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# THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

*Vincent L. Hutchings and Hakeem J. Jefferson*

### **Early proposed determinants of the vote choice**

Why do citizens vote for one candidate rather than another? Various explanations have been offered over the roughly 70-year history of voting behavior research, but two explanations in particular have garnered the most attention and generated the most debate in the literature on voting behavior. These explanations are known as the Columbia Model and the Michigan Model, and describing these two theories – including their respective strengths and weaknesses – is the subject of this chapter.

Before summarizing these two foundational theories, it is important to first understand the prevailing view about the origins of candidate preference prior to the scientific study of this issue. Before the advent of voting behavior research, many believed that ordinary citizens, much like elites, viewed the parties and candidates in ideological terms and made their political judgments largely on this basis. At the time that research on voting behavior was first developing, and indeed long before this time, this explanation held considerable weight. Even today, variants of this explanation remain in political science and such views are often implicit in standard political reporting, which reflects a powerful, though empirically unsupported, view of the ordinary citizen as ideologically committed and attentive to the particulars of the American political system (Achen and Bartels 2016). Thanks in part to the pioneering scholarship of the authors of the Columbia and Michigan Models and earlier work by journalist Walter Lippman, we now know that voters are not typically motivated by ideology and are often ignorant of the most basic facts of politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Lippmann 1922). Indeed, even those familiar with public policy debates are often unaware of the position of the candidates and the parties on the issues (Converse 1964).

The Columbia Model – described as such because of the contributions of Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and other scholars at Columbia University – helped to explain how voters make sense of the political world despite their general inattentiveness to politics. This groundbreaking theory was first articulated in *The People's Choice*, the first study to rely on representative sample surveys to explain what factors motivated individual voting decisions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). The Columbia scholars examined survey respondents in Ohio from May to November of the 1940 presidential election. They found that exposure to the election campaign essentially had two effects: it *reinforced* the choices made by early deciders and

it *motivated* the latent predispositions of uncommitted voters. These predispositions were associated with three types of social characteristics: (1) a citizen's class status; (2) a citizen's racial or religious identification; and (3) the region of the country a citizen lived in and whether they resided in an urban or rural setting. The social characteristics that were activated by the campaign were described as the *Index of Political Predispositions* (IPP) and this index predicted the 1940 vote quite accurately. For example, the IPP predicted that rural, middle class Protestants would vote for the Republican candidate and in fact this held true for about 74 percent of this group.

The Columbia scholars followed up on *The People's Choice* with the equally impressive book *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). As with *The People's Choice*, *Voting* argues that one's social identification, or political predispositions, largely accounts for how citizens think and act with regard to politics. In *Voting*, Berelson and his co-authors surveyed the citizens of a moderate-sized community, in Elmira, New York in 1948. In this study, Berelson and his colleagues provide much greater evidence, than in the previous study, of the importance of the social characteristics outlined above. Because their study focuses on only one community, however, they could not fully explore the role that place of residence plays in shaping political attitudes.

The Columbia Model was an important first step to answering the question posed at the beginning of this chapter and many of its insights regarding the political significance of social groups remains relevant today. Still, in spite of its strengths, the theory suffered from a very serious weakness. A model of vote choice based on social-demographic categories does not account very well for swings in election results over time. In other words, how could the Index of Political Predispositions explain the vote for Truman in 1948 (a very close Democrat victory) and the subsequent landslide victory of the Republican presidential nominee, Dwight Eisenhower, in 1952? The social characteristics of the voters could not account for these shifting preferences since the demographics changed little from 1948 to 1952. For this reason, an additional explanation was needed to account for over-time change in voting preferences.

Although the Columbia school's perspective on voting behavior proved influential, it was insufficiently dynamic, thus giving rise to an alternative model of voting. This newer model, proposed by scholars at the University of Michigan, offered a somewhat different explanation of voting behavior and it eventually became the dominant model of voting in the scholarly literature. Unlike the Columbia Model, which emphasized the social characteristics of voters, the Michigan Model – as this approach came to be known – focused on the individual attitudes of the voters as well as their identification with one of the major political parties. Briefly, the argument of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) can be summarized into three larger points. First, the Michigan scholars argued that people identify psychologically with political parties just as they do with religious, class, racial, and ethnic groups. Second, identification with a political party should be viewed as a long-term component of the political system and therefore this identification should persist even when people vote for a candidate representing the opposing party. Lastly, party identification is powerful not merely for its direct effects on vote choice, but also for its indirect influence on attitudes associated with the vote. These attitudes include evaluations of the major party candidates, the issues of the day, and the political parties.

