Groups, Behaviors, and Issues as Cues of Partisan Attachments in the Public

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Abstract

What factors do people most associate with the partisan identity of others: group identity, political issue positions, or social behaviors? In this research note we report the results of a conjoint experiment in which we test the predictive power of descriptive identities against other attributes such as social behaviors and issue positions. We find that when presented with a randomized biography to predict partisanship people rely on issue positions over descriptive group identities or behaviors. Most issues outperform group affiliations and behaviors, with sexual orientation as the partial exception. We then compared these results to the correlation between the same factors in respondents' own biographies and their own partisan identification. We find that political issues are far less important to people's own partisan affiliations, while group identity is more predictive. We conclude that an understanding or perception of ideological concepts and their association with the political parties in others should be distinguished from *adoption* of such concepts by individuals themselves.

In contemporary America, people's partisan affiliations are correlated with group affiliations, personal behaviors, and issue positions. However, among this expansive list, what specific group identities, behaviors, and issues positions do people most strongly associate with a person's partisan identity? In this note we measure the correlation between a host of potential cues and a person's partisan affiliation using first a conjoint experiment that presents randomly generated profiles of individuals and asks respondents to guess this person's partisan affiliation. We then then compare this correlation to the correlation between these same factors and the partisanship of the respondents completing the survey. In this way we can measure both people's perceptions of other's partisan affiliation as well as how their own partisan loyalties are related to these factors.

Our results strongly suggest that the key factor people use to draw inferences about partisanship (for both political candidates and voters) is people's political stances on various issues. This suggests that while the public may be ideologically innocent in the sense of adopting a rigid framework of issue positions (Converse, 1964; Campbell et al., 1960; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017), they are not innocent with respect to *understanding* how those issue positions connect to partisanship in the abstract.[1] This pattern is true despite the importance of group affiliations (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe, 2015; Achen and Bartels, 2016) and behaviors associated with world views (Hetherington and Weiler, 2018) in understanding people's actual partisan affiliations. In other words, while people understand the language of ideology, they are not apt to adopt this language for their own views—instead relying on their own shared group affiliations and behaviors in their partisan affiliations.

There is growing evidence that citizens have some issue commitments (Goggin, Henderson and Theodoridis, 2019; Orr and Huber, 2019; Costa, forthcoming) that seem to heavily influence their ability to draw inferences about partisanship, but views about how much this matters vary. Mason (2018) claims that "More often than not, citizens do not choose which party to support based on policy opinion; they alter their policy opinion according to which party they support (20-21)." In contrast, Fowler (2020) argues that "voter decisions are influenced by substantive considerations including policy preferences and . . . we do not have any compelling evidence to support the claim that a meaningful share of voters' decisions is influenced by party identity *or any other kind of identity*." (p. 219, emphasis

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[1]The results are robust to whether people are asked to consider a hypothetical voter or a candidate, but we will refer to voters throughout the rest of the paper for simplicity.

added). Our contribution is twofold. First, most of the research on this topic deals with how groups, issues, and partisanship impact voter choices in the voting booth. Here we consider the question of how groups and issues impact a voter's perceptions of which people belong in each partisan camp, or choose to adopt certain party labels. Secondly, we suggest that while Mason is correct that group affiliations have power in how individuals frame their own partisan labels, Fowler is correct insofar as people think about politics and draw inferences about *others* partisan affiliation based on policy preferences rather than group membership. In other words, our results show that there is a dramatic difference in ideological constraint between people's *perceptions* of other's partisan affiliations and the relationship between these same factors and people's *actual adoption* of party labels.

Conjoint Design

To test which cues matter most, we use a conjoint design to measure people's perceptions of a hypothetical voter's partisanship when presented with a variety of identities, behaviors, and issue positions. The conjoint design allows us to independently identify the causal impact of a number of possible predictors of partisanship.

It is well established that partisanship is correlated both with issue positions, group attachments, and personal behaviors. Thus, disentangling the relative impact of each remains difficult to do. New political issues that exogenously arise and cause the parties to take new stances are rare and cannot be relied upon to determine causality—suggestive though such events might be. Our solution is to present people with individuals whose issue positions, group identities, and other behaviors have been randomly determined in a conjoint experiment. This allows for an independent assessment of the relative power of group affiliations, issue positions, and other social behaviors on the perceptions of partisan affiliation. In this way we uncover the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for each of these factors and can then determine which of these factors weighs most heavily in the minds of Americans as they assess who is likely to be a partisan of either stripe.

The data for this project come from a representative survey of Americans collected by YouGov survey research company in the summer of 2019. Within the survey, respondents were presented with

the following text: "The next few questions display the results of a recent survey of [voters/candidates for public office]. We are interested in knowing how you view [people/candidates] like this" (respondents were randomly presented with either the voter or candidate treatments, however, we present the combined results here because we found no differences between the two groups). After this introductory prompt, the respondent was then shown the profile of a person and asked whether they thought the person was a Republican, Democrat, or politically independent.[2] The description of the hypothetical person randomly assigned demographic features (gender, race, sexual orientation, wealth, union membership), social behaviors (religious affiliation, hobbies, media preferences), and political views.[3] Because each feature was randomly assigned, we can independently assess the causal impact of each feature/behavior/issue on *perceptions* of partisanship among the public. To compare perceptions of others to the correlations between these same factors and the partisanship of the survey respondents, we also asked each respondent the same set of questions regarding *their own* demographics, behaviors, and political views. While these questions are of necessity not randomized, these data allow us to then compare the causal impact of randomly assigned features in the conjoint to the partial correlation of these same features among the actual public when placed in a multiple regression.

