



An analysis of the changing social bases of America's political parties: 1952–2008



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ABSTRACT

In this article I address two interrelated questions: have the group bases of the American political parties changed over time and what factors have led to the observed changes? I determine social group memberships significantly influence individual partisanship with a multivariate analysis using 56 years of ANES data. I then measure how many votes each politically relevant social group contributed to the party coalitions in each presidential election from 1952 to 2008. I discuss how group contributions have changed over time and establish the demographic and behavioral causes of group contribution change. I find that the party coalitions have been restructured as a result of groups' changing voting behavior and the changing ratio of groups in the electorate.

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It is difficult to discuss electoral politics in the United States without talking in terms of social groups. Journalistic accounts of party competition often stress the important role that specific constituencies play (such as the “evangelical” or “Latino” vote) in determining the outcome of presidential elections. A society's socio-demographic cleavages are typically the same divisions that give structure to political competition—one party derives the majority of its support from voters on one side of the cleavage while the opposing party obtains its support from voters on the other side (Key, 1949; Schattschneider, 1960; Lipset and Rokkan, 1964). Yet, the party system is dynamic in spite of enduring social cleavages; the group bases of party support have dramatically changed. How have the parties' social bases changed over time? In this article I investigate and identify the demographic and behavioral forces that drive changes in the party coalitions.

I must ask and answer two related questions in order to understand how the party coalitions have changed. First, I must determine what the parties' social bases actually are—what social group memberships actually structure individual level voting behavior? Second, once I have established the set of politically relevant groups, the task becomes measuring the number of votes each group contributes to the party coalitions and then assessing how demographic and behavioral changes have affected the size of each group's contribution. Electoral behavior is most often thought of in terms of partisan vote choice and there is a considerable amount of research devoted to understanding how and why patterns of vote choice change over time. My approach goes beyond looking at one aspect of voting behavior and assesses the combined effect of both behavioral and demographic factors. Political parties must capture more votes than the opposition in order to win—thus, any process that leads to a party obtaining more or less votes is politically consequential. Any change of a group's voting behavior (vote choice or turnout) or size affects how many votes the group contributes to a party's coalition. Analyzing these components in conjunction with one another allows for a more holistic understanding of

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party coalitions than can be gained from examining any of one of these behavioral or demographic components individually.

This paper is organized in the following format. In the first section I use a multivariate analysis of ANES data to uncover the group determinants of individual vote choice in each presidential election spanning 1952 through 2008. This analysis establishes which group memberships serve as political reference points and which group memberships do not.² Individuals are members of numerous overlapping groups, but only some of these group memberships actually affect political behavior. Establishing what groups shape individual vote choice will allow me to limit the proceeding analyses of the group bases of the electoral coalitions to only “politically relevant” groups—defined as group memberships that have a significant effect on individual voting behavior. In the second section I assess how many votes each politically relevant group contributes to each party’s coalition. In addition, I analyze how the sizes of groups’ contributions have changed and I assess the behavioral and demographic sources of these changes. I discuss the implications of the parties’ changing sources of electoral support in the third section and make several brief concluding remarks in the fourth section.

1. Identifying the group bases of political competition

The link between group identification and political behavior is well established—group memberships form the mouth of the American Voter’s “funnel of causation” that ultimately explains vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960, 292; also see Miller and Shanks, 1996; Lewis-Beck et al. 2006). Social groups are an important part of politics—group memberships influence an individual’s political attitudes and behaviors (Campbell et al. 1960; Dawson, 1994; Green et al. 2002) and party appeals are often targeted towards members of specific social groups (Huckfeldt et al. 1995). Thus, party coalitions are often thought of in terms of an aggregation of groups (Axelrod, 1972; Manza and Brooks, 1999) and the most dramatic reshuffling of the party coalitions occur when a group that was once loyal to one party begins to support the opposition.

However, any analysis of the group bases of politics must address several practical and theoretical issues before moving forward. Firstly, there is the question of what group memberships actually serve as the basis for political organization? Individuals are simultaneously members of a number of overlapping groups (e.g. African American, female, heterosexual, left handed, baseball fan) and not all group memberships serve as “political reference points” for the formation of attitudes—some group memberships are politicized while others are not (Campbell et al. 1960; Stanley et al., 1986). Thus, I need to establish what group memberships significantly influence vote choice before assessing how the group bases of the political parties have changed.

I adopt a similar empirical approach to that of Stanley, Bianco and Niemi in an effort to accomplish this task (1986; and updated in 1991, 1995, 2006 and 2010 by Stanley and Niemi; also see Manza and Brooks, 1999; Raymond, 2011). Stanley et al. utilized a multivariate logit model with partisanship as the dependent variable and a battery of group memberships as independent variables to determine what group identities influence an individual’s partisan attachments. They defined politically relevant groups as those group memberships that are statistically significant predictors of partisan identification, while groups that are not reference points have an effect that is statistically indistinguishable from zero. I am employing this same analytical approach as Stanley et al.; only I am utilizing vote choice in presidential elections, as opposed to partisanship, as the dependent variable.³ The strength of this approach is that I am not determining what groups are politically relevant *a priori*—my analytical choice of what groups to include in further analyses is determined by an objective empirical measure. Excluding groups that do not affect vote choice from the analysis allows me to narrow down the subsequent analysis and examine only the groups that significantly affect individual level political behavior.

I incorporate a similar set of demographic independent variables as Stanley, Bianco and Niemi.⁴ All of the variables included in this analysis come from the ANES cumulative file. The independent variables are a battery of group membership variables, including race and ethnicity, income group, religious group, church attendance, gender, age, birth cohort, union membership, and level of urbanism. All of the independent variables included in the model are binary. Many of these group memberships are binary by nature (race, ethnicity, union membership and age cohort), but some variables such as church attendance, age and income have been dichotomized from variables with more than two categories. There are several reasons for operationalizing the independent variables in this way. The first reason is analytical. The variables for all of these group memberships are set up as comparisons against a base category (e.g. the comparison between being African American versus white, which is the base category). The question here is, “does belonging to a group make an individual more or less likely to vote for a Democratic presidential candidate compared to the reference category?” Collapsing these categorical variables into binary dummy variables facilitates a straightforward comparison. The second reason is practical. The data in the ANES cumulative file spans 56 years. The mean value of many variables, such as income, has changed drastically

³ While the battery of independent variables that I am employing is largely the same as those used by Stanley and Niemi in their series of analyses, there are several important differences. Stanley and Niemi include white Protestant fundamentalist in their analyses (from 1991 onward) opposed to weekly church attendee (my measure). I include weekly church attendee opposed to fundamentalist white Protestant because it is available for more survey years. Secondly, I do not include self-reported social-class in my analysis—a variable that Stanley and Niemi included in some of their earlier analyses. The set of independent variables are broadly similar with the exception of these few differences.

⁴ The list of demographic independent variables included in the analysis is essentially all of the demographic variables available in the entirety of years included in the ANES cumulative file.

² 1952–2008 is the span of available ANES data necessary to conduct the analysis.

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