

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

ARGUABLY THE DEEPEST puzzle of democratic politics is how any substantial number of ordinary citizens can reason coherently about politics. Arguably, we say, because many, possibly even most, experts would deny that citizens can reason coherently about politics. They would parade you through a chamber of horrors. The first exhibit would feature surveys of political ignorance displaying classic findings of how little citizens know about political institutions and public affairs. Next would be a display of “non-attitudes,” illustrating how most citizens behave as if they are choosing sides on major issues by flipping a coin. This exhibit might be followed by charts documenting the flim-flam “structure” of citizens’ beliefs about politics. Having conducted this tour of research demonstrating the ignorance of citizens about politics and the inconsistencies in their political thinking, these experts would repeat that there is no puzzle about how citizens can reason coherently about politics. The fact of the matter, regrettable but undeniable, is that all too many of them have trouble tying their shoelaces, politically speaking.

Ironically, the deeper problem lies in just the opposite direction. It is the regularity in the most important judgment they make about public affairs—casting their votes—that is most troubling. Fifty years of research backs up three claims. The majority of voters see themselves as Democrats or Republicans. The majority of them gave their loyalty to one party when they were young, that is to say, before they could have developed a considered basis for their choice. And, perhaps most worrisome, the majority of them, instead of learning from the experiences of their lives, strengthen the bond of loyalty to their party. In short, the most important factor in the most important decision a citizen can make—for whom to vote—most often appears to be rooted in an unthinking loyalty to political parties.

It is the argument of this book that party loyalty is a—and perhaps *the*—basis for reasoning coherently about the realities of contemporary

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American politics. If this argument appears perverse or paradoxical, we apologize. In most studies, the influence of party identification on political judgments is the centerpiece evidence sustaining the claim that citizens' decisions derive from emotion and habit rather than considerations of policy. But the appearance of perversity or paradox is just that—appearance.

The reality of American politics is not the same as it was a half century ago. It only modestly distorts the facts to say that the official Republican Party is the spokesman for an unqualified brand of conservatism, and the Democratic Party plays the same role for liberalism. American politics at the elite level has, in a word, polarized. Republican means conservative; Democrat means liberal.

During the same period of time, voters' party identifications have become aligned with the ideological outlook of their parties. The largest number of Democrat supporters identify themselves as liberal; a still larger number of Republican supporters identify themselves as conservative. A result of this process, we shall show, is that the very same commitment that used to signal unthinking loyalty, party identification, has become the basis for coherently thinking about politics for a large number of voters. And when we say “coherently,” we do not have in mind a mealy-mouthed standard of coherence. On the contrary, the standard of coherence we will employ is choosing the best informed strategy to realize their policy preferences, taking account of institutional realities.

Our aim is to present a new theory of party identification. Party identification is, for the largest number of partisans, a conjunction of an ideological as well as an emotional attachment to party. Ideological reasoning, even in a rough-and-ready way, is the last thing that voters are supposed to be capable of.¹ And yet we show that, for many voters, party identification helps them accomplish just this.

Yet our story is not one of democratic triumphalism. On the contrary, we offer a cautionary lesson on the risks of citizen competence. The democratic dilemma that thoughtful researchers and public intellectuals have focused on is: how can voters identify which candidate will better

¹This was a major theme of Campbell, Converse, and Miller's classic, *The American Voter*. It continues to be a recurrent theme in public opinion research. In the formulation that Kinder has regularly repeated (1998, 2003), voters are “innocent of ideology.”

represent their views when they know so little about politics? This is a troubling dilemma, and it motivates, in part, our account. But this is not the most troubling aspect of democratic representation in contemporary American politics. As we show, the more profound problem confronting the American political reality is that, just because many voters follow the best strategy to realize their policy preferences all in all, public officials have great latitude in choosing the policy hand that they want to play.

OUR STORY

The specific purpose of this study is to propose a new theory of party identification—a reputational theory of party identification. We recognize that, if we were circulating an investment prospectus, we would face skeptical investors. The study of party identification has been the most exhaustively tilled row in the study of voting. What can be gained by plowing it yet one more time?

