal of support for the theory that American politics is becoming more ideologically
polarized in terms of its composition, though there is evidence that Americans are voting for the candidate that better reflects their ideology more frequently.

**Figure 4:**

**Figure 5:**
This logically leads to the question of the relative roles of party identification and ideology in American politics. As figure 6 shows, the relationship between both and vote choice has increased since the 1980s. Liberals and Democrats have become more likely to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate, while conservatives and Republicans have become more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. This appears to be somewhat contradictory, but there are several ways to explain this phenomenon. Thomas Carsey gives one potential reason for this situation by explaining, “despite the enduring character of both party identification and policy attitudes… they have statistically significant reciprocal effects on each other over time.”\textsuperscript{89} Others claim the relationship is not reciprocal, but rather that one factor is the cause of both voting for a certain candidate and identifying oneself in a specific manner. As discussed previously, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik argue that voters developed coherent ideologies in the 1960s and that this has led to people choosing to support a party with which they share an ideology, thus making the claim that ideology determines party identification and vote choice. Conversely, there is another opinion that believes party identification is the most significant variable and that, in terms of affecting vote choice, ideology is simply an intervening variable. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes present this idea in \textit{The American Voter} by claiming ideology is “trivial” when compared to partisan identification because of the greater strength of the latter.\textsuperscript{90} Figure 6 shows that party identification has always had a more significant correlation with vote choice, even though both have increased together. Also, as the analysis of the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections below demonstrates, there is more

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{90} Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, \textit{The American Voter}, 215.
\end{flushright}
support for the argument that party identification is the most important factor in determining vote choice.

**Figure 6:**

![Correlation of Party Identification and Ideology with Vote Choice](image)

Still, there is a continuing debate among political scientists about the role party identification and ideology play in influencing one another. Paul Goren argues, “party identities are more stable than the principles of equal opportunity, limited government, traditional family values, and moral tolerance.”⁹¹ On the other hand, William Galston and Pietro Nivola allege that voters who feel strongly about an issue and see significant differences between the parties will select the party with which they agree most closely to support. Their argument also supports the notion that voters who do not feel particularly strongly about an issue tend to identify with a party and, if the party changes its position,

---

they will change as well. Complicating this argument further are questions of how ideological the Democratic and Republican parties of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are. Carll Ladd argues that a major reason for the increasing number of disagreements between congressional Democrats and Republicans is that the Democrats are a “much more coherently liberal party” and Republicans “more a conservative party than ever.” This claim requires some understanding of the term “ideological party.” According to Hershey, an ideological party is a political party with “clear and consistent principles on a wide range of questions from the purpose of government to the pitfalls and possibilities of human nature.” That American political parties fit this definition is questionable. Galston and Nivola note, “Today, big spending and big bureaucracy are hallmarks of the politically chastened [Republican Party],” and one would expect that a conservative ideological party would support neither major government expenditures, nor a massive bureaucracy. The Medicare prescription drug benefit program approved by a Republican president and Congress is an excellent example of why American political parties are not especially ideological.

Additionally, there is limited evidence that members of the American electorate select their party based on ideological factors. Carsey finds, “even on issues as divisive and emotion-laden as abortion and racial equality, there is evidence of individuals

---

92 Galston and Nivola, “Delineating the Problem” in *Red and Blue Nation?*, Nivola and Brady eds., 18.
93 Jarvis, *The Talk of the Party*, 133.
95 Galston and Nivola, “Delineating the Problem” in *Red and Blue Nation?*, Nivola and Brady eds., 30.
bringing their attitudes into line with their party ties.”96 His research and data analysis concludes, “party identification has a statistically significant effect on attitude change… This effect is at least twice as large – and in terms of standardized coefficients, well more than twice as large – as the influence of policy attitudes on change in party identification.”97

Though there is technically a difference between ideology and issue positions (or, as Carsey labels them, “policy attitudes”), the difference is quite limited. As discussed in chapter two, most individuals who address ideology in American politics are actually identifying a form of issue consistency that has been labeled an ideology. The authors of The Changing American Voter even created their own measurement for ideology by coding issue positions on a liberal-conservative scale and then combining the scores of a voter to determine his or her “ideology.”98 In practice, there is actually little difference between issue consistency and ideology. If party identification influences the position a person takes on an issue, stating that it affects his or her ideology would not be unreasonable given that the two concepts are so closely related and the frequency with which ideology is used to refer to issue positions, such as those on the topic of abortion. As a result, the findings of Carsey give credence to the theory that party identification has a greater effect on ideology than ideology has on party identification and that party identification is therefore more significant in terms of determining vote choice. Both of these claims are supported by the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections.

97 Ibid., 474.
In order to investigate the question of the roles of partisanship and ideology, and to apply the debate to the elections of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, analyzing the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections in greater depth is valuable. Figure 7 shows the correlation between party identification and vote choice when the relationship is controlled for ideology. Essentially, the 1996 NES respondents are divided based on how each identified his or her ideology. Within each of the ideological categories, the relationship between party identification and vote choice is then measured. If the relationship between party identification and vote choice is spurious, which would mean that vote choice is actually caused by ideology, then the relationship in each of the categories should disappear. As figure 7 clearly presents, the relationship between party identification and vote choice weakens when the results are controlled for ideology, but not completely. There is a slight complication involving the extremely liberal and slightly
liberal categories of ideology since the level of confidence is not sufficiently high to be reasonably convinced that the apparent strength of the relationship is not the result of sampling error (In this project, all data presented is at the ninety percent confidence level or higher). This absence of confidence can result from a lack of variation within the categories or a small sample size, and one way to compensate for these shortcomings is to combine the three liberal categories (extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal), which is what is depicted in table 2 and figure 8. As figure 8 makes clear, the relationship between party identification and vote choice for liberals is quite weak, with tau-c being only 0.13. The strength of the relationship for moderate, conservative, and extremely conservative categories shows a relationship of medium strength which, though not as strong as the initial relationship, is still significant. Interestingly, for individuals claiming to have an ideology that is slightly conservative, there is still a strong relationship between party identification and vote choice.

There is some logic to these results, as one would expect that those with extreme views would rely more upon strongly held positions than those who lack a strong ideological commitment. A moderate or slightly conservative person would probably use a different type of self-identification to make decisions, as indifference is not likely to compel someone to vote for a specific candidate. Overall, the relationship between party identification and vote choice weakens when ideology is used as a control, but the relationship generally remains one of intermediate strength.
Table 2: Relationship between Party Identification and Vote Choice for Liberals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0 Strong Democrat (1.5 on K1, K1a, K1b, K1c)</th>
<th>1 Weak Democrat (1.5/0.0 on K1, K1a, K1b, K1c)</th>
<th>2 Independent Democrat (3/4/0.5 on K1, K1a, K1b, K1c)</th>
<th>3 Independent-Independent Democrat (3/2/0.5 on K1, K1a, K1b, K1c)</th>
<th>4 Weak Republican (3/1/0.0 on K1, K1a, K1b, K1c)</th>
<th>5 Strong Republican (2/2/1.0 on K1, K1a, K1b, K1c)</th>
<th>ROW TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>v961289 = 1(COMBINED LIBERAL)</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v961082</td>
<td>1: Bill Clinton</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2: Bob Dole</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVL TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std Devs</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted N</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Tau-C = 0.13)

Figure 8:

Recoded 1996 Party Identification and Vote Choice

When the relationship between ideology and vote choice in the 1996 presidential election is controlled for party identification, as is depicted in figure 9, there is more clearly a weakening of the initial relationship than with the preceding relationship of
party identification and vote choice with ideological classification as a control. When one
controls for party identification, there are no categories showing a strong relationship
between ideology and vote choice, and pure independents ("independent-independent")
are the only category with a relationship that is near the border of the intermediate and
strong relationship classification. The independent-Republican and weak Republican
categories technically show a relationship of intermediate strength, but only barely as the
values of 0.35 and 0.37 are very close to the weak relationship that is defined by having a
tau-c value of 0.33 or less. The other categories of party identification all show a weak
relationship between ideology and vote choice. The level of confidence in the results for
the independent-Democrat category is not sufficiently high to be adequately certain that
the given strength of the relationship did not result from sampling error, but it is unlikely
that the relationship in this category would deviate considerably from the relationships

**Figure 9:**

![1996 Ideology and Vote Choice](image-url)
seen in all other categories. This implies that a strong Democrat will nearly always vote
for the Democratic candidate while a strong Republican is extremely likely to vote for the
Republican candidate. As with the example of extremely liberal individuals nearly always
voting for the more liberal candidate, this makes sense intuitively. A person with an
incredibly strong attachment to a party is unlikely to abandon this intense personal
commitment regardless of other factors.

Table 3 depicts the results of using multiple regression to examine simultaneously
the effect of both ideology and party identification on vote choice. As the discussions of
party identification controlled for ideology and ideology controlled for party
identification indicate, party identification is more individually significant than ideology.
This finding is confirmed by the beta values shown in table 3. The effect of party
identification is nearly three times as strong as the effect of ideology. This suggests the
claim that party identification is more important than ideology is accurate, at least for the
1996 presidential election.

Table 3: 1996 Multiple Regression: Ideology, Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficients</th>
<th>Test That Each Coefficient = 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>.136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.692</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be more confident in the accuracy of the result showing the predominance of
party identification, controlling for an additional variable is useful. While largely absent
from contemporary works attempting to describe American politics, economic status is
still an important factor and is frequently included in works by political scientists
covering a large period of time or the politics of nation-states with more than two major parties. Class stratification has been an important component of American politics in several historical periods. In the New Deal era of the 1930s, the parties were largely defined along class lines.\(^9\) Some scholars make the case that this is not applicable to more recent decades. They argue that, while socio-economic class did play a role up through the 1950s, the role of class was not extremely great and not nearly at the level seen in Europe. This has led Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes to claim the American political system is “largely lacking in class content.”\(^10\) Still, some individuals, such as Morris Fiorina, Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope, argue that economics has not declined in importance.\(^11\) Hershey notes that Americans with lower incomes and those with less education (who often also have lower incomes as a result) tend to call themselves Democrats.\(^12\) Also, personal values and identification may follow economic factors given that various social categorizations influence “political experiences,” which in turn influences other factors.\(^13\) This would imply that income would be an antecedent variable and individually more important than other variables that it affects, such as party identification. Even though the United States does not have clearly defined classes and there is a dislike of recognizing class difference, including income as a potential factor for determining vote choice is worthwhile.

---


\(^12\) Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, 123.

Nonetheless, as table 4 makes clear, the effect of income on vote choice is very weak in the 1996 presidential election. Since this study is focused primarily on the role of party identification and includes ideology as the main alternative to party identification, the importance of income will not be discussed in greater detail. However, there is a possibility that if income is analyzed more closely, certain trends may become apparent and differences in income could be important for understanding twenty-first century American politics. The 2000 and 2004 elections will also include income in their multiple regressions, and studies attempting to describe why people make the political choices they do should not ignore the potential role of financial status.

Table 4: 1996 Multiple Regression: Ideology, Party Identification, Family Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficients</th>
<th>Test That Each Coefficient = 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.627</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between party identification and vote choice with ideology being used as a control in the 2000 presidential election is very similar to the relationship seen in the 1996 presidential election. As figure 10 shows, the initial relationship is quite strong, though the strength of this relationship diminishes somewhat when the electorate is divided according to ideology. In this case, the values for those who are extremely liberal and those who are extremely conservative are not reliable enough to be confident in the supposed tau-c values of the relationships. However, the other categories all have a fairly high confidence level. With the exception of the slightly liberal category, which
shows a weak relationship between party identification and vote choice, the relationship is one of intermediate strength, with the relationship between vote choice and ideology being strong for the moderate category. In the 2000 presidential election, the relationship between party identification and vote choice remains significant even after controlling for ideology.

Figure 10:

Analyzing the relationship between ideology and vote choice with party identification being used as a control is much more difficult for the 2000 election than the 1996 election. As figure 11 implies, the levels of confidence in the values given for the strength of the relationship between ideology and vote choice are extremely low in almost every category. Since every category except weak Democrats and independent-Republicans has a level of confidence too low to reject the null hypothesis, this is not
likely caused by the sample sizes being small. However, the recoding ability of SDA allows a more thorough investigation of the correlation between ideology and vote choice in the 2000 election.

**Figure 11:**

![2000 Ideology and Vote Choice](chart)

The results of recoding ideology and party identification and then re-examining the relationship between ideology and vote choice when controlling for party identification in the 2000 election are presented in figure 12, table 5, and table 6. The categories of ideology were condensed into a “COMBINED LIBERAL” category composed of extremely liberal, liberal, and slightly liberal categories; a “moderate” category that has not been altered from the initial correlation; and a “COMBINED CONSERVATIVE” category including the extremely conservative, conservative, and slightly conservative categories. Party identification was also recoded with strong and
weak Democrats treated as a single “DEMOCRAT” category; the independent-Democrat, independent-independent, and independent-Republican categories comprising an “INDEPENDENT” category; and weak and strong Republicans being combined into the “REPUBLICAN” category. This combination of original categories allows greater confidence in the measurement of the strength of the relationship as it enlarges the sample size, which by itself would increase the level of confidence, and is likely to increase the amount of variation within a category both as a result of the increased size of the sample and the greater diversity, in terms of identification, within the sample. Yet, even with this combination of categories, the level of confidence in the REPUBLICAN category is extremely low, allowing only an approximately twenty-five percent chance that the apparent relationship is not a result of some type of error, and is therefore not depicted. In contrast, the DEMOCRAT and INDEPENDENT categories do have a high degree of confidence. The relationship between ideology and vote choice of those who

**Figure 12:**
are classified as INDEPENDENT shows a nominally intermediate relationship, though, with a \( \tau_c \) value of 0.37, it is very close to being what is considered a weak relationship. The DEMOCRAT category shows a clear and very weak relationship. This supports the claim that ideology is not especially significant when controlled for party identification, and this is even truer for those who identify with either the Democratic or Republican Party.

