2

From Rational Choice to Partisan Identity

A Paradigm Change

2.1 WHAT IS IN THIS CHAPTER?

In this chapter, I introduce two models of partisanship – both of which differ dramatically in their assumptions about the origins of citizens' political behavior. First is the *instrumental* model of partisanship, which is based on Rational Choice Theory (RCT). Instrumental partisanship assumes that citizens bring their political preferences into the political arena and then decide to support a political party that satisfies these preferences. From this perspective, partisanship is determined by the proximity between a party's platform and a voter's political preferences. While this model has dominated political science for a long time, there is an abundance of scholarship showing that partisans do not always follow traditional notions of rational decision-making. In response to these inconsistencies, I introduce and review prior scholarship on the *expressive* model of partisanship, which, based on Social Identity Theory (SIT), conceptualizes partisanship as an identity that can operate relatively independently of political convictions and ideologies. After reviewing prior scholarship's evidence in support of the expressive model, I discuss its implications for democratic behavior as well as its current place in the academic discourse on partisanship.

2.2 WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

It is important to understand the origins of partisanship. Do partisans merely disagree on political issues or are they motivated to defend their party – regardless of actual policies or party performance? In other words, are partisans concerned about policies or about winning? The answers to these questions have vast implications for how we assess the nature of partisan conflict and its solutions. If the conflict between partisans is based on policies, then policy compromise is one possible solution. However, if it is based on status, then even shared policy preferences might do little to lessen partisan

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hostility, since it is not about policies but about seeing your team win at all costs.

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Partisanship plays a central role in political science. It is a key predictor of a host of important political outcomes, including the vote (Brader and Tucker 2009; Green et al. 2002), political issue preferences and core values (Gerber et al. 2010; Goren 2005), as well as political engagement (Huddy et al. 2015; Nicholson 2012). While the impact of partisanship on political behavior is well documented, there is still a lively debate regarding the origins of partisanship. Intuitively, partisanship should reflect people's political preferences and ideological convictions. Following this logic, citizens choose to support a political party based on their informed understanding of the party's platform and its alignment with their own political priorities. This notion, however, conflicts with the fact that citizens are generally uninformed about politics and tend to know little about concrete policy proposals (Lupia 2016). How do we square this lack of knowledge with the fierce partisan battles that characterize the political landscape in the United States and beyond? Put even more simply: What do we argue about if not about political issues? How can we explain "unbridled partisanship" – even in the face of unaware voters, changing ideologies, weak leadership, and poor governance? Rethinking partisanship as an identity, rather than just the sum of political preferences, can help solve some of these mysteries. To fully understand the theoretical innovation behind the expressive model, it is helpful to first review how political science has traditionally conceptualized partisanship. For this purpose, the following section discusses the instrumental model that, based on RCT, highlights the role of political issues and ideological convictions in shaping partisanship.

2.3 VOTER ECONOMICUS? RATIONAL CHOICE AND THE INSTRUMENTAL MODEL

The instrumental model is based on RCT, which has shaped the methodological and theoretical approaches of political scientists, psychologists, and economists for decades. RCT describes how people should behave if they complied with the ideal of the *homo economicus* – a self-interested agent whose actions are guided by the logic of optimization and utility-maximization. According to this logic, people's decisions are dictated by their anticipation of the value associated with possible future outcomes. Put differently, we are motivated to maximize the expected value of our actions. While this prediction may sound reasonable (and desirable), it builds on many underlying assumptions about how people arrive at these rational decisions: First, people need to gather sufficient information about their plausible

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courses of action since rational decision-making requires people to be well informed. Second, people need to assess the value of each plausible outcome and weigh that value by its expected probability of occurring. In other words, it is not enough to identify the outcome with the highest value to us. We also need to consider the probability of this outcome actually occurring. If the probability is low, then this will negatively affect the expected value of this outcome. For example, an American voter might consider voting for a third party such as the Green Party in a presidential election. Since the United States has a two-party system, the chance of the Green Party winning the election is quite slim, thereby reducing the expected value of voting for a third party. Eventually, the *homo economicus* compares the functions of plausible outcomes and chooses the one with the greatest expected value. These steps make up the ideal decision-making process; it specifies how people *should* act under optimal circumstances. From this perspective, RCT is a normative theory with strong built-in assumptions about how people make decisions.

