

STICKING WITH IT: HOW LOYALTY EXPLAINS POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION

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Introduction: Once a Democrat Always a Democrat

Political party identification is a remarkably stable characteristic of the electorate. Individuals do not change party identification often, those identifying as Republicans at age 18 still identify as Republicans at age 88. Not only is partisanship static, but it is an identification made by the time an individual reaches voting age (Campbell 1960; Key 1964). Campbell, et al. (1960) documented the phenomenon of partisan stability in the classic work The American Voter. Loosely defined, partisanship refers to identification with either of the two major parties- Democrats or Republicans in the American context. Political scientists rarely challenge the stability of political party identification; rather, the research struggle is explaining *what* influences partisanship and *why* partisanship does not change (Wray 1981; Issacharoff 2001; Ware 2001; Leyden & Borelli 1990; Beck 2002; Finkel & Opp 1991; Shachar 2003; Hudson 1995; Greene 1999; Hurwitz 1984; Aldrich 1995). The unanswered question about partisanship asks: Why are party attachments so enduring?

Albert O. Hirschman (1970) in his seminal work, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, developed a theory of loyalty to explain why individuals remain wedded to institutions, specifically when the institution is in a state of decline. Hirschman offers a simple, though not straightforward, definition of loyalty as a “special attachment” to an organization (1970, 77). Loyalty explains when individuals stick with a deteriorating institution. A loyal individual may use voice to

reverse the decline, but does not exit the firm (Hirschman & Nelson 1976). Applied to partisan identification, loyalty is when an individual maintains their partisan label even though the party does not provide them with benefits. Individuals may attempt voice to express dissatisfaction with their party through behaviors such as voting, but a two-party system limits the avenues for voice (Hirschman 1980). Loyalty's focus on identifying reasons for institutional loyalty in the face of decline may explain the partisanship's durability.

The guiding question of this literature review asks: In the context of party identification, what is loyalty? Is loyalty an independent variable that influences party identification? Or, is loyalty just one of the many factors people consider when making political choices? Exploring the nature of loyalty and its link to partisanship offers insight into the persistence of partisanship. What exactly are the ties that bind the individual and the political party?

Section one provides an overview of research on individual level party identification and its importance. Section two clarifies the definition of loyalty and attempts to explain this concept in a political context. The third section analyzes existing models of partisanship. This analysis examines how researchers define and utilize loyalty in the political context. The concluding portion identifies several research gaps in the partisan stability literature that a new model of partisan loyalty could fill.

Section One: Partisan Stability

That individual partisanship does not change is a virtually undisputed claim (Campbell et al. 1960; Key 1964; Aldrich 1995). Party identification is an attachment forged in an individual's pre-adult years and once formed it is permanent. Research on the nature of individual partisanship has a remarkable consensus around the stability of partisanship. This

section provides a brief outline of the current understanding of individual partisanship and its impact on individual political behavior.

A simple definition of partisanship is an individual's expressed party identification. Most individuals classify themselves as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. Parent party identification is an overwhelmingly significant predictor of individual party identification (Campbell, et al. 1960; Hudson 1995). This suggests that party identification is part of a child's socialization process; it is one of the ways people learn to orient themselves to the political world. By the time an individual reaches voting age, party allegiances are made. The literature provides ample evidence of individual partisan stability and how partisan ties form, but not why these ties are so resistant to change (Downs 1957; Campbell et al 1960; Key 1964; Fiorina 1981).

Party identification matters because it influences perceptions of and participation in the political world. For instance, partisan choice predicts individual voting decisions with remarkable accuracy. Party identification also predicts individual levels of political activism, issue preferences, and how individuals receive political information (Campbell 1960; Key 1964; Wray 1981; Finkel & Opp 1991; Bartels 2000; Bartels 2002). The American Voter most succinctly summarizes why partisanship matters:

Few factors are of greater importance for our national election than the lasting attachments of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place. And they are an important factor in assuring the stability of the party system itself (1960, 121).

Individuals use political parties as heuristic devices (Tversky & Kahneman 1982; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock 1993; Lupia & McCubbins 2000). Party labels contain most of the information necessary individuals need to make a reasonable voting decision. The heuristic nature of partisanship transforms this simple party label into the lens through which the public

sees the political world (Key 1964; Bartels 2002). Party identification matters, but why is it so resistant to change?