A healthy supply—or should one say, a surfeit—of theories of party identification is already on the shelf. There is the canonical theory of *The American Voter*.² There also is the retrospective theory of party identification,³ the reference group theory of party identification,⁴ the performance/valence theory of party identification,⁵ as well as the group identity theory of party identification,⁶ to cite the most familiar names on the roster. Are we then about to tell you that all of this “conventional wisdom” is wrong?

Not at all. On the contrary, we are going to present a good deal of evidence in favor of the longest-established theory of party identification.

²Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960). For contemporary analyses of American politics centered on the canonical interpretation of party identification, see Miller and Shanks (1996) and Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisburg (2008). For a deeply thought through review of fairly recent research on party identification, see Johnston (2006). For a focused review of theory and research on party identification conceptualized in terms of social identity, see Bartle and Belluci (2009).

³Fiorina (1981).

⁴Jacoby (1988).

⁵Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, and Whiteley (2005); also see Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, and Whiteley (2009).

⁶Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002).

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For that matter, we do not doubt that the standard measure of partisanship has a retrospective component.⁷ And there are important points of similarity between the theory that we are proposing and its conceptual next of kin, notably, reference group theory and social identity theories of party identification. Why, then, propose yet another theory of party identification?

Borrowing a familiar adage, we might answer that every generation gets the theory of party identification that it deserves. The ideological clash of the Republican and Democratic parties is the engine driving contemporary American politics, and a theory of party identification that encompasses ideas as well as feelings would seem suited to the time. That is one reason to present another theory. But there is another.

A theoretical stalemate has taken place in the analysis of voting. On the one side, there is Anthony Downs' classic narrative in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. In this story, competing candidates locate themselves on a policy dimension with an eye to winning voters' support—hence the characterization of this approach as spatial. Voters maximize their well-being by choosing the candidate whose policy views are closer to theirs—hence also the characterization of this approach as rational choice. On the other side, there is Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes' classic portrait of citizens in *The American Voter*. In this portrayal, voters are creatures of habit and emotion. Longstanding loyalties and beliefs—above all, their identification with a political party—are the principal determinants, of their electoral behavior—hence the characterization of this approach as behavioral.

The spatial and behavioral approaches seem opposed at every salient point. The first is economic in orientation; the second is social psychological. The first focuses on choices centered on the policy positions of competing candidates, abstracting from any sense of loyalty or personal history. The second centers on the motivations of voters, the most fundamental of which is loyalties to a party that they acquired early in life and have maintained throughout it. The first argues that citizens extract significant value from their limited political information. The second makes much of the meagerness of political knowledge that ordinary citizens possess, questioning people's suitability as competent agents in a de-

⁷Which is not the same thing as equating party identification with retrospective judgments.

mocracy. The first is a template of rational choice; the second is taken as shorthand for vote choices made out of emotion and habit, with minimal if any consideration of policy. In the language of the trade, the first approach is spatial, since its aim is to give an account of how voters should and/or do vote as a function of candidates' locations in a policy space—and of where candidates strategically locate themselves in this space as a function of voters' policy preferences. The second approach has been awarded the sobriquet of behavioral, as it centers on arguably irreducible attributes of human behavior, such as emotion, that cannot be readily captured in a rational choice theory.

Initially, the behavioral approach took the lead as studies of the beliefs and biases of ordinary citizens surged in popularity thanks to the introduction of public opinion surveys. Subsequently, the spatial approach overtook the behavioral one (in our judgment) because of its capacity to provide a simple, parsimonious theory of candidate positioning.

All the same, competition has remained intense, and for a generation, the behavioral and spatial approaches worked at cross-purposes. The clash of perspectives remains, but as time has passed, they have settled down into (mostly) peaceful co-existence. Indeed, some proponents of one approach break bread with proponents of the other.⁸ It is our aim to join them.