Analyzing the REPUBLICAN category, as presented in tables 5 and 6, is interesting in several ways. First, it shows that in the 2000 election there was not a massive turnout of strong or weak Republicans (or at least that few were included in the sample). Even with these combinations, the relationship is still not clear enough to reject the null hypothesis. Al Gore, the Democratic candidate, does not receive any votes from individuals in the LIBERAL category, receives one from the moderate category, and receives two from those classified as CONSERVATIVE. George W. Bush, the Republican candidate, receives both of the two LIBERAL category votes, seven votes from the moderate category voters, and forty of the CONSERVATIVE category votes. As a percentage, this means that the Republican wins one hundred percent of the liberal vote, nearly eighty-eight percent of the moderate vote, and more than ninety-five percent of the conservative vote. While not entirely representative of the American electorate, this suggests that party identification is much more important than ideology. When the Republican presidential candidate receives all of the liberal votes and a supermajority of the moderates along with nearly all the conservatives, the evidence indicates that people are influenced by their party identification rather than their personal ideology.
As with the 1996 presidential election, a multiple regression analysis of the 2000 election provides support for the claim that party identification is extremely important in determining vote choice and is much more significant than ideology. As table 7 reveals, the beta value for the relationship between party identification and vote choice, 0.539, is approximately four times larger than the value for the relationship between ideology and vote choice. The 2000 election shows that, in terms of understanding modern politics, at least as far as presidential elections concerned, partisanship is a factor of paramount importance.

**Table 7: 2000 Multiple Regression: Ideology, Party Identification**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Regression Coefficients</th>
<th>Test That Each Coefficient = 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideology</strong></td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party ID</strong></td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constant</strong></td>
<td>.857</td>
<td>.105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When a multiple regression analysis of the 2000 election includes income as a potential factor, for the same reasons articulated in the discussion of the 1996 presidential election, the numbers do not change in a meaningful way. As table 8 reveals, the significance of party identification decreases minutely, while the beta value of ideology
rises by the unimportant amount of 0.002. In this case, the conventional wisdom that as
the income of a voter increases he or she becomes more likely to vote for the Republican
candidate is supported, but by such a small margin that one cannot be certain that
differences in income affect vote choice in a consistent manner. Again, when compared
to factors such as party identification and ideology, income appears to be inconsequential.

Table 8: 2000 Multiple Regression: Ideology, Party Identification, Family Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficients</th>
<th>Test That Each Coefficient = 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.838</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 13 presents the correlation between party identification and vote choice in
the 2004 presidential election when the relationship is controlled for ideology. One
noteworthy feature of the relationship between party identification and vote choice in the
2004 election is their extraordinarily high correlation. A tau-c value of 0.88 shows that
the relationship between two variables is nearly perfect; however, this impressive
correlation decreases when ideology is used as a control. As figure 13 demonstrates, the
relationship between party identification and vote remains strong for voters with an
ideology they classify as moderate. Those with an ideology that is slightly conservative
or conservative show a relationship of medium strength. The relationship is weak among
individuals with an ideology that is liberal, slightly liberal, and extremely conservative,
though the relationship for the categories of slightly liberal and extremely conservative
show a relationship that is close to being intermediate. Like several other categories, the
level of confidence of the relationship between party identification and vote choice among those with an extremely liberal ideology is not high enough to be confident that it is accurate. As with previously analyzed elections, those who have strong ideologies are less likely to allow their party identification to determine for which candidate they will vote. One element of the 2004 presidential election that deserves emphasis is that those who are conservative are more likely to have their party identification influence their vote choice than liberals. The relationship between party identification and vote choice weakens substantially when one controls for ideology, but a relationship (and generally a relationship of intermediate strength) continues to exist between the two variables, which is not the case for the relationship between ideology and vote choice when party identification is included as a control, which is depicted below in figures 14 and 15.

**Figure 13:**

2004 Party Identification and Vote Choice

![Graph showing correlation between party identification and vote choice for different ideologies in 2004 election.](image-url)
The original relationship between ideology and vote choice in the 2004 election resembles the relationship between party identification and vote choice in that it is very high. In fact, like the 2004 relationship between party identification and vote choice, the 2004 relationship between ideology and vote choice shows the strongest relationship between the two variables in the history of the NES. This changes dramatically when party identification enters the equation as a control. As figure 14 conveys, the relationship in every category of party identification has a low level of confidence, implying that there are either not enough respondents in the category or, and more likely, not enough variation within the category to be at least ninety percent confident that the shown relationship actually exists. As the independent-Democrat and strong Republican categories show (tau-c values of 0.23 and 0.10 respectively), the relationships that one can be fairly certain are accurate demonstrate that there is a weak correlation between ideology and vote choice once the relationship is controlled for party identification.

Figure 14:
Figure 15 shows the results from a situation where categories are combined, as was done previously in the 2000 presidential election analysis, to increase the level of confidence in the results and provide a clearer representation of the effect of ideology on vote choice once party identification has been included as a control. In figure 15, the variable for party identification has been compressed into only three categories. The DEMOCRAT category includes both strong and weak democrats; the INDEPENDENT category is composed of the independent-Democrat, independent-independent, and independent-Republican categories; and both the strong and weak Republican Party identifiers comprise the REPUBLICAN category. The data indicates that the relationship between ideology and vote choice becomes extremely weak when party identification is taken into account. There is still a relationship of medium strength between ideology and

Figure 15:
vote choice in the INDEPENDENT category, and this makes sense since one would expect that those who do not have a solid party identification on which they can rely would use another factor, such as ideology, to decide for whom they will vote. This is plainly not the case in the DEMOCRAT and REPUBLICAN categories. Both of these categories show a weak relationship with very low tau-c values of 0.10 and 0.12. This shows that even though ideology may initially appear to be extremely significant in determining vote choice, this importance is greatly diminished once party identification is included in the analysis.

A multiple regression analysis of the 2004 presidential election, like the multiple regression analyses of the 1996 and 2000 elections, is an excellent tool for discovering the relative importance of party identification and ideology by analyzing both at the same time. As is shown in table 9, party identification is substantially more significant in terms of explaining vote choice than is ideology. The beta value of ideology is a mere 0.163, which is less than one-fourth of the beta value for party identification. This once more supports the argument that party identification dominates modern American electoral politics. If ideology is treated as the major challenge to party identification, party identification can clearly be considered the most important variable in explaining vote choice. It appears to be much more important than ideology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Test That Each Coefficient = 0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When income is included in the multiple regression analysis along with party identification and ideology, there are not substantial changes to the relative significance of the latter variables. The differences between tables 9 and 10 are small, with the beta measurement of ideology gaining 0.004 and the party identification decreasing by 0.014. As in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, income does not appear to be a prominent factor. However, to reiterate what was stated above, this does not mean that the effect of income is not worth further investigation. This study is principally focused on party identification and since income does not appear to be directly correlated with vote choice in a direct and linear way and does not seem likely to be of vital importance for understanding modern American politics, it will not be analyzed in greater detail. Those who argue that American politics is largely lacking in class conflict appear to be correct, at least as far as the multiple regression analyses of this chapter suggest.

Table 10: 2004 Multiple Regression: Ideology, Party Identification, Family Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Coefficients</th>
<th>Test That Each Coefficient = 0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.562</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One interesting feature of scrutinizing the role of party identification and ideology in determining vote choice is that both have increased together since the middle of the twentieth century. Party identification and ideology are clearly not mutually exclusive, but neither are they synonymous. As those who identify with the Democratic Party have become more likely to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate and those who
identify with the Republican Party have become more likely to vote for the Republican candidate, voters claiming to be liberals have also become more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate and individuals who consider their ideology conservative have become more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. This suggests that there is an overlap leading to many voters being either a liberal-Democrat or a conservative-Republican. Still, this leaves the question of whether ideology determines the party with which a person will identify or if the party with which a member of the American electorate identifies influences his or her ideology. A significant body of literature, such as the work of Carsey presented above, agrees with what the data presented in this chapter suggest: party identification seems to be the initial variable. Once party identification is included as a control, ideology has a very small impact on the decisions of voters, suggesting that party identification is more salient. There are liberal Republicans and there are conservative Democrats, and since these individuals have remained in their party and still frequently vote for the candidate of the party with which they identify, members of the electorate clearly do not automatically change party identification when the supposed ideology of a party does not match their beliefs. There are additional reasons why party identification would be more stable and is likely to lead to a person adopting issue positions and becoming more ideologically coherent with the other members of his or her party, and this will be discussed in the chapter five explanation of the psychological concept known as “social group theory.”

As all the data above indicate, party identification dominates American electoral politics and is more important than ideology. The NES show that, when an American voter is deciding for whom he or she will vote, the factor that affects the decision the
most is his or her party identification. When party identification is controlled for ideology, there is still a significant correlation between party identification and vote choice. When the role of ideology is controlled for party identification, only a weak relationship remains for individuals who identify with a party, though the relationship between ideology and vote choice does remain noticeable for people who consider themselves independent. This is true for the 1996, 2000, and 2004 electorates.

The multiple regression analyses of these same elections also show that the significance of party identification is several times as large as that of ideology and income. When this evidence is combined first with the NES data showing that the correlation between party identification and vote choice has been higher than the correlation between ideology and vote choice for every election in which both were included in the survey and second with the NES data establishing that the influence of party identification has become even stronger in recent elections, one can be confident that party identification is the most important concept required for understanding twenty-first century American electoral politics. However, the data in this chapter involves only presidential elections, which could potentially differ from other political situations. Chapter four, which looks at public opinion as revealed in polls conducted by Pew and Gallup, develops and substantiates the findings of this chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE SIGNIFICANT EFFECT OF PARTISANSHIP ON PUBLIC OPINION

The previous chapter focused exclusively on data from the American National Election Study series that is primarily related to voting in presidential elections. Many works, such as *The American Voter*, *The Changing American Voter*, and *The New American Voter*, rely nearly entirely on these studies, and there are several justifications for doing so. First, the presidential election is the only election in which all American citizens may vote. In this way, the presidential election is the only act common among all American voters, and therefore its analysis provides information on the entire American electorate. Second, the presidential election has received more scholarly attention than any other competition in American politics. Researchers are at the mercy of the available data, and there is a significant amount of data concerning presidential elections. However, applying the theories supported by the information about presidential elections to other political situations is valuable. There is a possibility that some political controversies could differ from presidential elections, as is always the risk when only one type of case is analyzed. Also, support for the theory that partisanship dominates modern American politics from areas beyond elections increases the likelihood of this idea being accurate.

This chapter focuses on the American political environment, particularly areas of public opinion, in the early twenty-first century. Included are a variety of examples of political issues, many of which are the subject of polling by Pew and Gallop, representing important areas of American politics. The areas analyzed are levels of trust in the Democratic and Republican parties, opinions on the Iraq War, presidential approval ratings, and the economy. I will also apply these findings to the ideas of Morris Fiorina, a
political scientist who argues that American politics is not as polarized as it appears. Surprisingly, the claims made by Fiorina regarding the exaggeration of the importance of ideology (which is itself verified by the data presented in chapter three) actually support the argument that partisanship dominates American politics, but his conclusion that the American electorate is not polarized seems to be mistaken. The evidence suggests that he should have considered that the polarization characterizing American politics is actually of a partisan nature. Partisanship must play a role beyond influencing vote choice in order to be accurately described as paramount in American politics, and this appears to be the case.

There are numerous non-election indicators of the importance of party identification. In terms of party identifiers within the government, votes in Congress show that in recent years, a coalition of Democrats has united and voted against a coalition of Republicans more frequently. Since the late 1990s, there has been an increasing number of votes where at least ninety percent of one party voted “yes” and at least ninety percent of the other party voted “no.”\(^{104}\) The 1990s also contained the highest percentage of roll call votes where a majority of Democrats voted against a majority of Republicans in American history.\(^{105}\) These trends do not seem to have decreased since Hershey identified them in 2004. One would expect that regional, ideological, or personal interests would lead to more voting across party lines. The congressional delegations of most states do not consist entirely of members from one party and there are many examples of congressional districts containing a majority of Democrats next to a district and this appears to be the case.

\(^{104}\) Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, 252.
\(^{105}\) Ibid.
that has a majority of Republicans. Voting in Congress shows that party identification is playing a more significant role in American politics.

The behavior of party elites in Congress appears to be exhibited by the rest of the American electorate as well. According to Gallup analysts, “The vast majority of rank-and-file Republicans and Democrats say they trust their own party on all the issues that they care about most.”\(^{106}\) In some ways, this is not particularly surprising, as a major reason for identifying with a party is likely to be holding a preference for them on issues of personal importance. However, the American media frequently discusses how a majority of Americans prefer Democrats on some issues, like health care, while Republicans are generally considered better on other issues like national security. Yet, as figure 1 shows, “seventy-nine percent of Republicans say they trust the Republican Party

\textbf{Figure 1:}\(^{107}\)

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.6\textwidth]{partisan_views.png}
\caption{Partisan Views of Which Party to Trust on the Issues You Care About}
\end{figure}

\(^{106}\) Gallup. \url{http://www.galluppoll.com/content/?ci=27853&pg=1} (accessed 15 September 2007).