It does not require a social science degree to raise objections to these assumptions. The bar for rationality is high, and in everyday life, the circumstances of our decision-making are anything but conducive to a *rational* choice. We are chronically short on time – certainly too short to gather sufficient information about plausible outcomes; and even if we have an abundance of time, access to critical information might not always be granted or easy to comprehend. Think about the complexities of tax policies or even just buying a car! To further complicate the matter, people are not always motivated to improve the quality of their decisions, particularly if they do not consider the decision at hand important. To illustrate this point: People might aim to be well informed when choosing a car that represents the best possible purchasing decision, but for how many people does that logic hold true when it comes to evaluating a party's tax policy proposal? Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that voters generally perform poorly when asked to place political parties on an ideological spectrum (Levitin and Miller 1979) or even to merely define the parties' ideological orientations (Converse 1964). These pieces of evidence call into question the notion of the well-informed voter as well as voters' ability to seek out a party that matches their political preferences or ideological convictions.

Despite these objections, RCT has greatly influenced the study of mass political behavior and propelled the development of instrumental partisanship. According to this model, various contemporary factors such as economic evaluations, presidential approval (MacKuen et al. 1989), policy preferences, party performance (Fiorina 1981), and candidate evaluations (Garzia 2013) shape party loyalties. Put simply, citizens select a party that aligns with their own policy preferences and has a track record of good governance and strong economic performance. This, in turn, also means that partisans abandon their party if it no longer satisfies these *instrumental* considerations.

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With the implementation of the first *American National Election Study* panel survey in 1948, the instrumental model became directly testable with individual-level data of both party preferences and political attitudes over time. This data allowed political scientists to examine how party identification and political attitudes relate to each other, how that relationship changes over time, and if a change in one factor precedes a change in the other. If the instrumental model holds, we should observe that a change in political attitudes precedes a change in party preference since the former shapes the latter. However, the panel data revealed patterns conflicting with these predictions:

> Despite some decline in the average level of partisan loyalty (and despite the intervention of the Watergate scandal and the resignation and subsequent pardoning of Richard Nixon between 1972 and 1976), the stability of individual partisanship was just as great in the 1970s as in the 1950s. Meanwhile, the continuity of individual issue preferences (for issues included in both sets of surveys) was no greater in the 1970s than in the 1950s – and thus well below the corresponding level for party identification. (Bartels 2008, p. 15)

Bartels (2008) identifies the crux of the issue: The instrumental model is unable to explain the extraordinary stability of partisanship in the face of volatile political attitudes. Citizens seem to change their political preferences without changing their partisanship. At the same time, partisanship remains relatively unaffected by shifting party platforms: Adams et al. (2011) show that when a party alters their policy platform, these changes either go unnoticed or have a small and delayed effect on partisanship.

In addition to partisanship's resistance to changing political attitudes and party platforms, another complication challenges the instrumental model: Voters do not assess instrumental concerns – party performance, leadership quality, and economic evaluations – in an objective fashion. A large share of research demonstrates the impact of partisan biases in the evaluation of many instrumental factors. For example, Lebo and Cassino (2007) show that "partisan groups generally do reward and punish presidents for economic performances, but only those presidents of the opposite party." This suggests that partisans are less likely to hold their party accountable, let alone change their party loyalties. Similarly, Bisgaard (2015) demonstrates partisan bias in the attribution of responsibility for the national economic downturn in the United Kingdom: While party supporters were generally capable of admitting that the British economy had deteriorated between 2004 and 2010, government party supporters were much less likely to blame their party for it while oppositional party supporters considered the government to be the primary culprit. This asymmetry in blame attribution is an unequivocal sign of partisan-motivated reasoning – another observation that seems to conflict with the instrumental model.