A Reputational Theory of Party Identification

In Downs' canonical formulation of spatial analysis, voters choose the party whose position is closer to theirs—however close or far that may be. In most subsequent variations of Downs' theory, however, the spatial analysis is candidate-centered—the voters ask: which *candidate* is closer to my preferred policy?⁹ Our approach similarly presumes that voters make policy-based choices. But its distinctive claim is that (many) voters

⁸Showcase examples are the pioneering studies of Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005) and of Tomz and Van Houweling (2008). For other noteworthy examples of inclusive perspectives, see Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, and Whiteley (2005, 2009).

⁹Note that Downs himself was concerned with the positioning of parties in a parliamentary-type system. Subsequent scholars, applying his theory to the U.S. system, have largely confined attention to competition between candidates. In any event, in either the original Downsian analysis or in subsequent neo-Downsian analyses, the focus is on either parties or candidates—but not both.

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take account of two, not one, sources of policy positions. One source is the policy positions of candidates, as in most spatial reasoning studies. The other is the policy reputations of the political parties under whose banner candidates run. Simply put, our account of spatial reasoning is party-centered as well as candidate-centered.

Our starting point, then, is a simple intuition: that political parties are a source of relevant policy information to ground choices between candidates. This intuition surely has sufficient plausibility to justify exploration. A generosity of spirit has been required to credit the ordinary citizen with the information and interest to make the endless list of comparisons of candidates' policy positions in a political system in which so many candidates compete for so many public offices. As compared to the galaxy of candidates and the positions they take, the policy reputations of the parties are easier to grasp; more stable over time; certainly more distinct at this moment in time; and, most importantly, able to integrate the free-ranging miscellany of policies salient at the moment into coherent political outlooks—and are accordingly effective predictors of policy outcomes all in all.

Our aim is to work out what this simple intuition that political parties are a source of policy information entails: Which voters make party-centered choices? How, exactly, do they combine candidate- and party-centered policy information? What electoral incentives do party-centered choices offer to candidates? And what are the implications of these incentives for the logic of electoral competition and a theory of democratic representation?

Answering these and other questions is the task of the chapters that follow. Here we want to call attention to two centerpiece concepts of our account. The first concept is a reputational premium.

It is accepted that the more strongly voters identify with a party, the more likely they are to support a candidate of their party independent of his policy positions. It is similarly accepted that they do so out of loyalty and habit, so much so that a vote based on party identification has become synonymous with a vote based on an emotional attachment to the party rather than a judgment about its policies. It is our claim that a large number of party identifiers now also support their parties' candidates because the candidates' policy positions reflect their party's policy positions. So far as this is so, it follows that the more strongly they identify

with their party, the more likely they are to support the candidate of their party.

This extra measure of support is in addition to the support that these partisans would give because of their emotional attachment to their party. This extra measure of support also is in addition to the support that they would give a candidate of their party because of the candidate's own policy positions. And which voters provide this extra support? Party identifiers who share the outlook of their party and understand the ideological logic of the party system. They need not have a philosophy of politics. Even well-informed voters are not all that well informed. But they have a good sense of their broad outlook on politics. And they have a good sense of their parties' outlooks, too. So we refer to them as *programmatic partisans*, supporting as they do the programs of their parties, and the extra measure of support that they provide as a reputational premium.

Candidates of a party earn a reputational premium, we contend, if they take a position consistent with the programmatic outlook of their party. The crux of the matter, obviously enough, is the precise meaning of the relationship, "consistent with." This phrase suggests a variety of possible meanings. Perhaps the most obvious is this: a Democratic candidate who takes a liberal position has taken a position consistent with the programmatic outlook of the Democratic Party, just as a Republican candidate who takes a conservative position has taken a position consistent with the programmatic outlook of the Republican Party. In contrast, we shall argue for a less obvious meaning of "consistent with," on the paradoxical ground that this other meaning is more obvious, in the sense of more readily and reliably noticeable, in the tumult of electoral competition. We shall state this other meaning now and make the case for it later.

In the American party system, the candidates have taken positions consistent with the policy outlook of their party if, but only if, they have lined up vis-à-vis one another on the fundamental left-right dimension in American politics in the same order that their respective parties line up vis-à-vis one another.