\(^{107}\) Ibid.
more on all key issues, while 73% of Democrats trust the Democratic Party on these issues.¹⁰⁸ Party identification accurately indicates which party a person will trust more.

There is also evidence that party identification determines whether or not an individual will approve of the performance of a public official. Figure 2 shows the approval rating of President George W. Bush by party identification. As the figure makes apparent, a strong majority of Republicans approve of the job Bush has done as president, while a very small percentage of Democrats, ranging from five to ten percent, approves of his performance. One useful feature of the polling and analysis performed by Gallop in 2007 is that it allows some comparison of party identification and ideology. Gallop states, “Fifty-nine percent of conservatives, on average, approve of Bush” over the time depicted in figure 2.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, Bush actually has a higher approval rating among

**Figure 2:**¹¹⁰

---

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
¹¹⁰ Ibid.
Republicans than among conservatives, and this difference is more than ten percentage points. Thus, being a Republican appears to make someone more likely to support a Republican president than being conservative is to make a person approve of a purportedly conservative president.

Perhaps the most important issue of the early twenty-first century is the war in Iraq. As predominantly a foreign policy issue, one would expect more consensus among American citizens than would be seen on domestic issues. As figure 3 shows, there is actually very little consensus, and party identification appears to have a significant effect on assessments of the Iraq War. While only twenty-three percent of Republican Party identifiers believe that the Iraq War was a mistake, eighty-two percent of Democratic Party identifiers feel that the Iraq War was a mistake. Independents are more evenly divided, with a majority (fifty-seven percent) saying they believe the war was a mistake. This shows that partisanship plays a major role when determining whether a foreign policy decision was correct. As with the earlier mentioned situation in which Larry Bartels asks if Republican and Democratic Party identifiers have a different understanding of what knowledgeable means, that Republican and Democratic Party identifiers have different definitions of what constitutes a foreign policy “mistake” is highly unlikely.

The Iraq War appears to be generally understood as a Republican policy attributable to a Republican president (George W. Bush) and as result, people seem to evaluate it in mostly partisan terms. There are several other examples of party identification affecting perceptions of the Iraq War. In 2003, eighty-five percent of
Republicans thought going to war with Iraq was right, but only thirty-nine percent of Democrats did. These numbers are incredibly similar to the most recent (March 2007) findings depicted in figure 3. Time has apparently done very little to alter earlier views. Also, there have been differences in perceptions of how well the Iraq War has unfolded. In 2006, seventy-six percent of Republican Party identifiers and twenty-seven percent of Democratic Party identifiers believed that the Iraq War was “going well.” In theory, a person could believe that the war was a mistake, but feel that it is going well, or they could believe that the war was right, but that it is not going well. Instead, there seems to be a strong core of Republican identifiers who think that the war was the right choice and believe that it has been executed successfully opposing a cohesive group of Democratic identifiers who believe the exact opposite. Additionally, seventy-six percent of

Figure 3:  

![Chart: Iraq War a Mistake by Party ID]

March 23-25, 2007

---

112 Galston and Nivola, “Delineating the Problem” in Red and Blue Nation? Nivola and Brady eds., 11.
Republican Party identifiers think that the Iraq War has made the United States safer from terrorism, while only twenty-nine percent of Democratic Party identifiers feel the war has made the United States safer.\textsuperscript{114} That nearly every poll involves approximately seventy-five percent of Republicans opposing seventy-five percent of Democrats supports the notion that party identification plays a sizeable role in influencing approval and perceptions of the progress made in a seemingly nonpolitical issue like a war. Clearly, partisanship is extremely relevant for understanding how the American electorate approaches foreign policy decisions.

The economy is another area of American politics in which the influence of party identification is important. According to the Pew Research Center,

Partisans differ in their view of nearly every aspect of the national economy. Most notably, just under half of Democrats (47\%) and nearly as many independents (44\%) think the affordability of health care is a very big problem for the nation's economy; just 28\% of Republicans agree. Similar gaps exist with respect to energy and gas prices and the federal budget deficit, where Republicans are more sanguine than are Democrats and, to a lesser extent, independents.\textsuperscript{115}

The period of time covered by this Pew Research Center analysis, like the above Iraq War time period, is during the presidency of George W. Bush. As he is the most obvious political actor who makes economic policy, that party identification appears to affect economic perceptions makes sense. However, as figure 4 and table 1 indicate, party identifiers have become increasingly polarized in their assessment of the American economy in recent years. Throughout the 1990s, the differences among Democrats, Republicans, and independents in terms of believing that the economy is performing well are small. After 2000, there is a marked divergence in economic evaluation by party

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid..
identification. Since the election of George W. Bush, Republicans have consistently claimed that the American economy has performed well, while Democrats (and independents to a lesser extent) are more negative.

**Figure 4 and Table 1:**

Many political commentators attempt to rationalize the differences in perceptions of the economy by arguing that economic policies since 2000 have had a status bias favoring wealthy individuals. As noted in chapter three, there is a common belief that Republicans tend to be, on average, wealthier than Democrats. Accordingly, there is a possibility that Democrats have increasingly come to believe that the economy is not doing well because they are struggling in their own financial lives, while Republicans have personally thrived and consequently assume that the national economy is doing well. Though an attractive theory to some, this does not appear to be the case. As is made evident in table 1, “at every income level Republicans are much more likely to say that the economy is in good shape,” whereas Democrats are more negative in each income

---

116 Ibid.
Perceptions of the economy are clearly partisan and seem to be becoming more so. This supports the idea that the importance of partisanship has increased since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The party with which a person identifies is becoming more pervasive in economic assessments and this implies that standard indicators of economic success may become less relevant than whether the party of the president matches the party identification of an individual.

Partisanship appears to play an important role in American foreign and domestic politics. Scholars like William Galston and Pietro Nivola, two members of the Brookings Institute, support this position by finding that “partisan polarity” is “more pronounced and deep seated than it was nearly a generation ago.” They also note that political observers generally agree that the United States Congress is more polarized and that fewer self-identified Democrats or liberals vote for Republicans (and fewer self-identified Republicans or conservatives vote for Democrats) in the twenty-first century than did so in the 1970s. However, not everyone who studies modern American politics supports these ideas. Fiorina argues that the “polarization of partisan elites” gives the appearance of polarization since this growing divergence within the political class means that voters have to choose among extreme candidates. Even though chapter three showed that party identification clearly affects vote choice in a significant and increasingly consistent  

---

117 Ibid.
119 Galston and Nivola, “Delineating the Problem” in Red and Blue Nation?: Nivola and Brady eds, 1-2.
120 Fiorina with Abrams and Pope, Culture War?, 166.
manner, the ideas of Fiorina justify some additional consideration of the importance of partisanship in terms of structuring modern American politics.

At the most basic level, the argument Fiorina makes is that the American electorate is not polarized, at least not to the extent that many claim it is. According to Fiorina, there are four main reasons why there is an impression that the United States is a politically polarized nation. First, he notes that many confuse the idea of a “divided” nation with that of a “deeply divided” nation. In support of this claim, Fiorina argues that the American electorate exhibits a bell-shaped distribution on the ideological spectrum with most people being close to one another in the moderate middle. He adds that the closeness of recent elections, particularly in the 1990s, shows that the candidates are appealing to this ideologically centric majority. Second, Fiorina alleges that politically active and influential individuals are abnormal and do not present an accurate representation of most voters. He defines the “political class,” those he argues shape American politics while differing from most Americans, as a “collection of officeholders, party and issue activists, interest group leaders, and political infotainers who constitute the public face of politics in America.” Fiorina supports this theory by citing a larger divergence on responses to CBS News and New York Times polls between delegates to the presidential conventions of the Democratic and Republican Parties than among a national sample on a wide variety of issues. He believes these elites may be quite polarized, but that there are limits to how much this reveals about American politics.

Related to the prominence of a misrepresentative elite, the third explanation for the

121 Ibid., 12.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., 16.
124 Ibid., 16-17.
appearance of polarization that Fiorina offers is that the media highlights this political class when reporting on elections. Finally, Fiorina notes that American politics now offers more polarizing options to voters in most elections.\textsuperscript{125} If American voters were always polarized to a certain degree and simply could not exhibit this polarization due to the homogeneity of the previous candidates for political office, there would not be much support for the argument that the American electorate is more polarized now than ever before.

The findings of Fiorina support the central theory of this study, namely that partisanship is the dominant force in modern American politics and is becoming more important, to the extent that he makes a strong case of the American electorate not being characterized by \textit{ideological} differences. One of the most consistent features of works studying American politics since the 1960s is that they overstate the importance of ideology in American politics. \textit{The Changing American Voter} did help make this idea a central concept of American political science, but it seems to have become somewhat anachronistic in the twenty-first century. Many students of American politics treat ideology and partisanship as interchangeable terms, and this can be misleading. Hence, just because Fiorina found a significant body of evidence indicating that the United States is not ideologically polarized does not eliminate the possibility of \textit{partisan} polarization. As was made clear in chapter three and reinforced by the data presented earlier in this chapter, the major cleavage in American politics is one of party identification. Even Fiorina concedes that there is evidence of extreme polarization based on the parties with which individuals identify. For instance, he acknowledges that ninety percent of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 25.
\end{flushright}
Democrats voted for John Kerry and ninety percent of Republicans voted for George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election. Fiorina takes solace in the ideological similarities between the two blocs of voters, but he fails to appreciate the significance of the divide between them. While the argument that Americans hold views that are fairly consistent and do not appear to be ideologically distinct may comfort some, one should not assume that this would preclude America from becoming divided into differentiated sects of individuals based on other characteristics.

In many ways, the people of the United States are generally divided into two “teams.” Following common convention, these teams can be understood as a “red team” composed of those who identify with the Republican Party, and a “blue team” composed of those who identify with the Democratic Party. Members of the red team overwhelmingly vote for the Republican candidate in elections and, as shown above, favorably view the actions of Republican politicians while believing that the policies crafted and implemented by Republicans were a good idea and are succeeding. The members of the blue team nearly always vote for the Democratic candidate and think that policies pursued by Republicans are not only mistaken in design, but that they are also failures in terms of their execution. Twenty-first century American politics appears to have become a nearly constant battle between these two teams and the competition is becoming more obvious in issue disagreements. The American electorate appears to be polarized, and this type of polarization centered on a “team mentality” is explored in greater detail in chapter five.

Party identification clearly influences much more than just vote choice. The views Americans hold on issues as divergent as the Iraq War, the job George W. Bush has done
as president, and the state of the economy are all greatly affected by the party with which a person identifies. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik state that voters in the 1950s were “only mildly involved in politics; … thought about politics in relatively simple and narrow terms, … [and] allied with one or the other of the major parties by ties that [were] more a matter of habit than of rational selection,” and this seems to be an equally accurate description of American voters in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{126} Despite strong evidence that the American electorate is not ideologically polarized, it is still obviously divided by party identification. As the data demonstrate, this is true for the entire American electorate, not only the elite or political class.

Having established that the influence of partisanship is ubiquitous in American politics, discovering why this is the case is valuable. Though \textit{The American Voter}, \textit{The Changing American Voter}, and \textit{The New American Voter} focus mainly on describing how Americans act, there is a rich body of scholarly work that provides insight into why partisanship is so significant. Utilizing theories from the fields of economics and psychology can help the political scientist understand why party identification is important and why it is likely to become even more important during the twenty-first century. These ideas are presented and investigated in chapter five.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{126} Nie, Verba, and Petrocik. \textit{The Changing American Voter}, 14.}
CHAPTER FIVE: EXPLANATIONS FOR PARTISANSHIP

Having established that party identification plays a substantial role in determining political actions and beliefs, why party identification is so important and why it is becoming more important remain to be seen. The theory that best explains the pervasive nature of party identification and its increasing dominance is known as “social identity theory,” and this idea explains that individuals who perceive themselves as part of a group will behave and interpret information in a manner that reinforces the correctness of their group affiliation. This notion encompasses several other concepts from behavioral psychology, such as cognitive dissonance and the use of schemas. There is strong evidence to support the accuracy of this theory and the development of American media since the 1950s appears to be a major cause of the growing importance of partisanship in American politics as the increasing number of choices strengthens social identities.

The other explanation of why party identification is central to American politics is derived from economics. Writing in the 1950s, Anthony Downs was one of the earliest academics to combine political science with economic theory. He shows that if voters and parties act in a rational manner in a two-party system with a set of exogenous factors, such as the ideological distribution of voters, resembling those of the American electorate, the political system will develop into the type of politics seen in the United States in the early twenty-first century. Both of these approaches are useful for understanding the behavior of voters and parties and, even though the economics approach assumes rationality while the psychological approach focuses purely on behavior (which is often irrational), they are not mutually exclusive. What appears to be
the case is that psychological biases influence the perception of events, which then has an impact on actions that are otherwise rational.

Political research has discovered numerous characteristics of party identification. First, political scientists find, “once developed, people’s party loyalties are often sustained because their friends, relatives, and co-workers typically share the same partisanship,” and this loyalty will usually last for life.  

Second, and perhaps partly as a result, “the longer most people hold a particular [party identification], the more intense it tends to become.”  

Marjorie Hershey synthesizes several studies and postulates another reason party identification may be important. She points out that since “party ID is more likely to become a habit after decades of political observations and activity,” a useful aspect of party identification is that it “becomes a fairly stable anchor in an ever-changing political world.”