The Michigan scholars offered a distinctive definition of party identification. They defined it as a sense of psychological attachment to one of the major parties. Importantly, this did not mean that one officially belonged to the party in the sense that one held formal membership in the party. By attachment they meant a sense of attraction (or repulsion) similar to the sense of attachment one feels to one's class, racial, or religious group. According to Campbell and his co-authors, party identification has two characteristics: direction and strength. By direction, they simply meant whether one is a Democrat, Independent, or Republican. By strength, they

meant the intensity of one's attachment to the parties. Thus, in this formulation, one's attachment to the party is either strong, not very strong, or one is an Independent who usually leans toward one of the two parties.

It is important to note that party identification could have been defined as one's prior voting record, and in fact other researchers had previously described it this way. The Michigan scholars rejected this definition because they did not want to confuse one's attachment to the party with how one votes at election time. They are not, strictly speaking, the same thing. Although not common, Republican identifiers can, under some circumstances, vote for a Democrat, and vice versa. If partisan attachment were not defined as something other than the vote this could not be recognized, let alone explained. In other words, the authors were interested in the extent to which the one (attachment) explains the other (voting behavior) and they could not explore this relationship unless the concepts were conceptually distinct.

As we have noted, the Michigan Model offered an explanation of vote choice based on a psychologically oriented perspective. This model was different from previous models because it did not locate explanations in the (relatively) immutable social characteristics of the voter, or in their presumed ideological sophistication, but in a broader set of individual attitudes. It is in this sense that *The American Voter* offers a "psychological" explanation of voting, although it does not strictly rely upon models developed in the field of psychology.

As indicated previously, the authors of *The American Voter* argued that attitudes about the candidates, issues, and parties predicted the subsequent vote choice. More importantly, however, levels of partisan identification predicted these attitudes. In other words, to a large extent, knowing which party a citizen identified with (and how strongly) determined how they would evaluate the candidates, and what position they would take on the issues. Thus, for example, citizens identifying with the Republican Party should also favorably evaluate Republican candidates and generally agree with Republican leaders on the major issues.

An obvious criticism of this formulation is that policy positions and candidate evaluations can also affect party identification, just as party identification can influence them. As plausible as this may sound, the Michigan scholars mostly reject the alternative proposition that issues affect partisanship. They adopt this view in part because of the relatively low levels of political knowledge in the electorate and the general lack of ideological sophistication. In making their argument, they also point out that party identification typically develops in adolescence and tends to be stable over time, while issue preferences and candidate evaluations usually arise much later and are more ephemeral (see Carsey and Layman 2006 for more recent evidence largely consistent with this view).

As evidence for the power of their theory, the authors of *The American Voter* examined nationally representative survey data from the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections. Their results are generally consistent with their expectations. They find that their measure of partisanship is strongly correlated with a variety of political attitudes about the candidates, parties, and current issues. Without exception, the stronger one's attachment to the parties is the more the respondent tends to view the political world in ways consistent with that attachment. For example, "strong Republicans" are much more likely to view Republican presidential nominee – and, later president – Dwight Eisenhower favorably, agree with the Republicans on domestic and foreign policy issues, and regard the Republican Party as a more effective manager of government than Republicans with moderate attachment to their party, Independents, moderately attached Democrats, and especially strong Democrats.

In their second test, Campbell and his co-authors argue that if party identification affects attitudes so deeply, the more partisan members of their sample should have more ideologically consistent issue positions than less partisan respondents. In other words, respondents' attitudes

about the candidates, issues, and parties should more consistently favor the Republican/Democratic Party as the strength of partisan attachment increases. They find that the evidence supports these hypotheses. Finally, they show that their measure of partisanship is strongly related to respondent vote choice in both 1952 and 1956.