We call this rule of judgment the Order Rule. It is our claim that programmatic partisans treat the Order Rule as both a necessary and sufficient condition for awarding a reputational premium to candidates of

their party. Accordingly, it is a primary objective of our study to test the validity of the Order Rule, both in its own right and as compared to alternative rules that voters could quite plausibly employ.

The theory we are proposing has strict limits. It is limited, for example, in the voters it applies to—it has nothing to say about independents, most obviously. It is limited as well in the political eras to which it is most applicable, gaining traction the more polarized and cohesive the parties-in-government, losing it the more moderate and diverse they are. And it is limited as a theory of candidate positioning, specifying the range of positions that party candidates may take and collect a reputational premium, but not the reasons why they take the particular position that they do within this range.

We do not underline that our theory has limits out of modesty or defensiveness. To be blunt about it, a theory should get high grades just so far as it specifies under what conditions the variables it asserts are related are in fact related and under what conditions they are not related. The principal thrust of our reasoning and testing accordingly is to specify both the conditions that voters must meet to pay a reputational premium and the conditions that the candidates must satisfy in order to collect it.

Citizen Competence

Just so far as the theory and hypotheses that we will set out are valid, we will have identified conditions under which voters do what they have long been supposed to be incapable of doing—namely, making ideologically coherent choices over candidates and policies. To be sure, the rule that they follow to make ideologically coherent choices is not unconditionally optimal. On the contrary, we will explicitly identify a set of conditions under which citizens do best by disregarding the rule.¹⁰ But these conditions occur only rarely in the world as it is. So the bottom line of our story is that, in the world as it is, substantial numbers of voters meet the conditions to choose the alternative on offer most likely to produce their

¹⁰There are two. The first is a failure of a Democratic partisan who knows and shares the outlook of his party to pay a reputational premium when confronted with a choice between a liberal Democratic candidate and an even more liberal Republican candidate. The second is the mirror image choice for a Republican partisan who knows and shares the outlook of his party. In a political era in which party elites are ideologically polarized, these two choice situations approach the breathtakingly hypothetical.

policy preferences all in all. And not only are they capable of doing this. We shall show that they actually do it.

This is the core of the story that we shall tell. It is a “good news” story about citizen competence, one might suppose. But it is not, to say the least, an unqualified good news story. One reason is the inherent contestability of what counts as a well-cast vote. For many students of politics, the standard of a well-cast vote is the choice of the alternative that maximizes their economic self-interest. What can we say? In politics, examples come readily to mind of when voters would have been better off materially if they had chosen one alternative rather than another. Indeed, the standard method of showing how ill-advisedly citizens vote is to present examples of people favoring, say, a tax policy that goes against their interests or holding incumbents responsible for shark attacks that ruined the summer business season.¹¹

Of course, even if clear-cut choices are the rule rather than the exception, who sets the standard of what matters? Economic interest matters, to be sure. But many voters have other interests as well: ideals about how a democratic society should work, to name a prominent one. And, exceptional circumstances aside, who is entitled to pass judgment on what should matter to voters.¹²

It is their convictions, their deepest beliefs about what government should aim to achieve and how they should attempt to achieve it, that concern us. It has become a habit of thought among researchers of public opinion and voting that things go wrong at bottom because of voters’ ignorance about politics. Or, if not their ignorance, their gullibility, or, if not their gullibility and ignorance, their susceptibility to emotional appeals. It

¹¹We pause only to note that some of the literature examining the influence of random events on retrospective voting appears off to us. Contrary to the suggestion of some of these papers, it is quite sensible, indeed rational, for voters to hold politicians accountable for events not entirely in their control. At root, this intuition follows from the fact that voters often cannot readily determine what is a random event and what is within the control of the politician; in this information-poor environment, it is often in the voters’ best interest to punish politicians for any negative outcome in the world, whether or not the politician influenced the outcome. For an early and influential paper on this topic, see Ferejohn (1986). Empirically, the key is to identify events not only that the politician does not have influence over, but (a) that he could not possibly have influence over, and (b) that voters know he could not possibly have influence over. The examples often used in this strand of the literature, such as shark attacks, also raise questions of representativeness.