Political scientists are good at explaining partisanship in practice, but some political science theories seem incompatible with these observations. For example, Morris Fiorina developed an approach that considers party identification “a running tally of retrospective evaluations of party promises and performance.” This implies that voters are not strongly attached to a party, but will mentally note each time they are affected and whether the actions of a party were helpful or hurtful. This approach has several problems, the most significant of which is that it assumes voters are able to see a clear cause and effect between policies and their personal situations. Additionally, most voters do not know who should be held responsible for bad policies and who deserves

---

128 Ibid., 103.
129 Ibid., 103-104.
130 Larry M. Bartels, “Beyond the Running Tally.” *Political Behavior*, 118.
credit for helpful policies. Larry Bartels uses the work of Lazarsfeld to emphasize “the capacity of party identification to color perceptions,” which challenges the running tally concept.\footnote{Ibid., 119.} Who receives credit for a policy and even whether a policy is considered a success or failure is heavily influenced by factors that have little to do with actual circumstances.

Those who study politics for a long period of time generally realize that, “People usually see events through a filter of stable long lasting orientations, the most stable of which is party identification,” and tend to surround themselves with information and individuals who reinforce their beliefs.\footnote{Hershey, \textit{Party Politics in America}, 208.} In this way, scholarly works addressing the behavior of the American electorate nearly always include a diluted version of social identity theory. Blake Ashforth and Fred Mael explain social identity theory more fully saying,

(a) social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons; (b) social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of outgroups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation; and (c) social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification.\footnote{Blake E. Ashforth and Fred Mael, “Social Identity Theory and the Organization.” \textit{The Academy of Management Review} Vol. 14, No.1. January 1989: 20-39. JSTOR. Available online at http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=03637425%28198901%2914%3A1%3C20%3ASITATO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R (accessed 24 October 2007) 20.}

In politics, the most salient identification a person can have is his or her party identification. Party identification links members of the electorate with those who hold
political office, serves as a basis for organizing politics once certain candidates have been elected, and roughly defines both sides in nearly every political debate.

One does not even need to be an official member of a political party to be considered an identifier in terms of social identity theory. Ashforth and Mael explain that to identify with a group, a person only needs to feel that he or she is psychologically a part of that group and does not necessarily have to do anything else.\(^\text{134}\) A Republican identifier does not technically have to believe what a majority of Republicans believe, contribute to the party, or even consistently vote for a Republican. All that is required is that an individual thinks that he or she is a part of the Republican group. Social identity theory also posits that once a person identifies with a certain group, they develop “loyalty” to this group, which Paul Djupe defines as “a continued psychological identification and social attachment arising from involvement with a social or political institution, whether a class, movement, car brand, sports team, beer, political party, [or] religion.” The similarities between political parties and teams are discussed in greater detail below.

After a person becomes an identifier with a group and develops loyalty, there are numerous ramifications. In terms of ordering the environment, in this case a political environment, the social categorization enabled by considering oneself a part of a particular group allows a person to define others and to position himself or herself within society.\(^\text{135}\) Michael Hogg and Deborah Terry explain that, “Once fully activated… category specifications organize themselves as contextually relevant prototypes and are used as a basis for the perceptual accentuation of intragroup similarities and intergroup

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{135}\) Ibid., 20-21.
differences, thereby maximizing separateness and clarity.”

Even if there are only slight differences between two groups (or political parties), the mere fact that there are understood to be two exclusive categories naturally leads to a focus on differences, not similarities. Over time, constant attention to these differences creates a situation where there are assumed to be almost no similarities and the groups appear to be at the extreme ends of some spectrum with a massive divide between them, even when this does not seem to be the case. One additional effect of social identification is that the identity of a person becomes intertwined with the group. This means that a situation leads to “personally experiencing the successes and failures of the group.”

As was briefly discussed in chapter four, American politics can generally be treated as a “game” between a red team (Republican) and blue team (Democratic). Djupe actually presents the example of a “[Chicago] Cubs fan converting to a [Chicago White Sox fan]” as the equivalent of a Democrat becoming a Republican, which helps contextualize how resistant people are to changing the objects of their loyalty. This sports team analogy for partisan politics is particularly apt for several reasons. First, in terms of how identification is passed, there appear to be numerous parallels between the two. A person generally becomes a follower of a sports or political team because of the

---


identifications of those surrounding him or her early in life. Second, both types of identifications seem to be illogical to some degree. Rationally explaining why a person prefers a certain team is quite difficult. In a monologue during an episode of the television show Seinfeld, Jerry Seinfeld explains the irrationality of being the fan of a sports team stating,

Loyalty to any one sports team is pretty hard to justify, because the players are always changing, the team can move to another city. You’re actually rooting for the clothes when you get right down to it. You know what I mean. You are standing and cheering and yelling for your clothes to beat the clothes from another city. Fans will be so in love with a player, but if he goes to another team, they boo him. This is the same human being in a different shirt; they hate him now…

While one cannot simply substitute political party for sports team, there are some noticeable connections. For politicians who do change their party affiliation, the experience of cheers turning to jeers is very common. One need only examine the examples of Senator Jim Jeffords, who left the Republican Party to become an independent, or Democratic Senator Zell Miller, who spoke at the 2004 Republican Convention. Moreover, one could create a fictional politician with a set of policy positions and ask Americans to assess this individual. If the citizen is told that the candidate is a Republican, the reactions and assessments made will differ substantially from a situation where the respondent had been told the politician was a Democrat. Just as the uniform or clothes an athlete wears determine how sports fans will rate the player and how much attention they will expend following him or her, the political party of a politician has a major effect on the assessments voters make.

---

Laboratory experiments have also provided support to justify social identity theory. Ashforth and Mael explain, “simply assigning an individual to a group is sufficient to generate in-group favoritism.”\textsuperscript{140} They add, “Favoritism is not dependent on prior perceptions of interpersonal similarity or liking, and it occurs even when there is no interaction within or between groups, when group membership is anonymous, and when there is no link between self-interest and group responses.”\textsuperscript{141} This implies that if an individual is simply told that he or she is a member of Political Party X, he or she becomes more likely to select the candidate representing Party X than the candidate of Party Y purely as a result of being randomly assigned to a group. Merely being a Democrat will encourage a voter to support the Democratic candidate while being a Republican makes a person more likely to prefer the Republican candidate.

Still, not every type of group identification plays a role in politics. For an identification to influence people, the identification must be considered salient. In sports, regional proximity is usually salient as location determines how likely a person is to have the opportunity to watch the team and sports franchises list their “home” as part of their name. In politics, region is far less salient. A major reason party identification is important is the result of the role party identification plays in organizing American politics. Every significant politician identifies with a party and nearly every political issue involves a discussion of partisanship. The party with power in the government makes policies, which are then generally supported by the other members of that party, while those members of the government identifying with the minority party present their

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
own policies as alternatives. Since party identification is the most salient type of identification in American politics, relying on it heavily once a person becomes politically active is understandable.

In addition to social identity theory, other psychological concepts, many of which are closely related to social identity theory, also help explain why partisanship is the primary feature of American electoral politics and public opinion. One theory that is useful involves cognitive dissonance. In its broadest form, the theory of cognitive dissonance states that people try to avoid information that contradicts what they believe.\(^{142}\) For instance, if a person identifies with the Democratic Party, he or she will not expose himself or herself to information that shows the Democrats are wrong on an issue or follow political stories if a prominent Democrat becomes embroiled in a scandal. This could take many forms. A person may discount the source as biased or unreliable. A person could simply ignore all sources of information that may contradict previous beliefs. One might also downplay the significance of an event. That a certain act has no relationship with the public functions of an individual is a common response to a sex scandal by members of the electorate who identify with the party of the allegedly indiscreet politician.

In addition to selective exposure and comprehension, people also use what are referred to as schemas. According to Thomas Patterson, “A schema is a cognitive structure that a person uses when processing new information and retrieving old information. It is a mental framework the individual constructs from past experiences that

---

Patterson adds, “Schemas help us to understand new information, provide us with a framework within which to organize and store it, enable us to derive added meaning from the new situation by filling in missing information, and provide guidance in selecting a suitable response to what we have just seen.” The use of different partisan schemas means that even if a Democratic Party identifier and a Republican Party identifier are exposed to the same stimulus, they will perceive it differently. One way to comprehend this is to understand the schemas that party identifiers use as storylines. A person who identifies with the Republican Party will generally see all stimuli as supporting the idea that Republicans have the answers to the problems of the nation and would be able to implement them perfectly if allowed to do so unfettered. A Democratic Party identifier will interpret the information to which he or she is exposed as proof that the Democrats have the right ideas and would or will be able to eliminate all national problems. Since these schemas are formed early in life and precede exposure to vast amounts of political information, there are unlikely to be many situations where individuals rationally view a political debate in an unbiased manner and then choose a position to support. Both cognitive dissonance and partisan schemas help explain many differences between Democratic and Republican Party identifiers, as well as why Converse, Campbell, Miller, and Stokes found that party identifications “progressively reduce the probability of change in partisan allegiance.”

There is a substantial body of evidence supporting these psychology-based theories of partisanship. For example, one study was conducted asking Democrats and Republicans whether inflation and unemployment increased or decreased under the

---

144 Ibid.
presidency of Ronald Reagan. Most Democrats said both increased, while most
Republicans said they decreased. Between 1980 and 1988, unemployment fell from 7.1
percent to 5.5 percent and the inflation rate dropped from 13.5 percent to 4.1 percent.145
However, more than fifty percent of strong Democrats said inflation became worse and
only 8 percent said it got better.146 Bartels points out that “in the absence of bias, we
would expect some individual variability in these economic perceptions but no aggregate
differences across partisan groups.”147 He adds that different values cannot account for
“markedly different beliefs about whether unemployment or inflation is rising or
falling.”148 Table 1 presents the regression analysis done by Larry Bartels showing
significant differences of opinion on other seemingly objective, nonpartisan changes,
such as whether the budget deficit increased or decreased. Bartels then combines these
findings with a variety of studies finding the stability and general permanency of party
identification, including the work of Campbell et al in The American Voter, as well as
work by Donald Green and Bradley Palmquist that argues party identification does not
respond to short-term political stimuli.149 Palmquist and Green claim recent works
finding that partisanship is unstable, particularly the works of Fiorina, tend to rely on
faulty measurements, and they argue that more than ninety-five percent of apparent
variation in party identification from one presidential election to the next results from
some type of sampling error.150 They state, “there is abundant evidence suggesting that

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid., 125.
149 Ibid., 133.
attachment to party is remarkably stable over time,” and they add that for the small minority of the American electorate that does experience a change in party identification the “changes” occur “very slowly.”\footnote{Ibid., 898.} Thus, according to Bartels, the findings in table 1 clearly support the theory that “partisanship affects perceptions, not the other way around.”\footnote{Bartels, “Beyond the Running Tally.” \textit{Political Behavior}, 133.} Bartels also explores how party identification influenced perceptions of how well George H. W. Bush handled the economy. His analysis suggests “more than half the observed difference in views between strong Republicans and strong Democrats would have evaporated if the two partisan groups had agreed in their perceptions of events over

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Partisan Biases in Perceived Changes in Conditions and Policies, 1988 (parameter estimates from OLS regression analyses of perceived changes in conditions and policies on party identification, with standard errors in parentheses)}
\begin{tabular}{lccc}
\hline
                           & Strong Democrats & Strong Republicans & Difference  \\
\hline
Unemployment              & \( -.116 \)      & .600              & .715         & std err of reg = .584; adj \( R^2 = .15; N = 1830 \)  \\
                           & (.023)           & (.025)            & (.039)      &  \\
Inflation                 & \( -.253 \)      & .390              & .643         & std err of reg = .617; adj \( R^2 = .11; N = 1841 \)  \\
                           & (.024)           & (.026)            & (.042)      &  \\
Assistance to the Poor    & \( -.274 \)      & .136              & .411         & std err of reg = .687; adj \( R^2 = .04; N = 1850 \)  \\
                           & (.027)           & (.030)            & (.047)      &  \\
Protect                   & \( -.185 \)      & .247              & .406         & std err of reg = .661; adj \( R^2 = .04; N = 1853 \)  \\
                           & (.026)           & (.028)            & (.044)      &  \\
Environment               & \( -.358 \)      & .029              & .387         & std err of reg = .409; adj \( R^2 = .10; N = 1759 \)  \\
                           & (.017)           & (.018)            & (.028)      &  \\
Honesty in Government     & \( -.106 \)      & .150              & .256         & std err of reg = .682; adj \( R^2 = .02; N = 1843 \)  \\
                           & (.027)           & (.020)            & (.046)      &  \\
Spending on Public Schools& \( .152 \)       & .401              & .249         & std err of reg = .721; adj \( R^2 = .01; N = 1862 \)  \\
                           & (.025)           & (.031)            & (.049)      &  \\
Social Security           & \( .119 \)       & .188              & .070         & std err of reg = .482; adj \( R^2 = .00; N = 1761 \)  \\
                           & (.019)           & (.021)            & (.033)      &  \\
Discrimination            & \( .660 \)       & .707              & .027         & std err of reg = .532; adj \( R^2 = .00; N = 1889 \)  \\
                           & (.021)           & (.022)            & (.035)      &  \\
Budget Deficit            & \( -.645 \)      & -.621             & .025         & std err of reg = .483; adj \( R^2 = .00; N = 1764 \)  \\
                           & (.020)           & (.021)            & (.033)      &  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\footnote{JSTOR. Available online at http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0092-5853%28199008%2934%3A3%3C872%3AOAAPI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O (accessed 23 March 2008) 877-881.}
this 2-year period.”\textsuperscript{154} The work of Bartels shows that party identification not only affects the political choices Americans make, but also influences how they interpret information that shapes their opinions.

