



Research Dialogue

A focus on partisanship: How it impacts voting behaviors and political attitudes

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Abstract

The target article by John Jost (2017 – this issue) focuses on political ideology (liberalism vs. conservatism) and its association with personal characteristics, cognitive processing style, and motivational interests. Jost's arguments and data are very compelling and will inspire consumer psychologists to do more research in the political domain. To enable this goal further, we complement the target article by focusing on partisanship, another major determinant of political judgments and decisions. Whereas political ideology refers to people being more liberal or conservative, partisanship refers to how strongly people identify with a specific political party (e.g., Republicans or Democrats). In reviewing the literature on partisanship, we concentrate on voting behaviors and attitudes, an area not addressed by Jost, but of great importance for consumer psychologists given the large expenditures on political advertising. Adding to Jost's discussion of the link between political ideology and systematic processing, we examine the interplay between these two constructs and partisanship.

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Introduction

"I am a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order." Mike Pence, the 2016 Republican vice presidential candidate, used this phrase to introduce himself on numerous occasions, including his vice-presidential nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National convention. Similarly, Tim Kaine, the 2016 Democratic vice presidential candidate, repeatedly defined himself in terms of his political ideology, with one of his earlier Senate campaign ads titled "Conservative". As [John Jost explains in his target article \(2017 – this issue\)](#), political ideology (liberal/conservative; left/right) refers to a set of beliefs, opinions, and values that shape how people interpret their

environment and how they think it should be structured. The target article convincingly shows that conservative (vs. liberal) ideology is strongly associated with an array of personality characteristics (e.g. conscientiousness and orderliness for conservatives; compassion and openness for liberals) and motivational interests (e.g. pertaining to stability vs. instigating change) ([Jost, 2017](#)). It is therefore not surprising that many politicians emphasize their ideology when communicating with the electorate: political ideology carries a lot of information about political candidates and can exert substantial influence on voters' behaviors.

Interestingly, some politicians choose to define themselves in terms of their party affiliations, rather than their ideologies. For instance, Frederick Douglas defined himself as a "Republican," and Franklin Roosevelt – as "Christian, and a Democrat." Because party affiliation is often correlated with conservative/liberal ideology, partisan cues potentially inform voters about the politician's ideological stance. However, partisan cues also capitalize on the partisan identification of the electorate. Partisan

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identification, or partisanship, refers to how strongly people identify with a specific political party; and denotes a long-standing, affective, psychological link towards that party (e.g. Democrats or Republicans in the U.S.; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Holding the ideology of a candidate fixed, partisan voters are more likely to support that candidate if he belongs to their party (Bankert, Huddy, & Rosema, 2017; Hawkins & Nosek, 2012).

To further illustrate the difference between political ideology and partisanship, imagine that Peter is a conservative who identifies strongly with Republicans, whereas Paul is a conservative who does not think of himself as Democrat or Republican, or affiliated strongly with any other party. In this case, Peter and Paul have similar ideologies, but whereas Peter is strongly partisan (Republican), Paul is non-Partisan. As such, Paul may feel less compelled (compared to Peter) to support a Republican candidate who holds liberal values at odds with his own conservative ideology.

The target article (Jost, 2017 – this issue) will inspire and enable consumer psychologists to do more work in the political domain. To facilitate this goal further, we complement the target article by focusing on partisanship and its role in political judgments and decisions. In reviewing the literature on partisanship, we zoom in on voting behaviors and political attitudes, areas not discussed by Jost, but of great importance for consumer psychologists given the large expenditures on political advertising¹ – e.g., Hillary Clinton's campaign spent \$211.4 million on television advertising between June and October 2016 alone.

Marketing scholars have already started working in the domain of political persuasion (Adaval, Isbell, & Wyer, 2007; Ahluwalia, 2000; Hedgcock, Rao, & Chen, 2009; Kim, Rao, & Lee, 2008; Klein & Ahluwalia, 2005). We have as well: we studied why the polls went wrong in the 2016 U.S. election (Krishna, 2016), and examined how people make voting decisions when they dislike presidential candidates (Sokolova & Krishna, 2017). Yet, there remains a large scope for research by consumer psychologists in the area of political decision-making and political persuasion.

We start by discussing how partisanship impacts voting behaviors and political attitudes, and why it does so. We then add to Jost's discussion of the association between political ideology and processing style, by examining the interplay between political ideology, partisanship, and systematic processing. We conclude with a discussion of research directions stemming from this dialogue.

Partisanship and voting behaviors

Research accumulated over more than five decades shows that partisanship influences voting by affecting voter turnouts and decisions between specific candidates (Campbell et al., 1960; Hawkins & Nosek, 2012; Petersen, Skov, Serritzlew, & Ramsøy, 2013; Schaffner & Streb, 2002). Similar to research on political ideology summarized in the target article, analyses

of partisanship and voting behaviors utilized both self-reports and actual voting data, obtaining similar results across the two data types (Bartels, 2000; Miller, 1991; Moore, 2004; Schaffner & Streb, 2002; Schaffner, Streb, & Wright, 2001; Sen, 2017). Below we discuss these findings in detail.

Voter turnout

Higher voter turnout

Partisanship can increase voter turnout in multiple ways. First, partisanship is rooted in group attachment, or group identification (Binning, Sherman, Cohen, & Heitland, 2010; Campbell et al., 1960; Dickerson & Ondercin, 2017; Greene, 1999; Petersen et al., 2013). Research suggests that group identification can serve as a powerful motivator to act in line with the interests and expectations of the group (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008; Terry & Hogg, 1996). Following this logic, partisanship, as a form of group identification, can stimulate voting because casting a vote for one's party provides a clear benefit for the group.

Second, partisanship is associated with reduced decision difficulty. It provides a mental shortcut for making voting decisions: by merely looking at candidates' party affiliations, partisan voters get information about the alignment of the candidates' program with their values and interests (Bullock, 2011; Gant & Luttbeg, 1987; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Mérola & Hitt, 2015; Rahn, 1993). Additionally, partisan labels make the candidates more discriminable in the eyes of the public (Heit & Rubinstein, 1994; Mogilner, Rudnick, & Iyengar, 2008; Sloutsky, 2003). Consumer psychologists have shown that low decision difficulty and high option discriminability both lead to lower decision deferral rates (Dhar, 1996, 1997; Mogilner et al., 2008). Consequently, we could expect that partisanship, by virtue of reducing voting decision difficulty and increasing candidate discriminability, should reduce voting deferral and increase voter turnout.

Several studies support this reasoning. Schaffner and Streb (2002) report that people were more likely to express vote preferences in a survey when vote-choice questions provided party labels, compared to when they did not, and the effect was especially pronounced among less educated respondents. This pattern also emerges in actual voting. Schaffner et al. (2001) examined real election data and found that voter turnout was suppressed in non-partisan elections in the U.S. For example, voter turnout went down following the switch from partisan to non-partisan elections (i.e. having vs. not having candidates' party affiliations on the ballot) in Asheville (NC) in the 1990's, and went up following the switch from non-partisan to partisan elections in Minnesota in the 1970's. In sum, partisanship affects voting behavior by mobilizing citizens to exercise their right to vote.

Voting decisions

Diagnostic cue

In addition to mobilizing voters, partisanship can potentially improve voters' decisions because candidates' party affiliations

¹ <https://www.fec.gov/data/>

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