Section Two: Definitions of Loyalty

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty introduces the concept of loyalty as a model that explains individual behavior. Loyalty occurs when an institution is in decline and an individual chooses not to exit that institution. Individuals may use voice to try and reverse the decline, but they do not exit. Loyalists stand by the firm hoping that conditions improve in the future. Hirschman offers a nebulous definition of loyalty as a “special attachment to an organization” (Hirschman 1970, 77). The loyalty model addresses a discrepancy in the rational choice literature about the nature of individual behavior. A rational actor does not stick with a declining firm; the rational actor seeks out better alternatives. Rationality assumes utility maximizing behavior and loyalty explains why individuals sometimes fail to act as utility maximizers (Downs 1957; Tversky & Kahneman 1982). Central to Hirschman’s concept of loyalty is the necessity of an institutional decline. Individuals that stick with a successful firm are no more than utility maximizers, those that stick with a failing firm are loyalists. Loyalty is ill defined, vague, and difficult to measure. However, scholars have sought to bring clarity to the definition and measurement of Hirschman’s original model and labor-management research offers a fruitful discussion of loyalty. The labor-management literature contributes to understanding loyalty by making a distinction between loyalty and neglect. Additionally, this body of literature uncovers the two dimensional nature of loyalty as an individual *attitude* that influences *behavior*.

Withey & Cooper (1989), Boroff & Lewin (1997), and Rusbult, et al. (1988) use survey data about job satisfaction to test for loyalty in the workplace. The working definition of loyalty in this research is an organizational commitment to the firm on the part of the individual. A

loyal individual believes that a firm's decline will change if they just wait it out (Rusbult et al. 1988). Workplace loyalty is a type of passive optimism, this is the attitude dimension, and individual behavior characterized by failure to exit reflects this attitude. Labor relations research tests for a positive attitude toward the firm and then examines whether these positive attachments influence decisions to stay with the firm.

Withey & Cooper (1989) differentiate between loyalty and neglect. Individual behavior under both of these conditions is characterized by non-exit. They predicted that the difference between loyalty and neglect would be levels of organizational commitment, but there was no evidence of any special attachment to the firm among loyal and neglectful actors. Loyal employees had no prior job satisfaction, lacked organizational commitment, believed improvement unlikely, and had no exit options. The only difference between loyalty and neglect was that neglectors had exit options.

Boroff & Lewin test for the behavioral component of loyalty. Do loyal individuals use voice to improve a poor employment situation? Hirschman predicted that increased loyalty leads to increased voice (Hirschman 1970; Hirschman 1980). Voice that encourages firm improvement could provide evidence for an attachment to the firm. Individuals that care try to improve working conditions. Boroff & Lewin failed to find evidence of this hypothesized positive relationship. Increased loyalty actually led to a decrease in voice, leaving loyal individuals to "suffer in silence" (Boroff & Lewin 1997). Both Withey & Cooper and Boroff & Lewin fail to find evidence of a special attachment to employers. Must loyal individuals have a commitment toward the firm in order for loyalty to be present? Is loyalty more accurately described as apathy? Alternatively, is loyalty simply a state of having nowhere else to go?

Out of the previous research on loyalty emerges a model of loyalty that focuses less on the special attachment and more on external influences controlling decisions to stay. Loyal behavior occurred among individuals who lacked alternatives and a mechanism for voice (Withey & Cooper 1989; Boroff and Lewin 1997; Rusbult et al. 1988). With these findings in mind, is the "sticking with the firm" behavior in the labor literature an appropriate application of Hirschman's loyalty or is it uncovering an entirely different type of behavior? Unfortunately, finding definitions of loyalty outside of the labor literature is difficult.

Several points emerge from this research on loyalty. Given the influence of external factors on individual behavior, is an affective attachment necessary for loyalty? Is loyalty really a reaction to forces beyond an individual's control? In these models, loyalty reflects an absence of choice. Individuals are not making decisions to stay with the firm; they are stuck with the firm. Hirschman argued that part of the attitude-behavior link of loyalty was that optimism for improvement is what motivated people to stay. Individuals made a choice in the original model to stay with the firm. Can loyalty be present without choice? A more accurate description of loyalty in this literature describes a lack of better alternatives and a feeling of apathy, or at best a non-attitude, toward the organization. Put simply, loyalists are stuck.

Section Three: Explaining Partisan Stability

The nature of partisan stability, what it is, and what factors influence it, have no conclusive answer in the literature. Multiple models posit different influences upon partisan choice, but political science lacks an overarching model to explain party loyalty. This section looks at how existing models of partisanship incorporate the notion of loyalty. Loyalty's main characteristics, outlined in the previous section, include a lack of alternative options, a limited

ability to use voice, and an organizational decline. This analysis will also look for measures of a positive feeling toward the party as evidence for the attitude dimension.