While selective exposure, retention, and perception help explain why party identification is very important in American politics, one could argue that they fail to explain why the importance of party identification has increased in recent years. For example, one could contend that the divergence between Democrats and Republicans concerning the state of the economy that was presented in chapter four shows the influence of selectivity in political matters, but that this selectivity does not explain why the divide appears to have started in the 1990s and why it has widened since then.

One likely contributor to the increased significance of partisanship is the American media. While there is currently a controversial debate about the role the media plays in American politics, there is little debate that throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, new media have developed and choice within a traditional medium, such as television, has increased. In terms of exposure, Diana Mutz notes that some news sources have identifiable political predispositions and people can choose sources that “reinforce and intensify their preexisting views.”\textsuperscript{155} She also presents evidence that “partisan audiences do select media that lean in the direction of their own views.”\textsuperscript{156} Still, even Mutz admits that if partisans were given the exact same information, they would interpret it differently. When an immense range of options of a medium like the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 226.
\end{flushleft}
Internet or even cable television is combined with the ability of the individual to retain, understand and interpret information in a partisan manner, the resulting growth in importance of party identification is not extremely surprising.

Economics also provides valuable tools for explaining the dominance of partisanship. In 1957, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* by Anthony Downs was published and it still serves as an excellent example of how economics can give those studying American politics better insight into why the American electorate behaves as it does. Downs presents his approach as deductive and positive since it draws conclusions from a “basic rule” and describes “what will happen under certain conditions, not what should happen.” He also bases his argument on the assumption that politicians and voters act “rationally,” which means that they weigh the benefits and costs of their actions and select the option where the difference between benefits and costs is greatest, thus reaching a goal in the most efficient manner possible. The central theme of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is that “In a two-party system, it is rational for each party to encourage voters to be irrational by making its platform vague and ambiguous.” A critic could attack this type of approach by arguing that rationality is not a trademark of American politics and that parties want to do more than simply win elections, which would lead to a platform that is more comprehensible. These ideas might also be treated as incompatible with the social identity theory or theory of cognitive dissonance that are based on a lack of rationality. However, rationality in the sense that Downs uses it simply refers to what is rational given the structure of American politics as

---

158 Ibid., x and 7-8.
159 Ibid., 115.
a result of a variety of exogenous factors. Also, political parties may be able to make voters behave irrationally by obscuring the information necessary to determine potential benefits and costs, which would then allow the party to enact the policies it wishes regardless of the opinions of the voters. Ultimately, the theories of Downs indicate that the American electorate will act in a manner consistent with social identity theory, the theory of cognitive dissonance, and partisan schemas; they will do so by relying on shortcuts to process information and base their decisions on party identification rather than issue positions or other potential variables.

One interesting feature of the analysis by Downs is its reliance on a left-right (liberal-conservative) ideological spectrum. In this way, Downs supports the claim that ideology is vitally important in American politics. Though this concept of ideology may be more accurately considered a unique American form of issue consistency, it still has value, particularly as purported ideology and party identification are becoming linked, which was discussed in chapter three. Additionally, treating issue positions as being located somewhere on a liberal-conservative linear spectrum has the advantage of simplifying issue positions, allowing comparisons between the positions various individuals hold, and is used frequently enough in American politics that almost everyone can comprehend what having a conservative or liberal position on an issue means.

The issue of abortion makes this very clear. There is generally considered to be a spectrum from “pro-choice” (the liberal position in favor of allowing abortions) to “pro-life” (the conservative position that is against abortion). A person who would allow abortion in any case is treated as being on the extreme of the pro-choice end of the spectrum, while the more restrictions a person would like to place on abortion moves him
or her to the pro-life end of the spectrum. One can understand the larger concept of ideology to be a combination of every meaningful issue by adding them together and then finding the average of the positions based on the conventional understanding of which position is liberal and which is conservative.

Downs notes that ideologies are practical since the voter can avoid comparing the behavior of the government to the proposals of the opposition party by focusing on the ideologies of the parties to find the one most like his or her own instead. However, Downs also points out that, “In order to be rational short cuts, ideologies must be integrated with policies closely enough to form accurate indicators of what each party is likely to do in the future.” Over time, as a party appears to take positions and construct policies that reflect their alleged ideology, voters will be able to predict the actions of a government run by each party, which would allow voters to make more rational decisions.

A primary reason why American politics is based on party identification rather than ideological differences is the consequence of the ideological distribution of the American electorate. As was shown in the chapter three discussion of ideology in American politics and is supported by the findings of Fiorina presented in chapter four, the general distribution of Americans along a left/liberal-right/conservative spectrum follows a bell-shaped pattern. Downs even claims, “A two-party democracy cannot provide stable and effective government unless there is a large measure of ideological consensus among its citizens.” This ideological distribution has several ramifications.

160 Ibid., 99.
161 Ibid., 102.
162 Ibid., 114.
First, Downs argues this means “both parties nearly always adopt any policy that a
majority of voters strongly prefer, no matter what strategies the parties are following,”
which will lead to fewer substantive policy differences from which voters can choose.\footnote{163}
This appears to resemble the trend Thomas Friedman referred to as the “golden
straightjacket” in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Friedman describes the lack of
differences of opinion concerning economic policies by highlighting the consensus that a
state must

… move toward… making the private sector the primary engine of its economic
growth, maintaining a low rate of inflation and price stability, shrinking the size
of its state bureaucracy, maintaining as close to a balanced budget as possible, if
not a surplus, eliminating and lowering tariffs on imported goods, removing
restrictions on foreign investment, getting rid of quotas and domestic monopolies,
increasing exports, privatizing state-owned industries and utilities, deregulating
capital markets, making its currency convertible, opening its industries, stock and
bond markets to direct foreign ownership and investment, deregulating its
economy to promote as much domestic competition as possible, eliminating
government corruption, subsidies and kickbacks as much as possible, opening its
banking and telecommunications systems to private ownership and competition
and allowing its citizens to choose from an array of competing pension
options…\footnote{164}

Though Friedman is specifically referring to an international consensus on required
twenty-first century economic policies, there is also growing agreement on these issues in
domestic politics as well. He notes that as a nation adopts this consensus, its “economy
grows and [its] politics shrinks.”\footnote{165} This does not mean that no one disagrees with these
policies, but that a strong majority supports them, making it self-damaging for a party to
take a position strongly against them in a general election.

\footnote{163} Ibid., 64.  
\footnote{165} Ibid.
The second effect of a bell-shaped voter distribution on the ideological spectrum is a convergence of the parties so each may appeal to the maximum number of voters. According to Downs, “Parties in a two-party system deliberately change their platforms so that they resemble one another; whereas parties in a multi-party system try to remain as ideologically distinct from each other as possible.”\textsuperscript{166} Figures 1 and 2 show two different potential distributions of voters. As the work of Downs, Fiorina, and many other studies of the American electorate make clear, the United States more closely resembles figure 1. Therefore, there is an impulse for both parties to take positions resembling the other, making them extremely similar. Hence, the institutional framework and political culture of the United States that has led to the development of a two-party system has created, as a byproduct, a system based on non-issue, non-ideological differences, such as party identification. The model Downs developed indicates that if candidates are close to each other on the liberal-conservative continuum, there is less issue-voting and partisan attachment plays a significant role.\textsuperscript{167} This theory is verified by the findings of Nie, Verba, and Petrocik who admit when candidates are close to each other on the issues, less issue voting occurs and party identification becomes dominant.\textsuperscript{168} Since American politics is based on ideological centrisim within the electorate and encourages the convergence of parties on issues, one should not be surprised that partisanship dominates American electoral politics and public opinion.

\textsuperscript{166} Downs, \textit{An Economic Theory of Democracy}, 115.
\textsuperscript{167} Nie, Verba, and Petrocik. \textit{The Changing American Voter}, 311.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
Figures 1\textsuperscript{169} and 2:\textsuperscript{170}

Possible Distributions of Voters along a Linear Ideological Scale

Downs argues that the structure of American politics actually encourages an even more specific strategy. In addition to the convergence of the average position of the parties (the means of all policies), “the rational party strategy is to adopt a spread of policies which covers a whole range of the left-right scale.”\textsuperscript{171} He adds, each party will also “sprinkle these moderate policies with a few extreme stands in order to please its far-out voters.”\textsuperscript{172} Perhaps the best way to determine on which side of the ideological spectrum a party is nominally located is to analyze the type of extreme positions they hold. The conservative party is more likely to appeal to the “far-out” voters on the extreme right, while a liberal party would more logically cater to individuals on the extreme left. However, even after taking these positions, Downs maintains, “they attempt to lead all voters to believe these policies are best for them.”\textsuperscript{173} At virtually no time in political history has one political party in a two-party system admitted or even entertained the possibility that the policies of the opposing party were superior, and it is equally

\textsuperscript{169} Downs, \textit{An Economic Theory of Democracy}, 114.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 88.
unlikely to occur in the future. This means that parties who recognize their policies may not be better for some groups will still make the argument to these groups that their policy is better. This has several noticeable effects. First, American politics is often relegated to a back-and-forth debate consisting of a seemingly endless cycle of “yes it is…” and “no it is not.” Additionally, political parties will make use of the human tendency to behave in accordance with social identity theory, the theory of cognitive dissonance, and partisan schemas. Both parties will cite studies that support their position, note figures who have endorsed their claims, and give their version of past successes and failure. This type of behavior may occasionally give the impression that candidates and party supporters are living in different dimensions, but these actions are, as the models of Downs show, quite rational. The inconsistencies of information used by the members of both parties, the similarity of the mean ideological positions of the parties in a two-party system, the spreading of party positions across the ideological spectrum, and insistence by both parties that their policies are better for every citizen in every possible way all contribute to the dominance of partisanship as the electorate has little else upon which they can rely to validate political statements or make decisions.

The rational behavior of voters is therefore constrained by the actions of political parties and their representatives, but Downs also explains why party identification would likely be overriding in American politics even if the parties were more straightforward. The central reason why a voter would rely on party identification to make political decisions is that “rational decision-makers acquire only a limited amount of information before making choices.”\(^\text{174}\) Downs states, “since the resources any citizen can devote to

\(^{174}\) Ibid., 207.
paying for and assimilating data are limited, [he or she] finds [himself or herself] in a situation of economic choice: from among these many sources of information, [he or she] must select only a few to tap."\(^\text{175}\) Most voters are likely to “tap” the sources they expect to conform to their exogenous preferences in order to avoid cognitive dissonance or require them to do further research to make sense of a situation. Additionally, in economic theory, “the information-seeker continues to invest resources in procuring data until the marginal return from information equals its marginal cost."\(^\text{176}\) Relying on party identification as a filter has the advantage of lowering the cost of information, as it may limit the sources to which a person chooses to expose himself or herself and the initial bias will make processing information much quicker. A rational voter will use party identification to lower the costs of obtaining information and making choices regardless of how political parties act.

While the analysis of Downs helps explain why party identification is an important initial variable in American politics, one must go beyond the analysis in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* to understand why partisanship is more significant in certain time periods and why it has become even more important in the twenty-first century. At any period of time, the parties are likely to encourage a reliance on partisanship by acting in a way that gives them the greatest advantage in political competitions, as outlined above. If a period of time is politically stable, meaning that no new paramount issues develop to force the adoption of less centric positions by the parties, the constant partisan appeals would likely cause an increasing dependence on party identification in the electorate.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 212.
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 215.
In terms of voters, the capacity of party identification to determine political behavior can perhaps be best described as directly proportional to the value of time, meaning that as the value of time increases, so does the use of shortcuts and timesaving devices like partisanship. Downs discusses how no information is really free, but is equal to its opportunity cost, which is whatever a person must give up to acquire and process the information. As with the psychological theories, technology also appears to be driving the modern swell in partisanship due to its effect on the value of time. Though information is now more widely available than at any other time in American history, politics now must compete with a constant and nearly limitless supply of entertainment and amusement which an individual can tailor to his or her specific preferences. Before the Internet, cable and satellite television, twenty-four hour shopping centers, video games, cheap and instantaneous communication, and a surplus of recreational institutions, there was much less competition for the attention of American voters. A person deciding whether he or she will watch the news on one of three channels instead of playing a card game or reading a book in 1965 is very different from someone deciding whether to watch Brian Williams on NBC instead of talking to friends online, watching one of the hundreds of other television channels, renting a movie, or going to Wal-Mart in 2008. The voter in the latter situation is more likely expose himself or herself to less political information and will make decisions based on his or her party identification, which will save a significant amount of time for use in more self-indulgent pursuits.

177 Ibid., 222.
This development should not necessarily be considered bad. In one study, Patterson “compared people’s news exposure with their perceptions of the parties’ positions as predictors of whether they were aware of the candidate’s positions on a series of issues.”\textsuperscript{178} He finds,

Party perceptions were the better predictor. Voters often assumed – correctly in most instances – that a candidate held the same position as his party. Even when the candidate held an aberrant position, people’s party perceptions were the better predictor of whether they knew his actual position. An awareness of the party’s positions gave them a reference point that helped them to place the candidate’s position. Partisanship helps voters to map information.\textsuperscript{179}

This implies that even if voters were to spend more time following the news, their ability to determine where candidates stand on specific issues would probably not improve.

Party identification is a useful tool for simplifying politics and allows members of the American electorate to make sense of a political world with a seemingly endless barrage of information. Chapter six will delve more deeply into the normative, as well as positive, effects of the dominance of partisanship in American politics.