¹²We encourage readers to consult Parfit (2011a, 2011b) for an immersive experience not of the indeterminacy but of the difficulty in determining what matters.

is a mistake to underestimate the roles of stupidity and selective interpretation in human affairs, we agree. But to concentrate only on the limits of human reasoning is a mistake, too. It is the argument of this study that biases in the democratic representation follow not only because some voters are politically ignorant, but for just the opposite reason: because other voters do understand the politics of their time, above all the ideological logic of the party system. This, we readily admit, is a non-standard position, and our burden in the following chapters is to convince you of its merit.

Research Strategy

Our strategy is to rely on randomized experiments. Dean Lacy and Philip Paolino (2010) have done pioneering work introducing this strategy in the study of spatial reasoning.¹³ In a particularly noteworthy study, they placed their subjects in as realistic a setting as their imaginative minds could conceive to evaluate two competing conceptions of spatial reasoning. We are pleased to be following their intellectual lead, albeit by employing just the opposite strategy. We place subjects in a highly artificial situation, as you will see. The merit of their design strategy is obvious.¹⁴ They stake a strong claim to external validity. In contrast, it is not obvious that our design strategy has any claim to external validity. How then can

¹³It may sound odd to characterize so recently published an article as pioneering. It was in our hands—and our minds—years earlier, as a conference paper in circulation. We wish to give Lacy and Paolino the full measure of credit they deserve.

¹⁴Since we have not hesitated to praise Lacy and Paolino's design for its realism and to flay our design for its lack of it, perhaps we may be forgiven for remarking that the strength of a naturalistic design like Lacy and Paolino's does impose some inferential costs. Respondents must infer spatial positions of candidates from nonspatial materials. But test materials have not been, and possibly cannot be, standardized and validated. Each set of newspaper stories or interviews is custom-created, study-by-study, as circumstances and hypotheses change. The gain in external validity of a naturalistic approach is thus a threat to internal validity. For example, Lacy and Paolino note that the moderate Democrat typically was seen as more liberal than the liberal Democrat "on issues of the economy, the environment, and education" (p. 6). What is more, the moderate Republican was seen to be on the liberal side (slightly) on gun control, the economy, health care, and education (p. 7). Are these violations of transitivity and directionality features of spatial reasoning in realistic contexts? Or are they unintended by-products of the use of imperfect study-specific test materials? The latter, as it seems to us, is more likely than the former, but based on the evidence at hand, it is not possible to tell whether it is the one or the other.

we claim that the results of our experiments reveal the choices that voters make and the processes by which they make them in the real world?

Our answer is that our experiments measure what they are supposed to measure thanks to—not in spite of—their artificiality. Our centerpiece hypothesis is that substantial numbers of voters place a high reliance on the policy reputations of the parties when choosing between candidates. What is the strongest test possible of this hypothesis? To place respondents in an optimal situation to make candidate-centered choices, yet observe voters making party-centered spatial choices anyway.

Our baseline experiments accordingly are designed to present our respondents with all the information necessary to make a candidate-centered choice—and no more. Moreover, we have deliberately made the information about candidates' policy positions unambiguous, immediately intelligible, and highly salient. The design of our experiments also insures that they receive no information about personal characteristics of the candidates—their race, gender, previous experiences in politics—that might induce them to make a choice between the candidates on some basis other than their policy positions. And in one crucial test, respondents receive no information about the parties under whose banner the candidates are running. In short, we stack the deck in favor of a candidate-centered model of spatial reasoning. If our experiments show that they nonetheless strongly rely on the policy reputations of the parties in choosing between competing candidates even in this extreme situation, we have presented the strongest evidence possible that they do so in the real world—in a world, that is, where the party affiliation of the candidates often is the only information that they have to work with.

That, at any rate, is our argument.