Overall, partisanship is much more enduring and resistant to changes in the political environment than the instrumental model would predict. There are cases in the history of American politics that can illustrate the stickiness of

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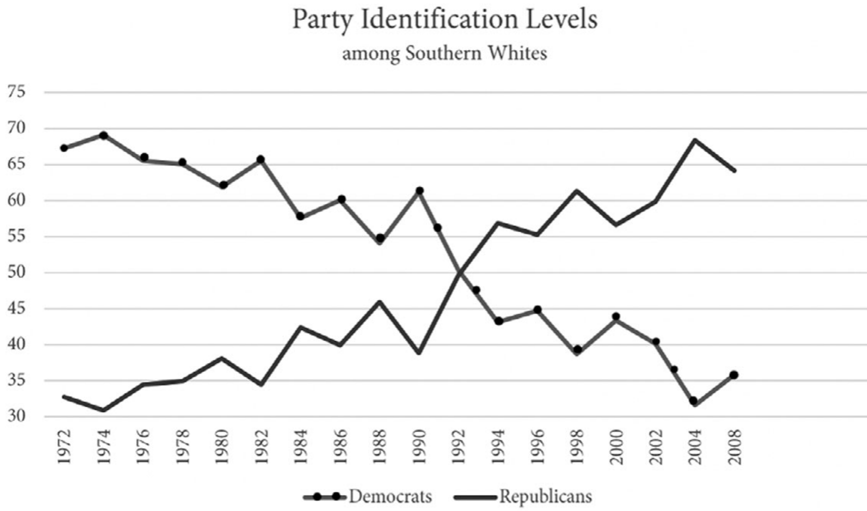

FIGURE 2.1 Party identification levels among White Southerners, 1972–2008
Note: Data taken from the ANES cumulative file. Graph includes Whites in the South only, who identify as both a strong or weak Democrat/Republican and who oppose government involvement in supporting minority groups.

partisan loyalties, even as the parties dramatically change their policy stances. Figure 2.1, for example, displays partisanship levels (as percentage of Democrats and Republicans) among White Southerners who oppose government involvement in supporting minority groups (i.e., civil rights legislation). The graph nicely illustrates partisans' resistance to change: Even though the Republican Party enjoyed several political successes in the South during the 1960s, it was not until 1992 that the partisan majority in the South flipped in favor of the Republican Party. Hence, it took almost three decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 before White Southerners who opposed civil rights legislation abandoned their former loyalties to the Democratic Party.

While the graph admittedly only shows aggregate levels of party identification, it nevertheless suggests that people only reluctantly reconsider their party affiliations – despite the drastic change in the parties' stance on civil rights. These findings might be driven by people's lack of attention to their party's policy platform (as Adams et al. [2011] demonstrate), but it could also be driven by their desire to protect and align themselves with their party. For example, Johnston et al. (2004) show that conflicts between party identification and liberal-conservative ideology tend to be resolved in favor of the party because partisans are motivated to be "good team players." Rather than abandoning their party because of a policy disagreement or poor performance in government, partisans try to defend their party, even to themselves.

Critics might advocate for a more generous application of the instrumental model. Rather than specific policy preferences, voters can utilize more

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general political principles and core values such as limited government, free enterprise, and individualism to judge which political party best represents their interests. While this argument certainly has face validity (and, again, can be considered desirable from a normative standpoint), Goren (2005) finds that party identification is more temporally stable and enduring than political core principles such as equal opportunity, limited government, or traditional family values. It is hard to explain these patterns if we keep assuming that core values determine partisanship. Instead, Goren's results suggest that even political core values – the basic building blocks of political attitudes – might be shaped by partisanship.