Psychology and economics can both help explain why the party identification of a person is significant in American politics. Theories explaining how and why people selectively expose themselves to information and process this information in a biased way provide insight into why those identifying with the Democratic Party would differ from those identifying with the Republican Party in policy perceptions as well as in vote choice. Numerous political science studies have found evidence supporting these psychological theories. The economic analysis of American political conduct also explains why a two-party system like the United States, with its bell-shaped ideological

\textsuperscript{178} Patterson, \textit{Out of Order}, 199.

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
distribution of voters, would result in a system based on labels or brand name parties rather than issue positions. Moving to the center of the ideological spectrum, being cryptic about the exact position of the party on issues, and telling all members of the electorate that the plans of the party will be best for everyone are completely rational and strategic actions for a political party. Voters are likely to respond to these political party statements by allowing their personal identification to play a larger role in decision-making. However, even without the actions of the party, using party identification to simplify and comprehend political situations would be rational on the part of the voter.

These features of American politics indicate that, over time, the importance of partisanship will increase, and when this is combined with the growth of the American media and the technological advances of the late twentieth century, the current dominance of partisanship is understandable. Americans can more easily select sources that they expect to reinforce previously existing viewpoints and, because they have more options for how they spend their time, party identification will dictate interpretation of the information received as a matter of convenience. This state of affairs has several ramifications for American politics, and the next chapter attempts to explain why these effects of the dominance of partisanship matter.
CHAPTER SIX: THE RAMIFICATIONS OF THE DOMINANCE OF PARTISANSHIP

The dominance of partisanship in American politics has effects both obvious and subtle. Most people who comment on American politics tend to view partisanship and a reliance on party identification as unfortunate and bad for American democracy. There are certainly some aspects of partisanship and American politics that most people would agree are bad. However, there are also positive features of the current structure of American politics, as well as some that, while important, can most accurately be described as neutral.

The most obvious effect of partisanship, and one that nearly everyone would agree is extremely important, is its influence on electoral behavior. America has a republican form of government, which means that the electorate delegates decision-making power to a select group of individuals. Thus, anything that affects how people choose their representatives and, as a result, the policies that are made, will be of vital importance. Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes recognize this when they justify their examination of electoral behavior by pointing out that the actions of the electorate are important simply because of all the decisions that come about as a result.\(^\text{180}\) Hence, people should appreciate the role partisanship plays in American politics if for no other reason than the political outcomes that are affected.

Several negative effects of a heavy reliance on party identification have been identified. First, William Galston and Pietro Nivola note that any polarization, whether ideological, partisan, or some other type, can lead to gridlock. They argue that in the American case, this may limit long-range reforms to major programs like Social Security

as well as contribute to the inability of the United States to maintain a coherent, predictable, and forceful foreign policy. The structure of American politics generally requires a significant majority to accomplish any changes. The federal system means that majorities will be needed at both the national and state level to create and implement policies, and at each level a supermajority is usually necessary. In particular, the rules and procedures of the United States Senate allow the representatives of a small minority of the American electorate to prevent the passage of legislation. While the structure of the American constitutional systems is not caused by partisanship, partisanship can exacerbate its characteristics.

A bi-partisan system dominated by a dependence on party identification will generally lead to a situation where one party finds itself attempting to stop the opposing party from accomplishing its stated goals. In a system based on partisanship, one party is likely to oppose the proposal of the other simply because the other party is behind the proposed action. In the United States, where the electorate is generally evenly divided between the two major parties, nearly every elected official has an allegiance to one of the parties, a supermajority is needed to pass legislation, and there are numerous veto points, the challenger wishing to prevent changes and new policies always has a substantial advantage. The growing authority of partisanship would logically contribute to an increase in opposition and, since both parties will be able to stop the other, issues that need to be addressed may be impossible to approach, which could cause substantial problems. People who wish to make political changes will certainly have to overcome the obstacles created by increasing partisanship.

---

181 Galston and Nivola, “Delineating the Problem” in *Red and Blue Nation?*, Nivola and Brady eds., 2-3.
A second possible negative repercussion of the dominance of partisanship is that most Americans may become passive political spectators. This means that instead of feeling like active participants in American politics, many members of the electorate will not seek out problems, become informed, or develop their own opinions on issues, but will rather wait until a third figure, most likely a politician wishing to get elected, claims that there is a problem. Thomas Patterson accuses the media of contributing to the alleged pacification of the American electorate. He says, “When voters encounter game-centered stories, they behave more like spectators than participants in the election, responding, if at all, to the status of the race, not to what the candidates represent.”182 While not purely a result of relying on party identification, party identification does contribute to the view of competing teams for many of the reasons discussed in the preceding chapters. As was discussed earlier, issues are less important to American politics than partisanship in terms of determining what type of response is desired and predicting how effective a particular response will be since both are shaped by the mental filter created by group identifications, the use of partisan schemas, and a desire to avoid information that contradicts previous beliefs.

Also, from the perspective of the parties, American institutions of government encourage vagueness and the two parties are likely to take positions on most issues that are moderate and nearly identical. Therefore, partisanship limits the choices from which voters may choose and attempting to go beyond what the parties offer by being politically active would likely only reinforce party identification because of the initial bias. These

---

182 Patterson, *Out of Order*, 89.
factors support the notion that partisanship decreases both the exercise and utility of individual political action.

Anthony Downs adds that voters in a system dominated by partisanship are actually unlikely to seek out information at all. He claims, “the more a voter originally favors one party over another, the less likely he is to buy political information, *ceteris paribus,*” and, if he or she “has a strong preference to start with, it takes a great deal of adverse information to change [his or her] mind.”\(^{183}\) Thus, “information is relatively useless to those citizens who care which party wins.”\(^{184}\) A Democratic or Republican Party identifier has no need to look for additional information since he or she has already reached a decision of whom he or she will support and is in fact likely to try to avoid any information that would challenge this choice. Downs also argues that “a voter who is indifferent to begin with may also feel apathetic about becoming informed” since the cost of acquiring information is much higher due to not having a party to which he or she can readily delegate information gathering and processing.\(^{185}\) Also, since this voter initially cares less about which person wins an election, there is no strong reason why he or she would acquire information in the first place. Members of the American electorate who have a party identification will not seek out information because it is useless to them and those who have no party identification will not acquire information because of their indifference and lack of personal investment.

A third criticism of relying on party identification that has been leveled against the American electorate is based squarely on the selective perception and other biases

---

\(^{183}\) Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, 243-244.  
\(^{184}\) Ibid.  
\(^{185}\) Ibid. 243-244.
that it promotes. Table 1 presents the results of a poll taken shortly after the presidential
debate between the Republican George W. Bush and the Democrat John Kerry. As is shown, ninety-five percent of those who were planning to vote for Kerry thought he won the debate while a majority (though not an overwhelming majority) of determined Bush supporters still claimed that Bush won the debate. Based on the commentary of the Pew Center, there is a clear indication that many political scientists would prefer a political system where people actually make decisions based on performances in debates. However, this information shows that recognizing one person as the winner of the debate

Table 1:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who won the debate?</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Kerry</th>
<th>Swing voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither/Both</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

has little effect on vote choice. Pew states, “By two-to-one [as a result of including swing voters], voters who watched the first presidential debate believe that John Kerry prevailed… But the widely viewed Sept. 30 showdown did not result in a sea change in opinions of the candidates.”  

While many people agreed that Kerry won the debate, they did not change their voting intentions. This once again supports the idea that people treat political competitions between parties as they would a match between sports teams.

186 Ibid.
Just as one team winning a game would not convert the followers of the other team to a new allegiance, the American electorate does not appear to be swayed by a person giving better answers to questions about his or her policies or the problems facing the country. The American electorate actually appears to be responding to the debate in terms of whether “my” candidate won or lost, not whether the viewer should change his or her actions or beliefs based on what he or she saw. A reliance on party identification makes people less likely to change their minds and it seems to contribute to a rigid electorate that has reached a decision before weighing all the evidence necessary to rationally embrace a position. This situation could fairly be described as troubling.

An additional problem related to the issues discussed above is that relying on party identification entails basing decisions on criteria of which many political scientists disapprove. Downs notes, “…voters are encouraged to make decisions on some basis other than the issues, i.e., on the personalities of candidates, traditional family voting patterns, loyalty to past party heroes, etc.”188 This itself upsets many political commentators since voters are not voting for the person they feel would be the best representative or even for what is in their best personal interest. Downs adds that there is an additional problem that can develop as a result of the continuous use of strategic ambiguity by the parties and party candidates. He states, “if parties succeed in obscuring their policy decisions in a mist of generalities, and voters are unable to discover what their votes really mean, a rationality crisis develops.”189 This rationality crisis has the potential of making voters incapable of deciding which party would be better for them. If voters realize that they cannot tell what position the Republican and Democratic Party

189 Ibid., 139.
take on the issues and lose confidence in their identifications and beliefs, there could be a major loss of faith in the American political system, which could have dramatic consequences. However, Americans have a long tradition of relying on party identification and seem to value the current system regardless of some significant flaws.

A slightly less dramatic criticism of partisanship is that it often leads to people believing the wrong things and relying on inaccurate information. This is partly driven by the vague positions parties take as well as selective exposure and comprehension. Gary Jacobson and Thomas Edsall find that party identifiers are likely to believe things that are not true if doing so supports the party with which they identify. They state,

> Even though there is significant information to the contrary, a survey conducted by the Center of Policy Attitudes and the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland found that 75% of respondents who supported George W. Bush in 2004 believed that Iraq was a substantial supporter of Al Qaeda, whereas only 30% of Kerry supporters believed Iraq was a substantial Al Qaeda supporter.¹⁹⁰

The psychological compulsion to seek justification rather than the truth can lead to an electorate that is grossly misinformed. The more people rely on their identification, the more likely they are to resist the truth if doing so would challenge the way in which they understand the world. If people can overcome their party attachments and evaluate specific issues in a more unbiased manner, they would probably not cling to beliefs that are simply not true.

Despite the numerous criticisms of the results of a political system based on partisanship, there are some positive ramifications as well. Many of the mentioned

---

critiques of a political system centered on partisanship are theoretical, and there is not a substantial body of evidence showing that they are justified. For instance, Sharon Jarvis cites several studies that find people actually remember information better if the information is “framed in partisan terms.”\footnote{Jarvis, \textit{The Talk of the Party}, 205.} This means the fear that a reliance on partisanship is detrimental to becoming informed is not as straightforward as some political scientists believe. Additionally, partisan attachment has been shown to make citizens more likely to become politically active. Miller and Shanks find that having a strong party identification is positively correlated with turning out to vote.\footnote{Miller and Shanks, \textit{The New American Voter}, 99.} Instead of creating an uniformed and passive electorate, partisanship may actually combat these ostensibly negative developments.

A positive feature of party-based politics and an electorate guided by party identification that is articulated in \textit{The American Voter} is that of stability. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes classify American presidential elections into maintaining elections, where the “pattern of partisan attachments prevailing in the preceding period” persists; deviating elections, where the “division of partisan loyalties is not seriously disturbed, but the attitude forces on the vote are such as to bring about the defeat of the majority party; and realigning elections, which are defined by a change in the “basic partisan commitments of a portion of the electorate.”\footnote{Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, \textit{The American Voter}, 531-534.} They add, “many, if not most presidential elections… have been maintaining elections.”\footnote{Ibid., 531.} There are several advantages of this predictable system, including the prevention of drastic policy changes over a short period of time, and the reduction of uncertainty makes planning for the future
easier for individuals. Maintaining elections may become even more common as the effect of partisanship on voting behavior strengthens, and American politics might become more stable and foreseeable as a result.

Another reason the increase in partisanship may actually be positive is that the rise and unchallenged nature of the party in twenty-first century politics could lead to a reorganization of the American political system that would be more transparent. Patterson is the main proponent of this notion. He argues that the political party is better for organizing elections than a media that attempts to remain unbiased since political parties exist “to articulate interests and to forge them into a winning coalition.”\textsuperscript{195} Patterson adds, “In some ways partisan bias is preferable to journalistic bias, because it can be contested head-on. A partisan vision can be fought or deflected with an alternative one.”\textsuperscript{196} The idea behind this view is that if the media were organized by party loyalties, one could understand the thinking behind attacks and descriptions of political figures. If people rely on party identification and allow it to dictate what information sources they use, there is a fair chance that the sources will become more obvious about their beliefs and values. This development might make false reports easier to identify because all news sources would be open concerning their motives and this would imply that the dominance of partisanship will lead to an electorate with a more accurate understanding of the world.

Like many of the critiques of partisanship, this idea developed by Patterson requires further investigation. Many political systems outside the United States do have a media with identifiable partisan connections, and the superiority of this system is

\textsuperscript{195} Patterson, \textit{Out of Order}, 37.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 130-131.
debatable. The increasing importance of partisanship may affect the media, but the extent to which the media will be changed and whether this is a beneficial development are not entirely clear.

One potentially beneficial effect of a political system revolving around party identifications of the electorate that is frequently overlooked in works analyzing partisanship is the adaptability of political parties. Since political parties are, in many ways, superficial objects of loyalty, people can alter their beliefs more easily than would be possible in a political system dominated by ideologies or issue positions. For example, individuals who have a personal ideology that is classically liberal generally favor the use of free markets. However, attachment to this type of ideology means that if a policy based on allowing the free market to work unfettered is enacted and results in major problems, the individual is in a psychologically difficult position. Ideologues frequently claim that a specific policy was not implemented correctly or that even though the result was bad, the situation would have been even worse without the policy. This commitment to a failed policy and the expenditure of resources trying to justify a failing proposal are the hallmarks of a politically immobile system.