According to the authors of *The American Voter*, issue preferences and ideological principles are not the source of party identification. Instead, partisanship is the result of pre-adult socialization. Attachments to political parties, they argue, typically form in mid-to-late childhood largely as a result of parental influence (similar to the acquisition of one's religious affiliation). As evidence for this claim, they use their survey data to show that respondents whose parents belong to the same party were overwhelmingly likely to also identify with that party. If parents disagreed with one another, the pattern was less consistent. An obvious problem with their evidence is that it is based on respondent recall. It is possible that strong partisans recall their parents having a similar party identification even though this is not the case. This is called "projection," and there is certainly evidence in the literature that citizens tend to erroneously assume that others (e.g., candidates, friends, relatives) have political views similar to their own. However, later work by Jennings and Niemi (1968) examined high-school students and their parents' partisanship and found that there was considerable agreement.

Although the authors of *The American Voter* argue that partisanship is mostly stable over time – at the individual level and in the aggregate – they do not argue that it never changes. Sometimes it does and they identify two causes of these changes. The first is what they call personal forces or changes in an individual's social environment. This was the least common explanation for the roughly 20 percent of the respondents in their sample who indicated that they had changed their party identification.

They refer to the more common explanation as emanating from social forces. Unlike personal forces that depend purely on personal circumstances, social forces involve experiences shared across a large number of citizens. There are essentially two ways that social forces can affect partisanship. The first is through life-cycle changes. For example, young people are more likely than older individuals to identify as Independents, whereas older people are more likely to identify as partisans. The second way that social forces can affect partisanship is through massive societal dislocations on the order of the Civil War or the Great Depression. From the vantage point of the Michigan Model, issues can influence partisanship only when they achieve this level of intensity.

In summary, the explanation for voting behavior offered by the Michigan Model can be summarized into three larger points: (1) people identify with political parties just as they do with their religious, class, racial, and ethnic group identity; (2) identification with political parties should be viewed as a long-term component of the political system that persists even when people vote contrary to their identification; and finally (3) partisanship is powerful not merely for its direct effect on vote choice, but also for its indirect influence on attitudes associated with the vote. The Michigan Model also holds that party identification is typically formed before citizens become adults (largely through parental influence) and that typically issues affect partisanship only when they reach catastrophic proportions (e.g., during the Great Depression).

### ***Partisanship and the normal vote***

The concept of partisanship was refined somewhat by Phil Converse, one of the co-authors of *The American Voter*, some six years after the publication of this landmark book. In an article entitled "The Concept of a Normal Vote," Converse (1966) pointed out that there were often large fluctuations in presidential election outcomes from one year to the next with no

corresponding change in the overall distribution of party identification. Converse interpreted this to mean that the election outcomes could be characterized as fitting into two categories: the normal vote and short-term deviations from the normal vote. By the term “normal vote,” Converse meant election results that simply reflected the voter’s stable commitment to either of the two parties. In other words, since the majority of voters identified with the Democrats one could expect the Democrats to win every presidential election if the electorate voted only on the basis of their party attachment.

By “short-term deviations” from the normal vote, Converse meant that election outcomes were sometimes influenced by fleeting circumstances, such as scandals or international crises, which did not substantially affect the overall balance of partisan support in the electorate. Sometimes short-term forces worked to the benefit of the Republicans (as in 1952 when General Dwight Eisenhower, a war hero, was the Republican presidential nominee) and sometimes to the benefit of the Democrats (as in 1964 when the Democratic presidential nominee was the former Vice-President of the recently assassinated President Kennedy). When these short-term forces cancel out, or when they are essentially equal for both parties, Democrats were estimated to receive 54 percent of the two-party vote.

### ***Contemporary socio-psychological perspectives on voting***

In the aftermath of its publication, *The American Voter* generated considerable controversy and disagreement. In time, however, researchers focused less attention on the dominant role of partisan identification and more attention on the psychological underpinnings of the theory. In particular, a number of scholars relied on social identity theory to help adjudicate long-standing questions about partisanship and to reorient how we think about the concept. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) were at the forefront of this effort, along with Greene (1999), and Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015).

In their 2002 book entitled *Partisan Hearts and Minds*, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler develop an argument they had originally introduced years earlier in several influential articles. In general, they argue that partisanship is a social identity and should be thought of in ways consistent with our understanding of other salient social identities. Building on the arguments put forth by the authors of *The American Voter*, Green and his co-authors also note that individuals consider salient social groups when they think of the political parties and subsequently determine their partisan loyalties by assessing which party most closely reflects their own unique set of identities. Beyond this grounding of party identification as a social identity, the authors present evidence suggesting that partisanship demonstrates levels of stability akin to other social identities. This stability is demonstrated at both the individual and the aggregate levels. On the occasions when we observe shifts in partisan identification, this is usually because individuals perceive changes in the identities of those who belong to the party. For example, we may expect shifts in partisan identification if one of the two major parties were to become newly associated with a different set of racial or ethnic groups. Interestingly, although their focus is clearly on America, the authors demonstrate that partisanship in places like Great Britain and Germany also operates similarly. The battles between Democrats and Republicans, or the more complicated multi-party competition in other democracies around the world, are not merely a fight over ideas; they are also fights between members of distinct social groups engaged in the same kind of conflict we observe between members of other social groups (for an opposing view, see Abramowitz and Saunders 2006).

