The dynamic properties of individual-level party identification in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Central to traditionalist and revisionist perspectives of individual-level party identification is a debate about the stability of party identification. We revisit the debate about the dynamic properties and processes underlying party identification. We present a conceptual framework that defines heterogeneity and state dependence as endpoints of a continuum underlying partisan stability, which is important in understanding an individual's capacity for updating partisanship. Using panel data from the 1992–1996 National Election Study, we estimate dynamic, random effects multinomial logit models of party identification that distinguish between heterogeneity and "true state dependence." In accord with traditionalist perspectives, our evidence suggests that in general, minimal state dependence underlies party identification; party identification is strongly stationary. However, we find that age enhances the magnitude of state dependence, which provides some support for revisionist theories. Overall, our work showcases how explaining individual-level dynamics expands our knowledge of partisan stability.

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Party identification is a fundamentally important concept for understanding mass political behavior, in both the U.S. and beyond. Analysis of this concept has produced one of the most enduring and significant literatures in American politics. Furthermore, the long-term stability of party identification at both the individual and aggregate levels has important implications for our understanding of voting, political participation, and election outcomes.

Over the years, scholars have estimated levels of partisan stability, and we know that party identification is perhaps the most stable of the many political attitudes (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Converse and Markus, 1979). Perspectives of partisan stability are commonly placed within traditionalist versus revisionist debates, with the former school contending that party identification is a stable "unmoved mover" and the latter school arguing that party identification is a malleable attitude that is endogenous to retrospective evaluations. However, we contend that even decades after Dreyer (1973) published on the topic of change and stability in partisanship, questions about the underlying dynamic properties of individual-level party identification remain unsettled. Specifically, what potential behavioral processes underlie partisan stability? What are the implications of these dynamic processes for our understanding of party identification? From the studies that have broached this topic (Green and Yoon, 2002; Wawro, 2002; Clarke and McCutcheon, 2009), differing methodological techniques have produced conflicting substantive results, which we discuss in more detail below.

Given the central role of partisanship in U.S. elections, understanding its dynamic properties is fundamental to

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our understanding of the formation of party coalitions and the role of party elites. If party identification is dynamic and malleable, then partisan coalitions and polarization are a continuous product of candidate positioning, retrospective considerations, and ideological sorting. For instance, a prominent explanation for partisanship's stronger role within American voting behavior is that it is a product of increased ideological sorting, where issue opinions are more closely aligned with party identifications (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009; Fiorina, 2002; Levendusky, 2009). We can determine how endogenous the process is if we know the dynamic properties of partisan identification, thereby clarifying whether the current resurgence is a product of partisanship alone or the melding of partisanship with other forces. The implications of a more dynamic individual-level party identification would also indicate a larger role for elites to mold partisan coalitions. Finally, the stability of individual-level partisanship has macro-level implications (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith, 1996; Clarke and McCutcheon, 2009).

In this article, we place individual-level party identification within a dynamic context and offer a perspective of what underlies partisan stability. We seek to highlight and apply an important conceptual and methodological distinction between *heterogeneity* and *true state dependence* in individual dynamic processes to the concept of party identification. This distinction has been deemed substantively and methodologically important in economic studies of wages and unemployment (e.g., Arulampalam et al., 2000; Gong et al., 2004; Heckman, 1981a; Vella and Verbeek, 1998), though it has not been emphasized in political science.[3] True state dependence implies that one's individual propensity for being in a partisan state changes as a result of past experience in a partisan state. According to this view, party identification possesses memory, and changes persist into the future. On the other hand, heterogeneity suggests that individuals' characteristics are strongly determinative of their party identifications; past experiences fail to exhibit a genuine impact on current identification. According to this view, party identification is stationary, such that an individual who deviates from an identification returns to his or her original identification very quickly. Individuals may change, but such changes do not persist in the long term.

While distinguishing between these processes poses obstacles, the processes have substantively important implications for understanding the essence of party identification. Does individual-level party identification possess memory such that changes in one's partisanship persist and reversion to a long-term partisan equilibrium takes years? Or does party identification evince a strong stationary quality such that shifts in one's partisanship are followed by a quick reversion to his or her original state or

equilibrium level? As we explain, the distinction contributes to traditionalist versus revisionist debates of stability by focusing on people's *capacity* for updating their partisanship. The framework also addresses conflicting accounts between Green and Yoon (2002), Wawro (2002), and Clarke and McCutcheon (2009), among others, concerning individual-level dynamics in party identification.

We employ an innovative statistical methodology capable of empirically distinguishing between heterogeneity and state dependence. Using panel data from 1992–1996, we estimate a random effects multinomial logit model. Results reveal that minimal state dependence underlies partisan stability, and instead, individual-level party identification evinces a strong stationary quality. However, we do find that age enhances the magnitude of true state dependence. On the whole, our conceptual and statistical framework showcases how explaining individual-level dynamics can expand our knowledge of not only party identification but other attitudes as well.

1. Stability and party identification

It has become commonplace to divide research on party identification into "traditionalist" and "revisionist" categories. Traditionalists support *The American Voter* conception of party identification as a psychological attachment that serves as an "unmoved mover" within a field of causal forces that culminates in the vote choice (Campbell et al., 1960). Revisionists argue that party identification is malleable, and that it should be viewed as a running tally of retrospective evaluations (Fiorina, 1981). In this conception, party identification is responsive to short-term forces such as evaluations of presidential candidates (Markus and Converse, 1979), retrospective evaluations of the economy and government officials (Fiorina, 1981; Brody and Rothenberg, 1988), and issue proximity (Franklin and Jackson, 1983; Franklin, 1984, 1992).

At the heart of both traditionalist and revisionist perspectives is a concern about the extent to which individuals maintain stable party identification levels over time. Because party loyalties are a type of group identification, Campbell et al. (1960) expect party identification to be as enduring as religious or ethnic loyalties, a contention reiterated more recently by Green et al. (2002). If citizens learn their party identifications as children and maintain them thereafter, then these attitudes are logically antecedent, and therefore exogenous, to election-specific issues and candidate evaluations. In short, party identification is highly stable, according to traditionalists.

Many traditionalists and revisionists agree that childhood socialization, especially transmission of partisan information by parents, influences the party identification of adults (e.g., Achen, 1992; Beck and Jennings, 1975; Franklin, 1984; Jennings and Niemi, 1968). But revisionists also claim that party identification is updated throughout a person's lifetime on the basis of retrospective evaluations (Fiorina, 1981) and prospective gains (Achen, 1992). If party identification is endogenous to short-term influences, such as presidential approval or candidate issue positions, then stability in party identification is dependent on the extent to which short-term forces influence current party

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[3] However, work in political science has emphasized the related concept of *path dependence* underlying political processes (Jackson and Kollman, 2007; Page, 2006; Pierson, 2000), and important work by Clarke and McCutcheon (2009) uses mixed Markov latent class models to show that partisan attachments exhibit substantial dynamism at the latent variable level in the American, British, and Canadian electorates.