A two-party political system inherently constrains choice (Hirschman 1970; Rappaport & Stone 2005; Gillespie 1993; Abramson et al. 1995; Beck 2002; Luks, Miller, & Jacobs 2003). Most Americans classify themselves as belonging to one of the two major parties, though the strength of the partisan identification varies across individuals. Even self-proclaimed independents demonstrate a low level of loyalty to a party through means such as regular voting patterns. Exit from a political party or the party system entirely is difficult and involves a much larger exit from political life. Exercising voice to halt a perceived party decline is not an action available to the mass public. The party in the electorate, consisting of anyone who adopts a party label, is simply too large and spread out for individuals, on their own, to influence overall party politics (Key 1964). Aggregated groups may be able to exercise voice, but at the individual level voice is largely absent. Voting is the only meaningful way individuals have to express party dissatisfaction and even this is not a very powerful tool for individual expression. Lack of exit and limited voice options, two of the conditions of loyalty, are certainly present in the two-party system.

Decline is the final condition for loyalty. There are several possible ways to look for partisan decline. One is at the party organization level. Organizational decline occurs when a party lacks firm support in the electorate and has little influence over policy process and outcomes (Wray 1981). A second, and more relevant option, for detecting decline is at the individual level. Party decline is determined on an individual-by-individual basis. One individual may sense the presence of a decline in the party while another may not. This depends on what individuals expect from their party and how they evaluate the success of the party. This

is a “what have you done for me lately” evaluation method (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Bartels 2002). Individuals make assessments about the party’s performance and a low performance evaluation equals a partisan decline.

Decline could also come from the limited choices offered by a two party system. Weak partisan identifiers may feel stuck with their party but stay because they do not want to identify as independent and the other party is a far worse option. Under these conditions, partisan decline relates to the lack of choices and the maintenance of the party label. This model suggests that external factors have a large influence on institutional loyalty, a finding first revealed in the labor research on loyalty. Is loyal behavior a choice individuals make or is it a choice made for them? The next step is to determine whether and how existing models of partisanship incorporate these conditions. Four main models for explaining partisanship are present in the literature: habit formation, psychological attachments, retrospective evaluations, and ideological polarization.

Model I: Habit formation

Habits describe repeated behaviors individuals engage in with little cognitive thought behind the action. The habit formation model of partisan loyalty posits that regular party voting equals party identification; a regular voting pattern is the party habit. Shachar (2003) argues that party loyalty comes from repeated behaviors. These behaviors, namely voting for the same party, are so ingrained in the individual that they are done on an automatic basis. Shachar’s starting observation is the fact that past party voting predicts future party voting. He uses panel data for U.S. elections from 1972-1976 to determine if party loyalty comes from habit formation.

The habit model posits three influences on vote decisions: party, candidate, and policy. Party identification is the most influential because it provides voters with the most information about candidates and policies (Sniderman 2000). The power of parties as heuristic devices is at

work in this model. First elections, according to this model, are the most important. They set the pattern of future voting. Regular party voting is easy to maintain because of the low information costs-an individual only needs to be able to recall which party they voted for in the previous election to decide how to vote in the current election.

Shachar's model focuses exclusively on the behavior dimension of loyalty. The lack of exit options and the potential for using voice are not addressed. As for decline, it is not clear if individuals are making cognitive assessments about the party and are capable of recognizing a decline. A habit, by its very nature, is an activity that has little thought or choice behind the action. Individuals brush their teeth before bed because they always do so, engaging in this action does not require any complex thought process. It is not clear if Shachar includes any measures of individual evaluations of the political party. If there is no thought behind voting and party loyalty, then regular party voters are not engaging in loyalty.

The habit formation model needs to determine whether and how individuals evaluate parties and candidates. Distinguishing between habit and commitment to the organization is not an easy determination to make (Hodgson 1998). If there is some thought that goes into political behavior then what role must parties play in providing information? Do parties need to provide accurate information to voters for this model to work? People often resort to stereotypes to assess parties (Hurwitz 1984; Bartels 2000). Can habitual party voters detect a partisan decline if they do not engage in a substantive evaluation of the party's performance? The habit model exclusively focuses on party identification as an automatic behavior devoid of an affective attachment. Furthermore, Shachar bases his model on partisan vote choices, he does not include any explanation for why partisanship is stable among the non-voting public.