In a similar vein, Greene (1999) posits that we should consider party identification through the lens of social identity theory. That is, individuals derive a sense of their own self-worth from

their self-perceived membership in partisan groups. Consistent with early work on social identity theory, Greene (1999: 394) suggests that partisan identifiers have an incentive to distinguish their in-group from partisan out-groups, and engage in a style of social comparison that “heighten[s] differences between the groups.” Using a psychological measure of group identification, Greene gauged the extent to which Democrats, Republicans, and partisan leaners expressed a partisan social identity. Unsurprisingly, Greene finds that partisan social identity is most pronounced for strong partisans relative to weak partisans and leaners. He also finds that higher degrees of social identification with a given party correspond with more negative perceptions of the out-party relative to the in-party. This measure of partisan social identity was also related to an engagement in partisan political behavior and an individual’s likelihood of turning out.

Huddy and her colleagues (2015) have also sought to apply social identity theory to the issue of partisan attachments. More specifically, they ask whether partisan identity is instrumental or expressive. An instrumental understanding of partisan identity would suggest that individuals collect some running tally of how well the parties have done and attend to questions of how closely aligned the party’s goals and preferences are with one’s own. Focusing on the expressive nature of partisan identity, however, builds on the idea that partisan identification, like other social identities, motivates individuals to behave in ways that protect the image of the group and maintains its high regard relative to the out-group. To explore the alternative explanations of partisan identity, the authors use campaign activity as their main outcome variable of interest. Across different studies, respondents noted whether they planned to contribute money to presidential/congressional candidates, and political organizations, and whether they planned to volunteer. Whereas a measure of expressive partisan identity is related to the participatory behaviors across the various studies, they find that an ideological intensity measure (the authors’ measure of instrumental partisanship) has a more limited influence.

In the past few years, scholars have reexamined the original perspectives outlined in the Columbia and Michigan Models. In 2008, a new group of scholars – Michael Lewis-Beck, William Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert Weisberg – sought to revisit the groundbreaking arguments of *The American Voter*. Specifically, they sought to subject the theories introduced in this volume to examination with more recent survey data (i.e., the 2000 and 2004 American National Election Studies). This replication was a bold effort. If the groundbreaking results of *The American Voter* are as enduring as the original authors believed, they should hold up even when examined with survey evidence collected almost 50 years after the data used in the original study. This updated test of the Michigan Model was explored in a book called *The American Voter Revisited*.

Lewis-Beck and his co-authors designed their book to mirror the same set-up as the original, with chapters mostly following the same pattern and addressing the same subject matter as the original book. One interesting point highlighted in the replication is that, although the authors of *The American Voter* emphasized individual attitudes, they did not neglect the role of social-demographic groups. Echoing results from *Voting*, as well as the original Michigan Model, the authors of *The American Voter Revisited* find that group members who identify strongly with the group are more likely to vote in accordance with the group. These effects are particularly strong for some voters (e.g., Jewish voters and, to a somewhat lesser extent, union members, Hispanics and women) but much weaker for others (e.g., blacks and Catholics).

Lewis-Beck and his colleagues, again building on the model developed by the Michigan scholars, argued that the influence that is exerted by social groups is done largely through their impact on party identification. In other words, just as the Columbia Model suggested, social group attachments inevitably lead to partisan group attachments. However, once these

socio-demographic affiliations lead to the “appropriate” partisan identification, it becomes exceedingly difficult to dislodge this attachment. And, typically partisan group attachments exert more influence on political judgments than the social group memberships that give rise to it. If interest group leaders try to change the party identification of their members, for whatever reasons, they are likely to have a difficult time doing so – especially for older group members.