All these findings have one thing in common: they reverse the causal arrow suggested by RCT and the instrumental model. Partisanship is relatively resistant to changes in voters' core political values and preferences as well as to changes in their party's platforms. It thus becomes clear that changes in partisanship are the exception, not the norm, and are most likely to occur under unusual circumstances. As Campbell et al. (1960) – the authors of the pioneering book *The American Voter* – put it, "Only an event of extraordinary intensity can arouse any significant part of the electorate to the point that its established political loyalties are shaken" (p. 151). In other words, instrumental considerations might be neither the only reason people acquire their party affiliations nor the only reason they remain loyal to them.

2.4 PARTISANSHIP AS AN IDENTITY: THE EXPRESSIVE MODEL

As the gap between the instrumental model's expectations and the empirical evidence widened, an alternative conceptualization of partisanship gained credence, known as the expressive model. Campbell et al. (1960) depart from the paradigm of rational decision-making and its assumption about the nature of partisanship. Instead of viewing partisanship as the product of careful reflections on policies and party performance, the authors define partisanship as a psychological attachment to a political party, arguing that – rather than malleable – party loyalties tend to transcend "elements of historical circumstances" (p. 8) such as fluctuations in party performance, changes in policies, and even in the state of the economy. Partisans are motivated to defend and protect their party – even in bad times – because their partisanship is part of who they are; protecting the party is thus analogous to protecting a part of their self-image. From this vantage point, partisanship turns into an identity similar to other social group memberships that are important to people such as religion, race, or even loyal support of a football team. Motivated by this partisan identity, partisans strive to select information that presents their party in a positive light and deny or distort information that presents their party in a negative light. Consequently, partisans' efforts to protect the party – and by extension the self – create a form of echo chamber

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that filters out or distorts adverse information about their party, its leadership, and its supporters. Accordingly, Campbell et al. (1960) consider partisanship an "unmoved mover" that drives partisans' perceptions and evaluations of their political environment, thereby highlighting how difficult it is for partisans to be truly objective in assessing their party's merits.

What explains the enduring power of these identities? Partisan identities develop at an early stage in people's political socialization – oftentimes before their political convictions and preferences have fully formed. This creates a feedback loop whereby young partisans adopt the political positions of their party, which further strengthens their party attachments. Over time, this reciprocal process diminishes the impact of information that might challenge their party loyalties, including changes in the party's platform or bad party leadership. From this perspective, the expressive model does not assume partisans to be well informed about politics or even to have well-defined prior preferences. Instead, partisanship can operate somewhat independently and motivate partisans to align their political beliefs with their party's stances. This identity-driven process can explain the oftentimes uncritical and unconditional loyalty we see among strong partisans.

Given the reinforcing nature of partisanship over time, it is important to examine more closely the process by which people acquire partisanship in the first place. In their seminal work *Partisan Hearts and Minds*, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) argue that partisanship links an individual's self-image to the social groups that are emblematic of each political party such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or even groups based on lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism, parenthood, or gun ownership. Thus, the process by which people come to identify with a political party starts with the question: "What kinds of social groups come to mind as I think about Democrats, Republicans, and Independents? Which assemblage of groups (if any) best describes me?" (p. 8) rather than "Which party best represents my political positions?" From this perspective, partisanship is the result of a self-categorization or matching process during which people compare themselves to the types and groups of people that are associated with each party and then sort themselves into the party where this matching process yields the best fit.

This process can also help explain under what circumstances partisanship can change. If the social group composition of a political party influences partisans' attachment to that party, then we would expect that a major socio-demographic change in the party's leadership and its base can impact existing partisan loyalties. Green et al. refer to these changes as alterations in the party's public persona: "By stressing how difficult it is to alter the partisan balance, we do not mean to suggest that parties are altogether incapable of producing change. From time to time, a party alters the social group composition of its leadership and, by extension, its public persona" (2002, p. 13). Green and colleagues also use the gradual party realignment process in the

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American South as an example to illustrate the face validity of their argument: the inclusion of Black Americans into the Democratic Party's base gradually altered the social group composition of the party's public persona. Over an extended period, this change led White Southerners, who sought to preserve the existing racial hierarchy, to abandon the Democratic Party. Other factors such as the increased presence of White Southern leadership in the Republican Party further accelerated the *Republicanization* of the South. These realignments of party loyalties were driven by voters' changing perceptions of which regional and racial groups "go with" each party. Since these perceptions are sticky and hard to change, it is not surprising that the exit of White Southerners from the Democratic Party occurred so incrementally over the course of decades.