Model 2: Psychological Attachments

The habit formation model focused on the behavior component of loyalty; the psychological attachment literature addresses the attitude dimension. The psychological attachment is the unseen tie that binds and individual to the party. It is the level of commitment felt toward the organization. Several models that explain the psychological attachment to the party include early childhood socialization, social group influence, and receiving intangible rewards.

Campbell et al. (1960) laid the foundation for party identification as a psychological attachment. Individuals orient themselves to a political party early in life; party attachments are made as part of a socialization process during childhood and adolescence. This socialization process makes party attachments psychological in nature. Campbell describes party identification as “affective orientation” (1960, 121). Striking about the endurance of party attachments is that they are relatively low-level commitments. People simply state their chosen party. There is no formal membership system and no barriers to individual entry. Given this low level of investment, it is particularly interesting that party attachments become ingrained in a person’s public identity. The psychological commitment arrived at through childhood socialization becomes the investment to the party.

Steven Greene (1999) explains that social groups reinforce the partisan labels people adopt early in life. People develop their concept of self through their membership in groups (Huckfeldt & Sprague 1993; Huckfeldt et al.1995; Beck 2002). Group memberships become party of individual identities. This makes political party identification party of an individual’s self-identity. Parties lack formal membership structures; however, party manifests in other group ties that people form. Individuals tend to build social groups around those with similar political

beliefs (Finkel & Opp 1991; Beck 2002). Peer networks are platforms for discussing politics and reinforcing partisan beliefs. The nature of decline in a social group context is vague. Social groups can either limit negative assessments or promote them depending on how the group evaluates the political party.

An exchange model of party loyalty expands on the social group model because it posits that individuals receive intangible rewards and benefits for their party loyalty. Alan Ware (1992) studies how political parties persuade volunteers to participate in get out the vote activities. He found that parties persuade through the promise of immaterial rewards such as social group solidarity, a feeling of civic duty, the satisfaction of learning about politics, etc. This is the “warm and fuzzy” feeling people receive from political engagement. This model links the attitude and behavior dimensions of loyalty. People volunteer out of duty and the promise of reward. Making an investment reinforces levels of organizational commitment and makes it less likely a person will exit should the party cease to meet their needs. If the rewards from participation are strong enough, party volunteers may be impervious to a decline. The exchange model hypothesizes a way that behaviors and rewards reinforce psychological attachments.

Finkel & Opp (1991) expand on the intangible exchange model by including public goods as incentives. For instance, people may volunteer on Election Day because the candidate promises a public good such as cleaning up public parks if elected. This argues that policy congruence occurs between people and parties and this congruence reinforces partisan attachments. Those that participate due to public goods incentives are not so attached to the party that they fail to recognize decline, but they may be more forgiving and patient. Investing in electoral outcomes through political participation strengthens loyalty, an individual feels that they are part of the political system and can impact that system.

Affective attachment literature deals with the notion of limited exit in a distinct manner. Exit is not just exit from the political party; it involves an exit from social groups. Individuals that shed their party labels must develop a new self-identity. These costs of exiting the party are too high. Additionally, social networks offer an avenue for voice among social peers. A person may be displeased with the party but they feel better about the party once they express that dissatisfaction to their peers. This voice does not result in any real influence on the party itself. The role of decline is not directly dealt with in the affective attachment model, but a reasonable assumption is that if a decline is perceived it will not influence the individual's partisanship. A higher psychological attachment makes it more likely that an individual will wait out a party decline.

Model Three: Retrospective Evaluations

The habit formation and psychological attachment models do not address how individuals evaluate parties. A retrospective evaluation model of partisanship fills in this gap and specifically examines how individuals make decisions to stay with or defect from a party. Retrospective voters assess the party's past performance. This model has its origins in the reward-punishment theory of party behavior. Reward-punishment argues that people reward political parties and incumbent candidates if they have done well with the party in power (Downs 1957). Fiorina expands on the reward-punishment model of voting by arguing that voters regularly assess a party's performance and they file these assessments in their memory. When called upon to vote, the running tally of prior experiences is recalled and its net sum determines vote choice.

Fiorina distinguishes between party identification and vote choice. A person's party identification need not always reflect vote choice. A negative running tally of a political party

may result in a temporary defection. Levels of party commitment depend on the result of the running tally. The considerations that go into the running tally vary across individuals and may include assessments of economic performance, religious influences, or social networks. The running tally is a plausible explanation for how individuals make vote choices, but it does not explain the stability of partisanship. Fiorina acknowledges that party identification is stable at the individual level. However, he argues that the strength of party identification varies with the result of the running tally.