In the United States, however, parties are largely non-ideological, and can thus change their positions. For example, for most of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party was characterized by its support for racial discrimination in the South. In 1948, Harry Truman embraced the recommendations of the Committee on Civil Rights, which included protecting the rights of minority populations, and this trend was continued through the 1960s when Lyndon Johnson, a Democratic president, signed the Civil Rights
While the changes in the position of the Democratic Party did contribute to a decrease in party identifiers in the South and by 1964 led to many Southern states voting for Republican presidential candidates, these developments were neither abrupt nor complete. This shows that American political parties are flexible and can adopt new positions when older ideas become no longer acceptable.

In some ways, this idea of the adaptability of the American political party seems to contradict the strategies Downs claimed were necessary in a two-party system like the United States. He argues that a party needs integrity if it wishes to foster long-term support and states, “A party has integrity if its policy statements at the beginning of an election period are reasonably borne out by its actions during the period.”

Downs adds, “Ideological immobility is characteristic of every responsible party, because it cannot repudiate its past actions unless some radical change in conditions justifies this.” While this is true over time, American political parties are more able to change their positions because they are not ideologically pure or completely wedded to the positions they take. Though the Democratic and Republican Parties cannot dramatically change positions on important issues every election and avoid offending or confusing voters, over time both can change their official policies because the parties are ultimately little more than brand names. If one looked at the dominant beliefs of both the Democratic and Republican Parties one hundred years ago, they would be very different from today. This potential for

---

198 Ibid., 43-44
200 Ibid., 110.
change in a political system based on psychological identification with a party may make adapting to emerging problems and addressing policy failures easier, which most people would consider a good thing.

In addition to the many positive and negative ramifications of the dominance of partisanship, some of the most important outcomes may not be obviously good or bad. While the previous chapter outlined how a two-party system characterized by a high-degree of consensus encourages the major parties to behave in a specific manner that reinforces a reliance on party identification, the dominance of partisanship that emerges also has strategic implications. As party identification has become more important and indicative of how a person will vote, candidates and campaigns have changed their conduct. Galston and Nivola explain this change by noting that, with the current configuration of American politics, mobilizing the “base” to turn out appears to be a better strategy than attempting to convince “undecideds.” As a reliance on party identification for reaching decisions makes a person less persuadable, there is little motivation for a candidate to even try.

Thomas Mann explains this change saying, “The moderation hypothesis—that competitiveness induces responsiveness to the views of the median voter and therefore policy moderation—was supplanted by the mobilization hypothesis, which poses a negative relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness and policy moderation.” This appeal to polarized partisans (which can accurately be referred to as

201 Galston and Nivola, “Delineating the Problem” in Red and Blue Nation?, Nivola and Brady eds., 18.
202 Thomas E. Mann, “Polarizing the House of Representatives: How Much Does Gerrymandering Matter?” in Red and Blue Nation?: Characteristics and Causes of
“preaching to the converted”) is frequently discussed in scholarly works on American political campaigns. While inaccurately predicting that Rudy Giuliani would be the 2008 Republican candidate for president, Thomas Edsall points out that Chris Henick, a political advisor to Giuliani, is connected to leading Republican political masterminds like Lee Atwater and Karl Rove, and Edsall states that this makes him “a protégé of the men who, more than anyone else, fathered the [Republican Party’s] strategy of polarization.”[^203] There has been a clear rise in focus on decided voters rather than voters who have yet to select which candidate they will support. According to John Judis, “For the last 16 years, presidential elections have come down to which party can maintain its political base while [still appealing to the] swing voters.”[^204] The increasing dominance of partisanship may mean that appeals to swing voters will decrease with candidates and campaigners relying almost entirely on their base of party identifiers.

Chris Matthews, an experienced and celebrated observer of American politics, attempts to explain how these mobilization tactics can help a person accomplish his or her goals in life. His “advice” is particularly valuable as it depicts the new paradigm in political behavior that will likely strengthen as party identification becomes even more important and its application to non-political areas. Matthews counsels dividing the public into groups. He says, “Give a 1 to all your friends [(In American politics, a friend could be considered synonymous with strong party identifier)], a 2 to people you


regularly say hi to but don’t consider that close [(weak party identifiers)], a 3 to people you feel are probably truly undecided about you [(true independents)], and a 4 to those you figure are either strongly against you or loyal to another candidate [(this would encompass individuals who weakly and strongly identify with the other party)].

Matthews advises those seeking something (being elected in the case of American politics) to “nail down your base” by embracing those given the number 1. He then says to approach those labeled with a 2 and “treat them as people you have to convince.” Next, he recommends approaching those labeled with a 3 to “give them an aggressive, extensive case for your election.” Finally, Matthews implores those following his advice to “not approach the people you categorized with the number 4.”

As American politics continues to develop along a partisan framework, more and more people will likely act in accordance with the advice of Chris Matthews, and this lack of communication between people who disagree could be a bad development for America. Still, regardless of whether this change is good, bad, or neutral, this strategy is likely to become even more common.

As is apparent, there are numerous reasons why the increasing influence of partisanship warrants attention. There are several potential developments resulting from an increase in partisanship that can be considered bad, including the greater potential for political gridlock, voters becoming less active, and a reliance on information that is questionable or clearly wrong. However, there are also some results from the growing influence of partisanship that appear to be positive. Frequently presenting information in

---


206 Ibid.
a partisan format may help people better retain what they have learned, and it may also aid individuals in attempts to make sense of their environment. Patterson also feels that the centrality of political parties will reconstruct the way Americans and the American media approach politics, and he believes that a greater transparency of personal beliefs would benefit the nation. There are also consequences that can best be described as neutral. The new method of campaigning based on ensuring support from those who already support a party rather than convincing individuals who disagree or are indifferent will certainly have important implications for American democracy. The effects of a growth of partisanship clearly justify further investigation of this phenomenon. The way politicians act and the lives of Americans will both be affected by this development.

There is strong evidence that some of the changes discussed in this chapter are already occurring and will continue. To reiterate the findings of several previous chapters, party identification is becoming more indicative of how a person will vote, how a person will perceive events, and how he or she will react to figures or policies connected to a party label. Alan Abramowitz and Gary Jacobson find,

> On a host of domestic issues (ex: Social Security, taxes, energy) surveys find substantial partisan divisions that grow even wider when Bush’s name is attached to any of the policy alternatives…In March 2005, one poll found that 42% of Democrats supported “a plan in which people who chose to could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market,” but only 11 percent said they supported “George W. Bush’s proposals on Social Security.”

In coming elections, the Republican candidate will likely only appeal to those who support or would have supported the Bush proposal for updating Social Security, while the Democratic candidate will focus almost exclusively on those who do not or would not

---

207 Abramowitz and Jacobson, “Disconnected, or Joined at the Hip?” in *Red and Blue Nation?*, Nivola and Brady eds., 91.
approve of the Bush policies. This may or may not be good in the normative sense, but it is certainly important and worthy of extensive examination.

**CHAPTER SEVEN: POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Having shown that partisanship is central in modern American politics and that this prominent role of partisanship has numerous ramifications, there are several related issues worthy of further investigation. Additionally, there are some potential limits to this study in terms of its contribution to understanding American politics in its totality which need to be acknowledged. Many of these limits could also be overcome or mitigated by further research. The features that have a limiting effect on this study include the difficulties of combining numerous types of contests and debates into the single category of American politics, the complexities of measuring attitudes and identifying characteristics over time, and the differences between local and national parties that result from federalism. One issue worthy of significant attention is that of American political changes over time. The lack of data from eras before the 1950s can make this difficult, but if one wishes to understand American politics rather than simply twentieth or twenty-first century politics, earlier time periods should be investigated. Finally, the characteristics that lead or could potentially lead to changes in the structure of American politics also warrant further analysis.

While the concept of politics generally encompasses all debates about the actions of the government, this idea can also be divided into categories that differ in several respects. This study has used voting behavior as well as beliefs of party identifiers revealed by polls to show the importance of partisanship. However, many political scientists create a dichotomy of foreign and domestic politics, frequently then dividing
domestic politics into either economic or social categories. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes note that the relationship between partisan attachment and preference in foreign affairs is not as strong as the relationship between partisan attachment and preferences in domestic affairs. However, as chapter four showed in its discussion of views of the Iraq War, partisan identification influences how members of the American electorate perceive foreign policies. Additionally, the politicians whose elections largely revolve around partisanship are the individuals who make foreign and domestic (both economic and social) policies, which would support the notion that partisanship influences all policy formation. Additionally, classifying some political issues as foreign and some as domestic is often difficult. For example, treaties concerning international trade also involve many domestic issues, such as the effect on American producers. Still, further research could be performed to further investigate the difference in the role partisanship plays in foreign and domestic politics separately.

When analyzing American politics on the national level, some consideration should be given to the state level as well. This study treats Republican Party identifiers from Vermont as the equivalent of Republican Party identifiers from South Carolina, and Democratic Party identifiers from Texas and Massachusetts are also treated similarly. This analysis has attempted to minimize this problem by including ideology as a control for party identification. Ideology is valuable as a control because when most people argue that there are internal differences among Democratic Party identifiers and Republican Party identifiers, the difference most often identified is ideology. Nevertheless, further research could examine the role of partisanship in various states. A good deal of work

---

analyzing state partisanship has already been completed and Patrick Kenney and Tom Rice have clarified many changes in party identification at the state-level between the 1950s and 1980s. This could provide an excellent starting point for an in-depth comparison of state and national partisanship in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Additionally, differences among states may have contributed to the lack of ideology of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Writing in the 1950s, the authors of *The American Voter* state that diversity among local political parties can lead to an incoherent national party. This theoretically provides an additional reason for the previously discussed lack of issue position clarity and the generally ambiguous appeals of American parties that Anthony Downs discusses. While the theory that partisanship dominates American electoral politics is unlikely to be disproved by investigating the importance of party identification in state politics, there may be some interesting findings from such an inquiry.

Just as with treating all Democratic and Republican Party identifiers as interchangeable (except for in the strength of their identification) on a national level, the analysis in this paper has not been able to delve deeply into the differences between the Democratic and Republican Party identifiers. As shown above, Republican identifiers vote for the Republican candidate more consistently than Democratic identifiers vote for the Democratic candidate. One theory may be that Republicans have higher incomes

---


and tend to be more educated, which allows them to engage in selective interpretation and exposure more easily. There may also be a fundamental psychological difference in the way most Republican Party identifiers and most Democratic Party identifiers approach politics. Additional investigations into the differences presented in chapter three and the reasons for them could be worthwhile and would contribute to the understanding of modern American politics and its paramount feature, partisanship.

An additional difficulty encountered when attempting to analyze trends and changes in American politics over several decades involves changes in measurement. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik explain that through time, some words acquire different meaning and, even if people are the same, they may describe themselves in different ways. These authors give the example of declaring oneself “liberal” or “conservative,” and the growing negative connotations of being a liberal in America. Although, there is no indication that this is a substantial problem. Ideological categorization is ubiquitous in American politics and ideology has been included in the National Election Survey for more than three decades. Still, particularly when analyzing trends in ideology, a person should be aware that there are some potential complications with using information based on self-designation.

As with the complication of treating concepts as constant across time, time itself presents a challenge to any attempt to describe developments and trends in American politics. There are few reliable sources of data before the National Election Studies began in the 1950s; Gallup polling did not start until the 1930s, and the wording of Gallup and

---

other polls have changed over time.\textsuperscript{213} Thus, partisanship may have dominated American politics throughout American history with a deviation in the early and middle twentieth century and a return to this normal state may be occurring in the twenty-first century. David Brady and Hahrie Hans argue, “The difference between the parties in the first decade of the twenty-first century is less than between the two major parties in the 1890s, but greater than during the 1930s.”\textsuperscript{214} If the data were available to construct a graph of the correlation between party identification and vote choice from the founding of America in the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century, the larger trend might differ from twentieth century trends, and the current partisan polarization might be unremarkable. This would indicate that the numerous works decrying the recent increase in partisanship and the dangers of a political system organized around party identification exaggerate and that such criticisms are unfounded. Brady and Hans add that studying the records that are available, particularly congressional voting records, indicates that partisanship has been consistently crucial. They state, “Looking at the differences between the median party member of both major parties between 1867 and 2003 demonstrates that political parties in Congress have been polarized for much of the time.”\textsuperscript{215} Although the task would be laborious, creating a measurement of the significance of partisanship from eras before the twentieth century would be useful and allow a more accurate description of modern American politics in terms of its relation to earlier political periods of time.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{214} Brady and Han, “Polarization Then and No” in \textit{Red and Blue Nation?}, Nivola and Brady eds., 130.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
Finally, any attempt to characterize the American electorate is ultimately limited because of the dynamic nature of American politics. Perhaps the greatest advantage of the series of works analyzing American voters that began with *The American Voter* is that a new work is periodically published to reevaluate previous theories, find changes in the voting behavior of American citizens, and identify new developments. This study has attempted to build on these previous works and apply their method of analysis to the late 1990s and early twenty-first century while focusing on the dominance of partisanship. Even if partisanship dominates contemporary American politics, there are limits to how applicable this finding will be in ten, twenty, or fifty years. For instance, blacks voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates before the 1930s, but after the reforms of Franklin Roosevelt and the “New Deal,” they became reliable Democrats. This demonstrates that major events and the actions of political figures can alter the structure of American politics. Miller and Shanks also support this claim, stating, “the stability of party identification is clearly a function of the larger political environment… subject to great and pervasive change [under political upheavals].” This naturally leads to the question of what constitutes a political upheaval capable of reconstituting the American political system. Developments such as the emergence of nearly instantaneous communication, the predicted crisis of entitlement spending, the “War on Terror,” and the Iraq War all have the potential to force the Democratic and Republican Parties to take unambiguous positions and create new alliances and agreements across currently divided groups of individuals. If one or even a few issues gain greater importance in the coming

---

years there is a possibility that the importance of partisanship could be reduced or even eliminated. There could also be a realignment of American politics.