2.5 SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE EXPRESSIVE MODEL OF PARTISANSHIP

The expressive model and the idea of a partisan *identity* did not develop in a vacuum; they are derived from Social Identity Theory (SIT) – a prominent theory in social psychology that examines the role of identity in intergroup relations. With the integration of social and cognitive psychology into political science in the past few decades, SIT and its offshoots have become a prolific theoretical framework for the study of partisan identities (e.g., Huddy et al. 2015; Mason et al. 2015) and other social and political identities such as gender, race, religion and ethnicity (see Huddy 2001 for a review). Since SIT is the main theoretical framework of this book, I review the theory's key tenets in the remainder of this chapter.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) originated as a model of intergroup behavior, examining the psychological processes that promote the development of group identifications. According to SIT, people are motivated to achieve a positive "social identity," which is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1981, p. 255). Put differently, people's sense of self is defined by their membership in social groups such as their nationality, occupation, religion, race, or even their hobbies and lifestyle choices. For example, when people are asked to describe themselves, they might say "I am an American" and "I am a Muslim" if their nationality and religion are an important part of who they are. Alternatively, one might value "being a UGA football fan" as an integral part of one's self-concept. Thus, membership in these social groups is important to us and we aim to defend and protect them because they are a part of who we are. Turner et al. (1987) further describe this motivation as a need for people "to differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity"

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(p. 42). We are motivated to see the groups we belong to in a positive light – especially in comparison to other social groups – since it reflects well on us as a member of that group too.[1]

The ease with which people attach to their groups and internalize their membership has been empirically demonstrated by the so-called minimal group paradigm – a methodology in social psychology that investigates the conditions for conflict and discrimination between groups (Tajfel 1970). Experiments that have utilized this method consistently show just how *minimal* the conditions for in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice can be. In fact, even experimentally imposed and thus arbitrary distinctions between groups of respondents, such as the color of participants' shirts or preferences for certain paintings, can motivate participants to systematically favor their "own" group at the expense of other groups – despite the trivial and random nature of these group distinctions (see Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament, 1971). This in-group favoritism is driven by the motivation to achieve a positive social identity in relation to other groups, even if the group was artificially created for the purpose of the experiment.

These predictions are even more applicable to real-world identities that have been practiced over time, such as partisan identities: Partisans are motivated to defend their party, precisely because the party's status is intertwined with their self-understanding. This helps explain not just partisans' motivation to discredit information that portrays their own party (i.e., in-party) negatively but also the hostility partisans show toward the opposing party (i.e., out-party) in zero-sum situations – the latter poses a threat to the positive image and status of the in-party. From this vantage point, Social Identity Theory can explain many of the partisan behaviors that are hard to reconcile with the expectations of rational decision-making, including biased and selective information processing (Bolsen et al. 2014; Druckman et al. 2013; Lebo and Cassino 2007) as well as disdain toward the opposing party – even when they endorse similar policies as the in-party (Mason 2015; Westwood et al. 2015). Indeed, as Mason (2015) shows, partisans who strongly identify with their party care about more than *just* policies; they want their party to win. Electoral victory is not just a means to an end (i.e., implementing desired policies), it is also an end to itself (i.e., positive status). The desire for victory also helps us understand why partisans are much less

[1] While the authors of *Partisan Hearts and Minds* refer to partisanship as a social identity, they explicitly distance themselves from Social Identity Theory (SIT). In fact, Green et al. (2002) state that their theoretical approach differs from SIT: "The [theory] emphasizes an individual's drive to achieve positive self-esteem. People attach themselves to socially valued groups, and those who are trapped in low-status groups either dissociate themselves or formulate a different way of looking at groups. This depiction is very different from ours . . . [we] remain agnostic about the underlying psychological motives that impel people to form social identities such as party attachments" (p. 11).