The running tally offers insight into how individuals detect and cope with partisan decline. An individual temporarily defecting from the party due to a negative evaluation may be engaged in either exit or voice. An individual that has a negative perception of the party but votes for the party anyway is exercising loyalty. How individuals factor levels of partisan identification into the running tally is not clear. Is loyalty an independent term in the running tally equation? Is loyalty a term that varies based on evaluations of the party? For example, a Republican voter during a recession under Republican rule may weaken the loyalty variable in their running tally. The relationship between loyalty and other factors that influence partisanship is not entirely clear in this model. Fiorina does incorporate decline and lack of exit options into the model, but excludes the role of voice. Does the running tally include party efficacy as another factor in the running tally? Do perceptions of efficacy toward the party matter?

Model 4: Ideological Polarization

Ideological polarization is a phenomenon of the last thirty years. Growing ideological distance between Democrat and Republican elites influences how voters sort themselves into political parties. Levendusky (2009) describes the process of partisan sorting as the movement of liberals into the Democrat party and ideological conservatives into the Republican Party. He

uncovers evidence that people adjust their party identification to match their ideology as opposed to adjusting ideology to match party identification. With a close match between ideology and party, voters feel more positively about the party. Levendusky confirms the “affective polarization hypothesis” and finds that after sorting “affective evaluations of the parties are 19 points more polarized” (2009, 123). Sorted voters feel more strongly about their party and more negatively toward the other party.

A close alignment between party and ideology reduces the possibility of partisan decline. Voters become immune to negative evaluations. With decline less likely, is there an opportunity for an ideologically polarized electorate to demonstrate loyalty. At what point does partisan stability transform into blindly following the party? Loyalty without decline is just following without thinking. Another possibility is that partisans find strategies, other than exit, for coping with decline. More ideological distance between the parties does reduce the options for exit, but it is not clear what relationship polarization has on voice. Is voice less likely because individuals are blind to decline? Is loyalty really just a reflection of ideological polarization?

Section Four: Building a Model for Partisan Stability

The four models of partisan stability in the literature deal with the components of loyalty in different ways. However, there is no model that fully incorporates Hirschman’s loyalty. Identifying the ways that these models have addressed, or not addressed, loyalty identifies how a new model can better explain partisan stability. Loyalty is a state marked by no exit, limited voice, and an institutional decline. Loyal behavior is motivated by a special attachment to the party.

A two-party political system makes the options for exit limited. The limits of exit are further exasperated by the ideological polarization of the two major parties. A safe conclusion

regarding exit and party identification is that it is limited but not impossible. Understanding how individuals perceive exit options and why they choose to exit or not is a question that needs to be answered. Also, clarifying what constitutes an exit from the party as an institution needs to be determined. Is an exit voting for another party, ceasing to vote completely, or joining a third party movement? All of these actions indicate some level of defection from the party.

Research on third party movements can fill in the gaps regarding the options for exit and the role of voice. Third parties are not permanent parties, they merely introduces temporary shocks to the two party structure (Gillespie 1993; Beck 2002; Abramson, et al. 1995; Rappaport & Stone 2005; Luks 2003). What draws people toward third parties, if only just temporarily? Is third party support a disguised expression of voice? The nature of third parties as fleeting makes it more likely that individual members are motivated by voice to join the movement. Who supports third party movements can determine whether third party support is a case of loyalty and voice or exit? If a third party attracts support from ideological extremes and the third party adopts an ideological extreme position then the third party supporter would be better characterized as exercising voice more than exit. Understanding third party movements illustrates how individuals cope with decline.

Loyalty has its limits. It is not rational for an individual to unwaveringly support the party in the face of extreme decline. What constitutes extreme decline? How perceptive is the public to a decline? At what point are individuals better off by exiting the party? What is the threshold for loyalty? Understanding more fully how people evaluate party performance can illustrate the role of decline in partisan stability.

The persistence of partisanship is a puzzling phenomenon of the American electorate. There is a clear consensus on how partisan attachments form and that they are enduring. But

what influences this stability? Is partisan stability a reflection of loyalty? This literature review attempts to clarify how current research understands party identification and how a model of party loyalty could explain party stability. Why do people stick with their party so fervently? Does the public perceive partisan declines are how do they cope with these declines? These are just a few of the research questions that emerge from this analysis.

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