

Parties and Partisanship: A Brief Introduction

John G. Geer

The controversies surrounding the 2000 presidential election were driven by three forces—partisanship, partisanship, and partisanship (and in that order). People who felt that the recount should be stopped in Florida were almost always Republicans, while Democrats thought it was only “fair” that the recount proceed. The reactions and interpretations of the vote in Florida were molded and shaped by one’s partisanship. The influence of this force could be seen in all aspects of our political process, including the legal system. The Supreme Courts of Florida and the United States both showed their partisan stripes. The many battles that followed the closest election in modern times underscored the importance of partisanship and certainly provide the justification for closer inspection of this important political force.

Of course, the horrible events of 9-11 made the memories of the 2000 presidential election seemed part of the distant past. Following the events of that horrific day, there was, in effect, a suspension of partisan feelings.¹ Nearly every Republican rallied to the side of President Bush, as one might expect. But so did Democrats and in record numbers—over 80% of Democrats approved of Bush’s handling of U.S.’s response to the terrorist attacks.² Democrats in Congress also offered their strong support to the president, avoiding any hint of criticism. It appears that in the shadow of the wreckage from New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., people were less likely to think of themselves as Democrats or Republicans. Instead, we all were Americans. The upsurge in displays of the American flag on our cars and our homes underscored this shift. This wave of national unity helped President Bush chart a quick and powerful response to these terrorist attacks.

At first, some observers thought that the tragic events of that September

John G. Geer, CSDP, Princeton University, 313 Robertson Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544 (jgeer@princeton.edu).

day might forge an era of bi-partisanship. That politicians, activists, and the public would realize that working together is more productive than disagreeing and that we had entered a new political age.³ While there was an upsurge in patriotism and partisan battles did wane, those predictions have proven hasty. The differences between Democrats and Republicans reemerged and partisan struggles ensued. These disagreements played out in the halls of Congress and on the campaign trail. While terrorism (and the threat of it) continues to be a reality in this country, so is the effect of partisanship.

The bottom line is that partisanship matters and it in fact matters a great deal. As Morris Fiorina observes in our lead essay, the “study of parties and partisanship are enjoying a resurgence” in recent years. The purpose, therefore, of this special issue of *Political Behavior* is to show the various influences of partisanship on political life and to continue the resurgence of this subfield. These 10 essays, which comprise the next three issues of *Political Behavior*, paint an interesting portrait of partisanship—how to think about it, how to assess its impact, and how to appreciate its importance.

In our first set of essays, we have three articles that represent a wide array of thinking about parties and partisanship. Morris Fiorina provides a wonderful start to this special issue by raising a series of broad and important themes for the field. He begins by discussing what he terms the “ups and downs” of parties. There were the “down” years where parties seemed to be on a decline (e.g., Wattenberg, 1998). But of late, parties have staged a comeback and are enjoying “up” years (e.g., Bartels, 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Shickler, 2002). Fiorina offers, however, a critique of this comeback, raising a number of doubts about it. These counterarguments will surely become an important part of this unfolding debate over the strength of parties. It must also be noted that Fiorina views the parties and election field as having fallen behind the legislative research group. The latter is more scientifically advanced than the former, he claims, and that, as a result, we need to catch up. Some may want to dispute the accuracy of that claim, but regardless of one’s opinion, Fiorina’s observation justifies even further the value of having a special issue dedicated to advancing the scientific study of parties and partisanship.

The second essay, “Beyond the Running Tally,” is by Larry Bartels. This article provides a valuable contrast to Fiorina’s critique of party resurgence. Bartels calls into question the notion of partisanship as running tally of political assessments, arguing, instead, that partisanship is a “pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens’ perceptions of, and reactions to, the political world.” His evidence is impressive and provides us good reason to think not only that partisanship remains a central force in people’s political lives but that the insights and conclusions of *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960) remain as true today as they were in the 1950s.

Chris Achen takes us into new territory by offering a rational choice theory

of parental socialization of partisanship. In this clever and thoughtful essay, Achen offers an explanation for why children tend to adopt their parents' party identification. Rather than viewing children as blank slates that parents can easily shape and reshape, Achen reminds us that children (especially teenagers) rarely are passive recipients of parental preferences. They listen to different music, wear different clothes, and rebel whenever possible (or at least disagree vehemently). So why would children accept political messages so willingly while the other attempts to influence their tastes fail? Why does previous theorizing on socialization treat kids as passive recipients of their parents' partisan leanings? Achen's model offers some answers and in so doing teases out a number of hypotheses that fit what we know about political socialization. This model offers the kind of progress that Fiorina was calling for in the first essay. Now, the task for future researchers is to test and adjust this model and, thereby, advance our understanding of partisanship and its transmission across generations.

