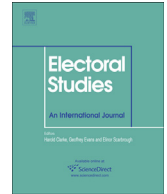




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Party registration and party self-identification: Exploring the role of electoral institutions in attitudes and behaviors



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ABSTRACT

How do electoral institutions affect self-identified partisanship? I hypothesize that party registration acts to anchor a person's party identification, tying a person to a political party even when their underlying preferences may align them with the other party. Estimating a random effects multinomial logit model, I find individuals registered with a party are more likely to self-identify with that party and away from the other party. Party registration also affects voting in presidential elections but not in House elections, leading to greater defection in the former where voters have more information about the candidates. These insights illuminate varying rates of electoral realignment, particularly among southern states, and the makeup of primary electorates in states with and without party registration.

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President Barack Obama's re-election campaign performed surprisingly poorly in Kentucky, Oklahoma and West Virginia's Democratic primary elections. In the latter, the President's margin of victory over an incarcerated felon was less than twenty percentage points. Election observers chalked up these surprising results to lingering effects of the waning regional partisan realignment occurring in these states. While I agree with this assessment, the research I present here explains why this electoral behavior is observed among these states and not in other states that have also experienced similar realignment.

Starting with the seminal work in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) scholars have shown that party identification is among the principal ways that people make sense of the political world (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Carsey and Layman, 2006; Zaller, 1992). The stability and nature of party identification is among the areas that has drawn considerable interest and debate (e.g., Johnston,

2006). I add to this rich discussion by investigating a previously neglected role electoral institutions play in individuals' party identification. I show that party registration powerfully shapes the durability of individuals' attachment to a political party. The three states where Obama performed poorly all have party registration, where voters may choose to affiliate with a political party when they register to vote. In these three states and twenty-seven others with party registration, registered Democrats who would have otherwise transitioned to the Republican Party have been resistant to change due to their party registration, which further manifests itself in their voting behavior.

A few scholars explore the effect of party registration on party identification. Burden and Greene (2000) show that states with party registration have a greater share of self-identified partisans. The authors attribute this to voters using the party they are registered with as a guide for their party identification. I extend this work by emphasizing a temporal component: the capacity of party registration to act as an anchor, making it more difficult to change party loyalties over time. Individuals register with a party as loyal

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partisans but may gradually grow away from the party. However, party registration is costly to change and so these voters remain registered with their old party and continue to identify with it even though they might be less loyal partisans.

To evaluate these claims, I analyze data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) 1980 Major Panel Study, which tracks respondents' party identification over time. Following [Bartels et al. \(2011\)](#) I estimate a dynamic random effects multinomial logit model that controls for observed and unobserved individual heterogeneity. I find that individuals registered with a political party are more likely to identify with that party and that party registration also exhibits a repellant effect, making individuals registered with a party less likely to identify with the opposing party.

In low information elections, such as for the United States House, I expect that voters anchored to a party will more often follow candidates' party affiliation as a voting cue, but in a high information election, such as the presidential election, higher levels of information will lead to party registration predicting voter defection ([Bassi et al., 2011](#); [Schaffner and Streb, 2002](#)). Analyzing the 1978 and 1980 ANES Time Series and 1980 ANES Major and Minor Panels, I find that voters in party registration states are significantly more likely to vote for the other party's candidate in presidential elections and that the rate of defection increases the longer they have been registered. However there is no relationship between party registration and defection in vote for the House. Overall, these results demonstrate that the electoral institution of party registration has significant effects on individual behavior and attitudes.

1. A theory of party identification and party registration

The authors of *The American Voter* appreciated that over their lives, individuals displayed a consistent attachment to political parties. Scholars have since investigated self-identified partisanship in numerous contexts: influencing the candidates an individual votes for ([Campbell et al., 1960](#)), individuals' policy positions ([Carsey and Layman, 2006](#)), and how they process novel information ([Bartels, 2002](#); [Zaller, 1992](#)).

Given the importance of party identification, there has been great interest in its origins and dynamics. The authors of *The American Voter* primarily conceived the link between an individual and the political party as an affective attachment similar to a religious affiliation: “[G]enerally this tie is a psychological identification which can persist without legal recognition or evidence of formal membership and even without a consistent record of party support” ([Campbell et al., 1960](#), p.121). Rather than based on individual policy congruence with a political party ([Downs, 1957](#)), most evidence consistent with this conceptualization of party identification finds that party identification is predominately acquired early in life from parents ([Jennings and Niemi, 1968](#)). In contrast, another body of work conceives of party identification as instrumental in nature. While scholars in the rational choice tradition have

acknowledged party identification does not follow the canonical Downsian model, some scholars, most notably [Fiorina \(1981\)](#),¹ hypothesize party identification is primarily based on individuals' retrospective policy evaluations of the political parties rather than an emotional attachment. In this conception, people identify with the party they believe has shown as the most impressive record of governing to date.

Scholars colloquially refer to these two conceptualizations as the traditionalist and revisionist views of party identification (e.g. [Bartels et al., 2011](#)), respectively, and they lead to different predictions of the stability of individual party identification. While [Campbell et al. \(1960\)](#) noted different degrees of partisan loyalty exist in the electorate, contingent on education and other demographic and contextual factors, the traditionalist conceptualization of party identification's affective attachment has been as an unmoved mover. Party identification is believed by these scholars to be durable and largely insulated from the changing electoral fortunes of the parties. An individual who is a Democrat at twenty-five is on average likely to be one at seventy-five as well, absent a major upheaval in the existing party system. The revisionist conceptualization posits party identification is dependent on the policy performance of the parties. For the revisionists, party identification is state dependent—based on an individual's previous party identification updated with pertinent policy accomplishments. A voter changes her partisanship through her evaluation of the parties' performance. These revisionist claims have been challenged by members of the traditionalist school, who argue that measurement error is the primary cause of apparent instability of partisanship. When measurement error is controlled for, they argue party identification exhibits extraordinary stability ([Green and Palmquist, 1990](#); [Green et al., 2002](#)). Recent research by [Bartels et al. \(2011\)](#) largely supports the traditionalist conception of party identification, but finds that among older adults, lagged party identification exerts a significant effect on current party identification. Their finding thus supports that individuals' party identification is influenced by both state dependence and a process driven by differences in individuals' characteristics.

While [Campbell et al. \(1960\)](#) emphasize the capacity of party identification to persist in the absence of formal party membership, in thirty states and the District of Columbia, individuals have the option of affiliating with a political party when they register to vote. This is an official government record, appearing in the state's voter registration files and on voters' registration cards. Party registration serves principally to regulate participation in primary elections, restricting voting in most party registration states to only those voters registered with a party or in some cases also to those unaffiliated with a party. Voter registration provides an official, external link between a voter and a political party in lieu of the infrequent activity of officially joining a party ([Campbell et al., 1960](#); [Green et al., 2002](#)).

¹ See also [Calvert and MacKuen \(1985\)](#), [Franklin and Jackson \(1983\)](#) and [Ordeshook \(1976\)](#).

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