Though there are additional areas of research involving the role of partisanship in American politics that deserve further investigation and the absence of data makes comparing modern American politics to periods before the 1950s extremely difficult, studying partisanship in the modern period is still valuable since it presents hypotheses that can be applied to other times, provides a foundation for future research, and can be combined with studies from other eras to create a clearer depiction of American politics across time. This work could also be combined with studies of local politics to test the strength of partisanship, which could possibly refine the theories contained in this work. Partisanship is clearly extremely important; further research may be able to ascertain the extent of the current dominance of partisanship and recognize any changes that occur in American politics that would require adjusting the findings of this study.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

This study supports the hypothesis that partisanship dominates contemporary American electoral politics and public opinion. Political parties are an important component of American democracy and, while their importance is recognized, many scholars and political commentators may underestimate how vital they are. The partisan influence theory of American politics discussed in the introduction (that party identification influences and often determines value positions) appears to be much more valid than the revisionist argument made by some who believe that citizens are not strongly attached to political parties and frequently change their self-image. The late twentieth century saw an increase in the correlation between party identification and vote choice, as well as between party identification and opinions concerning certain policies. As American politics enters the twenty-first century, partisanship has become even more important and has reached a level of dominance not observed since at least the 1950s.

When Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes attempt to describe the behavior of American citizens in *The American Voter*, they conclude that party identification is an accurate indicator of political beliefs and behavior in presidential elections of the 1950s. Working backwards in their funnel of causality and relying on psychological explanations for beliefs and behavior (rather than structural causes), these authors established a foundation on which many works, including this study, have been based. Several works advancing and testing the applicability of the ideas contained in *The American Voter* published before this study find that the importance of partisanship has not always been as great as Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes found in the 1950s. These works identified that new factors affecting voters, particularly
issue positions and ideology, that were replacing party identification during the twentieth century. Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik claim in *The Changing American Voter* that the 1960s and 1970s was a time of dramatic change in the political lives of Americans and note the erosion of partisan voting. They find that members of the American electorate began to develop cohesive ideologies that can be divided roughly into conservative and liberal beliefs. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik also conclude that the development of ideologies led to the Democratic and Republican Parties becoming more ideologically consistent, with the Democratic Party becoming a liberal party while the Republican Party embraced ideologically conservative positions. The increase in the correlation between vote choice and ideology (the more liberal a person is, the more likely he or she is to vote for the Democratic candidate) provides some support to their argument that ideology, or some type of generally accepted issue consistency, is becoming more important in American politics. The high correlation of both party identification and ideology with vote choice also supports the claim that the parties are becoming more ideological, or at least being understood in ideological terms more frequently. However, the evidence discussed in chapter three makes clear that party identification has always been more significant than ideology and that when ideology is controlled for party identification, it is virtually unimportant. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik seem to realize that their ideas were not likely to apply to time periods after the 1970s as they examine the results of the 1976 presidential election, which was in many ways a harbinger of the resurgence of partisanship.

In *The New American Voter*, the latest installment of the *American Voter* series, Warren Miller and J. Merill Shanks state that party identification is the most important
single factor in determining vote choice, but they are hesitant to argue that it dominates American politics in the late twentieth century. However, their findings, which are reinforced by chapter three of this paper, support the argument that partisanship was central to American politics in the elections taking place near the beginning of the twenty-first century. Therefore, the foundation established for an analysis of the twenty-first century American voter is one of increasing partisanship and reliance on party identification. The findings of this work support the theories of *The American Voter*, *The Changing American Voter*, and *The New American Voter* and demonstrate that the trend identified by Miller and Shanks has continued, resulting in a political environment where party identification is even more important than when Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes first used National Election Studies in their attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of the American voter.

In explaining why the late twentieth and early twenty-first century American voter relies on party identification more than previous American voters and why partisanship now dominates American electoral politics and public opinion, several explanations have been presented. The two theories emphasized can be understood as the psychological explanation best encapsulated by social identity theory and the economic theory based on the structure of American politics and other exogenous characteristics of the American electorate. According to social identity theory, individuals who describe themselves as members of a group selectively acquire and process information in a way that supports their group associations. In practice, this has been described as meaning that members of the American electorate avoid information that does not support previously developed beliefs and that political information is processed with a partisan schema.
focusing on portraying the party with which one identifies in positive light, while
denigrating the other party. The best example of how this theory operates involves
analyzing how party identifiers respond to objective questions. As is explained in chapter
five, Democratic Party identifiers typically believe that inflation and unemployment
increased during the time the Republican Ronald Reagan was president, while
Republicans accurately believe that both decreased.

The economic explanation presented earlier is based on *An Economic Theory of
Democracy* by Anthony Downs. Downs explains how a politician and party acting
rationally actually prevent voters from making a rational decision based on weighing the
expected benefits of each party being in power. As stated above, a government structure
that results in a two-party system and an electorate characterized by ideological
consensus typically lead to the type of partisanship-centered political environment that
can be found in American politics of the 1950s, 1980s, 1990s, and twenty-first century.
Over a period of time that is politically stable (meaning the same key issues remain
foremost in most voters’ minds and do not require that parties take actions making their
beliefs clear to the voters), the features of the American system of government that
Downs identifies are likely to strengthen partisanship. Therefore, one way to understand
American politics is that there is a stable equilibrium of partisanship-centered politics that
can be disturbed by major events, such as the Great Depression or Vietnam War, that
would change the system to make issues more salient to voters than party attachment.
One area that has been noted as in need of further investigation is what allows some
political controversies to overcome the partisan equilibrium established by the structure
of American government and psychological processing, while others do not.
Technology has also been identified as an explanation of why the late twentieth century was host to a steady and dramatic increase in the influence of partisanship. More choices in the American media, particularly with the rise of cable television and the Internet, allow a greater degree of selective exposure and provide politics with more competition for the attention of American citizens. Thus, relying on parties to process information and develop opinions is more appealing to the average American and can even be considered rational.

Chapter three, which makes use of the National Election Studies, the same source of information used by the authors of *The American Voter*, *The Changing American Voter*, and *The New American Voter*, makes the dominance of partisanship quite clear. Even when self-described ideology is included as a control, there is a strong or intermediate correlation between party identification and vote choice. Democratic identifiers usually vote for the Democratic candidate, while Republican identifiers tend to vote for the Republican candidate. Between the early 1970s and 2004, there is an obvious increase in the correlation between party identification and vote choice, with the relationship reaching extremely high levels of correlation in the twenty-first century. Though the number of weak and strong identifiers of both the Democratic and Republican Party have decreased slightly, these decreases have been offset by the increase in independents who identify with a party. Additionally, the data also show that these changes have been relatively minor.

If a person looks at ideology and vote choice with no controls, he or she will find that since the National Election Study began including ideology, there has been a substantial increase in the strength of the correlation between ideology and vote choice,
with liberals becoming more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate and conservatives more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. While the level of correlation for ideology and vote choice has never surpassed or even reached the strength of the relationship between party identification and vote choice, ideology does appear to be quite indicative of how a person will vote. However, as was previously shown, if one controls ideology for party identification, or controls both for the other in a multiple regression, any relationship between ideology and vote choice weakens greatly or disappears. When party identification and ideology are both controlled for the other, the relationship between party identification and vote choice remains, while ideology becomes insignificant. There does appear to be a growing connection between ideology and party identification, with liberals mostly identifying with the Democratic Party and conservatives generally preferring the Republican Party (or perhaps those believing that they are liberals identifying with the Democratic Party while those claiming to be conservatives identify with the Republican Party).

Still, as the analyses of the 1996, 2000, and 2004 elections make clear, party identification is of much greater significance than ideology. Also, when Gallup conducts a survey that allows a comparison in the beliefs of liberals and conservatives with Democratic Party identifiers and Republican Party identifiers, such as the approval ratings of the Republican George W. Bush depicted chapter four, there is a stronger correlation between party identifiers and support for the partisan figure than is found when looking at the relationship between ideology and support for a political figure (i.e. Republican identifiers are more likely to support George W. Bush than conservatives
Partisanship has been shown to be noticeably more important than ideology throughout this investigation.

These findings help explain why Morris Fiorina has reached the conclusion that ideological differences within the American electorate are exaggerated and why the term “culture war” cannot be accurately applied to contemporary American politics. However, this study has shown that even though there may not be an ideological polarization of the American electorate, there does appear to be a conspicuous and growing partisan polarization. Some, like James Campbell and Carl Cannon use the notion of partisan polarization to explain the extreme differences in approval ratings of political figures, such as Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, as well as the extent of other political disagreements. The American Congress has seen a perceptible and increasing cleavage in voting behavior by members of different political parties, which was discussed in chapter four. The partisan polarization has also been demonstrated with a number of recent examples, including the overwhelming tendency of Democratic Party identifiers to believe that the Iraq War was a mistake and is not going well at the same time that Republican identifiers believe that the war in Iraq was the correct choice and is going well. This study has also addressed the emerging differences in how partisans rate the performance of the economy and the potential objection that this is a result of wealth differences in party identifiers has been shown to be inaccurate. There is clearly a partisan divide in American politics and it is growing.

After verifying that partisanship has become more important in American politics in recent years and that partisanship dominates twenty-first century American electoral politics, as well as explaining the likely causes sustaining the dominance of partisanship,
this paper has noted the ramifications of this development. As was explained, partisan politics has many negative connotations and the word partisan is often used as an insult to a person or his or her behavior. There are some potential negative effects of the rise of partisanship, including political gridlock as opponents are in the advantageous position of having the parliamentary and political tools to prevent changes, citizens not actively engaging in political activities or acting with a lower intensity, and voters perhaps becoming detached from reality and holding beliefs that are untrue but support the party with which they affiliate. Alternatively, there are several possible positive results of the centrality of partisanship that have also been previously discussed. Some scholars, like Thomas Patterson, believe that the American political system will work better if parties become more powerful and the media becomes more transparent about personal beliefs, both of which would seem likely in a highly-partisan political environment. Also, the mobile and adaptable features of parties were discussed, and this may be the greatest strength of modern American politics. The twenty-first century brand name parties of America are not wedded to ideologies that may result in policies that fail to achieve their objectives, and a party can easily abandon and adopt a new position on a specific issue if doing so appears to be beneficial or necessary. Hence, having a political system based on attachments to malleable political parties many not be as unfortunate a situation as some believe.

Additionally, the strategic effects of the dominance of partisanship have also been presented. These are likely to be the most obvious repercussions that observers of twenty-first century American politics will experience. The moderation theory of American politics, which was earlier described as being one that understands politics as based on
appealing to those who have moderate views or have not reached a decision, clearly does not fit in a partisan polarized electorate with a relatively small number of true independents ( independents who do not identify with either the Democratic or Republican Parties). Many political analysts, like the above-mentioned Thomas Edsall, have already found evidence of a mobilization approach, where campaigns focus their resources on energizing those who are already supportive of a candidate in an attempt to ensure that these people become political active at the appropriate times. Some, like Chris Matthews, feel that there is potential for these strategic effects of the dominance of partisanship to influence aspects of the lives of Americans in realms unrelated to politics.

Chapter seven discussed several instances where further research would be helpful to test the applicability of the findings of this study in areas that could not be addressed in great detail here. For example, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik make the claim that the decrease in the importance of partisanship in the 1960s and 1970s resulted from events like the Vietnam War, Watergate, and massive racial conflicts. This raises the question of why some issues can reorient American politics and one could investigate current or likely controversies that will have the same effect. Also, this study, while covering most of the twentieth century, is focused on the last decade of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century. As events and political actors change, the findings expressed in this study may become inaccurate. Situating the period of time this analysis of American politics covers by continuing to study trends in American politics in the future and attempting to develop an accurate understanding of times before the Gallup polls of the 1930s or National Election Studies of the 1950s is essential. There is a tendency to treat the 1950s and 1960s as a baseline to judge all later
periods against. However, if these early eras from which there is the most available data are outliers in terms of their characteristics when compared to the entirety of American political history, using them as a point of comparison may not be wise. This study is itself a valuable tool to use when analyzing future and past eras and looking for possible similarities or differences with what has been observed elsewhere.

Twenty-first century American electoral politics and public opinion are dominated by partisanship. Ideology does have some importance, but this is quite small by comparison and seems to be an effect of the increasing saliency and significance of party identification. The party with which a member of the American electorate identifies will influence his or her understanding of events and shape his or her actions. If the current trend continues, the United States may reach a point where not only is virtually everything significant in American politics rooted in partisanship, but where everything important in American politics is completely based on partisanship; however, this is unlikely and some might argue that since the correlation between party identification and vote choice (as well as political beliefs in general) is at such an extremely high level, it can do little but decrease. Nonetheless, as American politics develops throughout the twenty-first century, partisanship is likely to continue to be dominant, and recognizing this will help observers of American politics understand the behavior of the electorate and the outcomes of the political process.
WORKS CITED