These essays provide an important start for this three-part special issue by providing an analytically charged overview of the field, a carefully argued and reasoned empirical piece, and a theory-driven essay. The essays in the second part of this special issue will build on these contributions by addressing the topic of "party change." The authors are Geoffrey Layman and Tom Carsey, Karen Kaufmann, Christina Wolbrecht, and Edwards Carmines and James Woods. Layman and Carsey offer a new way to think about partisan change, arguing that we need to think not just about "conflict replacement," but "conflict extension." Kaufmann charts the impact of cultural issues on partisan change, unpacking differences between men's and women's reactions to these concerns. In so doing, she offers a new and important explanation for the so-called gender gap. Wolbrecht explains the polarization of the parties on women's rights issues. Using the Convention Delegate Studies, she documents the changes in the parties' views on positions on these important issues. Carmines and Woods take a close look at the abortion debate and how that issue has forged partisan change at the mass level. They use the "issue evolution" approach by mapping shifts in party activists that helped to pave the way for this mass level change.

Our third and final installment pushes the study of partisanship further. In the lead essay, Steve Greene offers new ways to measure partisanship. One of the best known and most famous questions in survey research involves the question "generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent, or what?" This question has been at the center of the studies of partisanship and parties over the last 5 decades. But as Greene points out, there have been numerous advances in the field of social psychology that give us to reason to re-think how best to measure partisanship. Greene does not call for an abandonment of this longstanding measure, but

he does argue persuasively that we need to consider supplemental ways to operationalize this important concept. As social scientists, we need to evaluate, at least periodically, our measurement of key concepts. Greene's article provides of powerful reminder of this social science norm.

Paul Beck and Herbert Weisberg, in turn, tackle important empirical puzzles surrounding the study of partisanship. Beck examines partisan defection. Partisanship is not an absolute predictor of behavior, as we all know. Yet it is surprising that we have had few efforts to study defection explicitly. Beck's essay fills this important gap and by so doing sheds additional light on the workings of partisanship. Weisberg addresses another neglected topic—the impact of incumbency in presidential elections. In congressional battles, incumbency is a mainstay. Weisberg shows why it is important at the presidential level as well. These findings suggest that we need to push further in our thinking and study of incumbency, because no longer can the presidential case be treated as the exception. Instead, we need to start thinking about incumbency as a universal force in American elections.

A PARTISAN LOYALTY OF A DIFFERENT TYPE

I end this brief introduction by talking about a different kind of partisan loyalty. Any time partisanship is mentioned by social scientists, we inevitably think about *The American Voter* and its four authors—Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. Much has been written about that book and these pioneers. The ideas of these four scholars have clearly withstood the test of time. The insights of that book and the care with which the arguments and evidence were presented still shine some 40 years later. We all owe them a debt of gratitude for their contributions and their leadership.

While all four deserve special mention, I want to single out Warren Miller by dedicating this special issue to his memory. The reasons are threefold. First, Miller was probably the strongest advocate of party identification as a central force in the political process over the last half century. Even when there were indications that parties were on the decline (i.e., the “down decades” Fiorina talks about), Miller did not wane in his commitment to the importance of this “pervasive dynamic force” (to use Bartels' terms). Miller's article in the June 1991 issue of the *American Political Science Review* was an effort on his part to remind the discipline about the original conceptual foundations of the party identification,⁴ while providing evidence of its enduring impact.⁵ That reminder helped to spark the resurgence Fiorina mentions in our lead essay. But Miller was not done. He then followed with the publication of *The New American Voter* (1996) with Merrill Shanks. The bottom line is that Miller had an understanding of the importance of parties and partisan-

ship that was shared by very few. The ideas and findings offered in these 10 essays only further underscore the importance of this intellectual tradition that he helped to forge.

The second reason to pay special tribute to Warren Miller is that all of us who are tied to this special issue owe him a debt of gratitude that goes beyond his written work. Not everyone involved with this project had the good fortune to know Warren Miller personally, but everyone has been influenced by him, whether having the opportunity to learn methods at the ICPSR, making use of data from the National Election Studies (and the many other data sets at the ICPSR), or profiting from numerous other institutions here and abroad that he helped to build which support social science research. We all live in some sense in the house that Miller built.