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likely – if at all – to punish their party for poor policies. While many political pundits might assume that these powerful partisan identities are an American phenomenon, recent scholarship has demonstrated the validity of expressive partisanship in European multi-party systems (Bankert et al. 2017), as well as in newly formed (Carlson 2015) and politically changing democracies (Baker et al. 2015), highlighting the universal applicability of Social Identity Theory and the expressive model of partisanship.

2.6 EXPRESSIVE VERSUS INSTRUMENTAL MODEL

Considering all the evidence, it is clear that the origins of expressive partisanship stand in sharp contrast to its instrumental counterpart. However, that contrast should not create the wrong impression that expressive and instrumental partisanship are two irreconcilable theories. For example, Green and colleagues do not categorically rule out the importance of issue positions in shaping partisanship: "To be sure, party issue positions have something to do with the attractiveness of partisan labels to young adults, much as religious doctrines have something to do with the attractiveness of religious denominations. But causality also flows in the other direction: When people feel a sense of belonging to a given social group, they absorb the doctrinal positions that the group advocates. However party and religious identification come about, once they take root in early adulthood, they often persist. Partisan identities are enduring features of citizens' self-conception" (2002, p. 4). Here the authors make the crucial point that the expressive and instrumental models are not mutually exclusive. Both models can shape the development of partisanship, a notion that is further supported by Huddy et al. (2015): "Distinct expressive and instrumental approaches to partisanship have coexisted in political science research since at least the early 1980s .... Both models can claim empirical support, and there is growing evidence that instrumental and expressive accounts of partisanship may explain vote choice and public opinion at different times, under differing conditions, and among distinct segments of the electorate" (pp. 1–2).

Indeed, the applicability of expressive and instrumental partisanship might depend significantly on characteristics of voters, including their age, education, political knowledge, but also personality traits (more on this in Chapter 7). Equally important might be the political culture and the institutional features of an electoral system. For example, partisanship in multi-party systems might be more influenced by instrumental considerations like ideology[2] since it is a more salient dimension that voters use to categorize political parties and coalition blocs (see, for example, Huddy, Davies, and

[2] Note though that even a seemingly instrumental factor like ideology can function as an identity (see Malka and Lelkes 2010; Mason 2018; and Oshri et al. 2021).

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Bankert 2018 for a review of partisan identity in Europe, as well as Bankert, Del Ponte, and Huddy 2017 for a case study of partisan identity in Italy). From this perspective, rather than asking which model is "correct," a theoretically more interesting question would be which model is more applicable *under what conditions*. An answer to that question requires studying partisan identity across different political systems. Such a comparative setup can detect the cultural and contextual factors that might accentuate expressive and instrumental facets of partisanship such as the number and ideology of political parties in the electoral space, the voting system, the campaign finance system, the regulation and distribution of public and private media ownership as well as the length and quality of the election campaign cycle. Chapters 8 and 9 aim to propel that kind of research by providing a comparative assessment of partisanship in the United States as well as four different multi-party systems in Europe – Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Italy. These countries differ vastly in their political culture as well as in the architecture of their political institutions, providing a comprehensive test of the validity of the expressive model.

2.7 SUMMARY

Partisanship originates in a mix of both expressive and instrumental factors. While the instrumental model considers partisanship the product of careful evaluation of a party's platform and their leadership's performance, the expressive model conceptualizes partisanship as a social identity that is part of partisans' self-image and thus motivates them to protect and defend the in-party – even in the face of changing policies and poor performance. From this perspective, partisan identities are self-reinforcing: Strong partisans aim to be good team players that support and align themselves with their party. Over time, this practiced loyalty becomes a habit that further strengthens their party attachments and creates a perceptual lens through which partisans assess their political environment This reciprocal relationship can be disrupted by major changes in the party's social composition or stances on highly salient policies such as the inclusion of southern Whites in the Republican Party's leadership or the Democratic Party's decision to promote civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

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