In 2016, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels also addressed the fundamental question of what motivates voters. In their book, *Democracy for Realists*, they deconstruct what they refer to as the “folk theory of democracy” – the notion that citizens evaluate political leaders on the basis of ideology or issue preferences. The authors review a broad range of scholarship on this question, both within and outside of the US. Consistent with the early Columbia and Michigan Models, Achen and Bartels conclude that voters fail to meet even the more limited expectations of the retrospective model of voting (i.e., rewarding and/or punishing elected officials based on assessments of their performance in office rather than their adherence to abstract ideological principles). Given their condemnation of the “folk theory of democracy,” the authors turn to a more realistic basis for political judgment – salient social groups. Again echoing the pioneering work of Lazarsfeld, Campbell, and their respective colleagues, Achen and Bartels conclude that the vast majority of voters develop their attachment to the parties based on social group loyalties (and pre-adult socialization from their parents). Similarly, they argue that the actions of political figures are primarily interpreted through a partisan or social group lens.

Although there is considerable evidence in support of the foundational works in public opinion, most of this evidence is derived from the US (although see Achen and Bartels 2016). Research on both stable and emerging democracies suggest that the concept of partisanship does not always perform as anticipated in other parts of the world. Holmberg (2007) provides an excellent review of this literature. He notes, for example, that the concept of party identification translates better in some parts of Europe than others. More specifically, partisanship is more volatile in the Netherlands than in Britain or Sweden. Moreover, the number of strong partisan identifiers is mostly stable in the US, but has been declining in Sweden. In the case of emerging democracies in Eastern Europe, Holmberg reports that partisan identifiers are also rare and – more troubling for the standard Michigan Model – such attachments that are developing seem mostly based on cognitive rather than affective factors.

## **Conclusion**

Here, we have attempted to provide a broad overview of the early history of scholarship pertaining to candidate choice and some of the more recent examinations of these theories both domestically and internationally. In particular, we focused on two complementary, though distinct, schools of thought that laid the foundation for much of our contemporary understanding of how individuals come to make political decisions.

To recap, the Columbia Model, with its focus on the role of socio-demographic factors, including social class and membership within salient social groups, brings to the fore a consideration of how political decision-making is informed by one’s place in the social hierarchy and one’s connection to others who share in their social identity. Focusing more directly on the attitudes individuals hold toward political objects (e.g., candidates, parties, and issues), the Michigan Model adopted a more social-psychological understanding of individuals’ decision-making calculus. Describing partisan identification as a psychological attachment to one of the political parties, akin to the attachment one might have to one’s racial or religious group, the Michigan Model placed at the center of our theorizing a concern with party identification as a

key predictor of individual-level behavior. Remarking on its stability, the authors concede that partisan identification is not immune to change, but note that change requires either a shift in an individual's personal situation or the occurrence of a large-scale, salient social or political event. With few exceptions, the claims put forth by the Michigan Model are replicated and extended by the authors of *The American Voter Revisited*, published more than 50 years after the original text.

Finally, as the other chapters of this handbook demonstrate, there is a great deal of new and exciting work being done that both clarifies and complicates our understanding of the nature of individuals' political beliefs and behaviors. And while much of this work warrants careful consideration by readers, we are particularly excited by scholarship that bridges literature in political science and social psychology to interrogate partisan identification as a meaningful social identity that forms the foundation for citizens' interactions in the political world. The chief tenets of social identity theory, which center on the connection between one's sense of self and her membership in a salient social group, not only provide an interesting lens through which to consider this important feature of the American political system. These tenets also allow us to make sense of deep and persistent divides between individuals for whom a partisan identity is about more than electoral choice, but occupies a central role in a broader set of social identities that motivates behaviors across a range of domains. In fact, this way of thinking about partisan identity takes us full circle to the Michigan Model's early sense that there was an important psychological underpinning to this politically meaningful construct.

In focusing on these two schools of thought and some of the subsequent scholarship they have inspired, we hope we have provided the reader with a useful starting place for grappling with the ideas and debates highlighted in other chapters of this handbook. And though many scholars appreciate both the role of social groups and the centrality of partisanship in the American political system, debates will undoubtedly continue in the literature about the relative stability or dynamism of partisanship, the influence of context on political identity, the role of social identities on political choice, and, in the case of new immigrants and emerging democracies, the very roots of partisan attachment. Clearly, the work we have endeavored to describe in the preceding pages represents the very beginning of what continues to be an exciting and growing area of study in our discipline.

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