The third reason, I must confess, is personal. Simply put: I owe Warren far more than can be conveyed in these few pages and I just want to acknowledge it. When I look back on what he did for me (and others at Arizona State University, including Pat Kenney, Kim Kahn, and Rick Herrera), I marvel at his kindness, generosity, and leadership. He cared deeply about social science and about advancing the discipline, which included helping junior faculty make their way in the field. At the time, I did not (and really could not) fully appreciate what he did for the four of us. But looking back on those years, I now better understand the extent of his help and guidance. And I know full well that many others who have contributed to this project too have benefited from the same kind of help Warren provided me and my, then, junior colleagues. So while this third reason is personal, it is widely shared by others who are part of the special issue.

It does not seem possible that Warren has been gone since January 1999. Of course, his influence continues and that is perhaps why it is inconceivable that he is no longer with us. I just hope dedicating this special issue to him and his memory reminds us once again about his central role in our intellectual and personal lives. I am quite confident that he would have enjoyed reading and reacting to the essays that follow. I am also quite sure he would not have agreed with every word written, but he would have been very pleased by the quality of the ideas, arguments, and evidence presented by this outstanding group of scholars. And like a true partisan (of the best kind), Warren would have reminded us of the central role of party identification in the study of the American political process. We would have expected nothing less.

Acknowledgments. The essays that appear in this volume and in the next two issues were part of a conference held at Vanderbilt University in October 2001. The financial support for this conference came from the Norman Thomas Lectures, with support from the Mary L. Armistead Fund. I want to thank Chancellor E. Gordon Gee for his support and his willingness to open the proceedings with a gracious welcome to the

attendees (and about 300 Vanderbilt students). I must also extend my appreciation to all the participants in the conference, which included not only the authors of this special issue but Herb Asher, James DeNardo, Don Green, Stan Kelley, Bruce Oppenheimer, Benjamin Radcliff, Ron Rappaport, Jim Stimson, Walt Stone, Lynn Vavreck, Ken Wong, and John Zaller. A number of graduate students were especially helpful in making this conference a success. In particular, Amy Carter, Ryan Teten, Rosalyn Cooperman, Prateek Goorha, and Sam Whitt deserve a note of thanks. In addition, Michele Austin and Susan Moody provided valuable support in handling various bureaucratic details associated with the conference.

I want, finally, to acknowledge the important and essential contributions of Brad Palmquist. Brad was the co-organizer of this conference and was instrumental in making it a success. Brad's impact extends beyond these efforts, since his new book, *Partisan Hearts and Minds*, with Eric Shickler and Don Green promises to push the field in new and important directions.

The transition of conference papers to published articles was made smooth by the many efforts of Diana Mutz and Brandon Bartels. Diana and I owe an additional debt of gratitude to the reviewers of these essays who offered thoughtful critiques in a timely fashion. By submitting each of these essays to the rigors of the peer review process, we were able to not only ensure that each essay was of exceptional quality, but we also improved each article. The end result is a series of essays that will advance the study of parties and partisanship.

NOTES

1. Shanto Iyengar ran some interesting experiments where he was able to test for strength of partisanship (see <http://pcl.stanford.edu/>). He has participants play a game called "whack a pol" where you tried to hit with your mouse various political figures. The idea was that Democrats would try to hit folks like President Bush and Senator Helms, while Republicans took aim at Senator Clinton and Senator Kennedy. Partisanship worked as one might expect. But after 9-11, this tendency waned—a finding consistent with my claim that there was a suspension of partisanship.
2. See Gallup Poll, 10/19–21.
3. As the *Economist* reported on October 6, 2001: "Since September 11th, politics in Congress has been transformed. Gone is the party bickering and endless inaction. America's lawmakers claim a new urgency and a new bipartisanship." This kind of statement is typical of the kind of rhetoric that followed on the heels of September 11th.
4. In that essay, it is important to note that Miller drew a conceptual distinction between "partisanship" and "party identification." All too often the terms are treated interchangeably. Miller clarified these differences.
5. Of course, I would be remiss not to mention the essays in the *British Journal of Political Science* that Warren wrote with Merrill Shanks. Those articles also made a strong case for the continuing role of partisanship in American elections.

REFERENCES

- Bartels, Larry (2000). Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996. *American Journal of Political Science* 44: 35–50.

- Campbell, Angus, Converse, Philip E., Miller, Warren E., and Stokes, Donald E. (1960). *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Green, Donald, Palmquist, Bradley, and Shickler, Eric (2002). *Partisan Hearts and Minds*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Miller, Warren E. (1991). Party identification, realignment, and party voting: back to the basics. *American Political Science Review* 85: 557–568.
- Miller, Warren E., and Shanks, Merrill (1996). *The New American Voter*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wattenberg, Martin (1998). *Decline of American Political Parties, 1952–1996*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.