Results

The left panel of Figure 1 shows our main conjoint results. The figure displays the marginal means (i.e. the average partisanship rating) for all profiles that included each particular characteristic or issue preference. Each point represents the mean outcome across all appearances of a particular conjoint feature, averaging across all other features. The outcome variable is the traditional 7-point measure of partisanship.[4]

The coefficient plot is divided with ascriptive characteristics (gender, racial identities, sexual

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[2]The question is coded from 1-7 to align with the traditional 7-point partisan identification question with 1=strong Replublcian, 4=independent, 7=strong Democrat.

[3]The supplemental materials contains a complete list of randomized features and the exact wording of the survey question.

[4]In the supplemental materials we consider how these results vary based on the political knowledge of the respondent. We also consider the possibility of demand effects by looking at the results based on whether the profile appeared early or later in the 6 profiles presented to each respondent. We find no such differences.

orientation, economic identities, and religious affiliation) at the top. Beneath that, we present a series of behaviors, consumer preferences, and media choices stereotypically linked to partisanship. The lowest portion of the figure shows the marginal means for profiles containing each issue position (here we show both the marginal means for profiles who support or oppose the policy in question). As a final point of comparison, we show the results of additionally providing a subset of respondents with an explicitly ideological cue. A random 20 percent of respondents were told that the person described themself as "conservative" or "liberal." Given the very high correlation between ideological self-identification and partisanship in contemporary American politics, this coefficient serves as a relative "baseline" effect regarding the association between each feature shown in the conjoint experiment and partisan affiliation. In other words, by telling respondents the individual is "liberal", we have more or less given them the answer (or as close to the answer as one can provide) regarding the person's partisan affiliation.[5]

In discussing the results of the left panel of Figure 1, we begin at the bottom and move our way up the figure. The ideological (conservative vs. liberal) conditions serve as a point of comparison as both liberal and conservative self-descriptions are the largest coefficients. Respondents who saw a person describe themselves as 'conservative' placed that individual approximately 1.5 units further to the right (compared to someone who labels themself 'liberal') on the 7-point party identity scale. Comparing this coefficient to the rest of the figure shows that issues tend to weigh heavily on perceptions of partisanship. In fact, one issue, support for a border wall (coef=4.70), is slightly larger than the ideological conservative cue (coef=4.58), though still relatively symmetric. Each issue position is statistically significant compared to holding the opposite view on the issue as well as statistically significantly different from the 'pure independent' position (represented by the vertical line in the figure). They are also substantively large. The marginal means for the issues range from 4.18 (opinions of #MeToo Movement, which is just slightly to the right of 'pure independent') to 3.22 (support for LGBTQ protections), with views on the border wall (either for or against) being the largest predictors.

Moving up the figure we see that social behaviors are much weaker as partisan heuristics to people. The marginal means range from 3.69 (driving a Prius) to 4.06 (own a gun). The remaining

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[5]In the supplemental materials we show the results for the 80% of the sample that did not see this cue versus the 20% who did.

marginal means for the cultural/behavioral features fall between that range. It is illuminating to note that in no case does a behavior/consumer preference provide a stronger signal of partisanship than any of the issues discussed above. In other words, even the least powerful issue is a stronger predictor of partisanship than the most powerful behavior.

In the identities portion of the table (at the top) the results are somewhat mixed. None of the religious identities are significantly associated with partisanship in people's minds, with non-religious having the largest impact (coef=3.65). However, being gay and membership in a labor union are both strong predictors of Democratic affiliation (gay coef=3.42, union coef=3.57). However, even these identities are seen as less informative than all but one of the issue positions described above. The other identities of sex and race are much weaker in predicting people's perceptions of partisanship.

The right panel of Figure 1 shows a similar analysis, but with one key difference. Rather than presenting the results of a *hypothetical* voter whose issue preferences, behaviors, and identities are randomly determined, we fit a regression model using the responses from the *actual* respondents to the survey, who were asked these same questions prior to completing the conjoint task. In this way we can test the relationship between people's perceptions of how these issues/behaviors/identities are related to partisanship in others as well as how these same features are correlated with the expressed partisan affiliation of the actual survey respondents.[6] Each point in the figure shows the average predicted value for a voter with a particular feature, behavior, or issue position, while holding all other factors at their observed values.[7]

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[6]We recognize the potential concern that asking people about their issue preferences, social behaviors, group identities, and partisan affiliation might cue people to think about the relationship between these things and politics. However, because we asked respondents about all of these factors, if any priming did take place, it is likely to have impacted all factors across the board.

[7]The regression model from which we derive these predicted values is displayed in the online supplemental materials in Table A3. We also show the number of people who answered affirmatively to each question (i.e. the number of females, union members, or the number of people who read the Wall Street Journal, etc). Each feature has at least 50 respondents answer in the affirmative (with the exception of being wealthy N = 42).
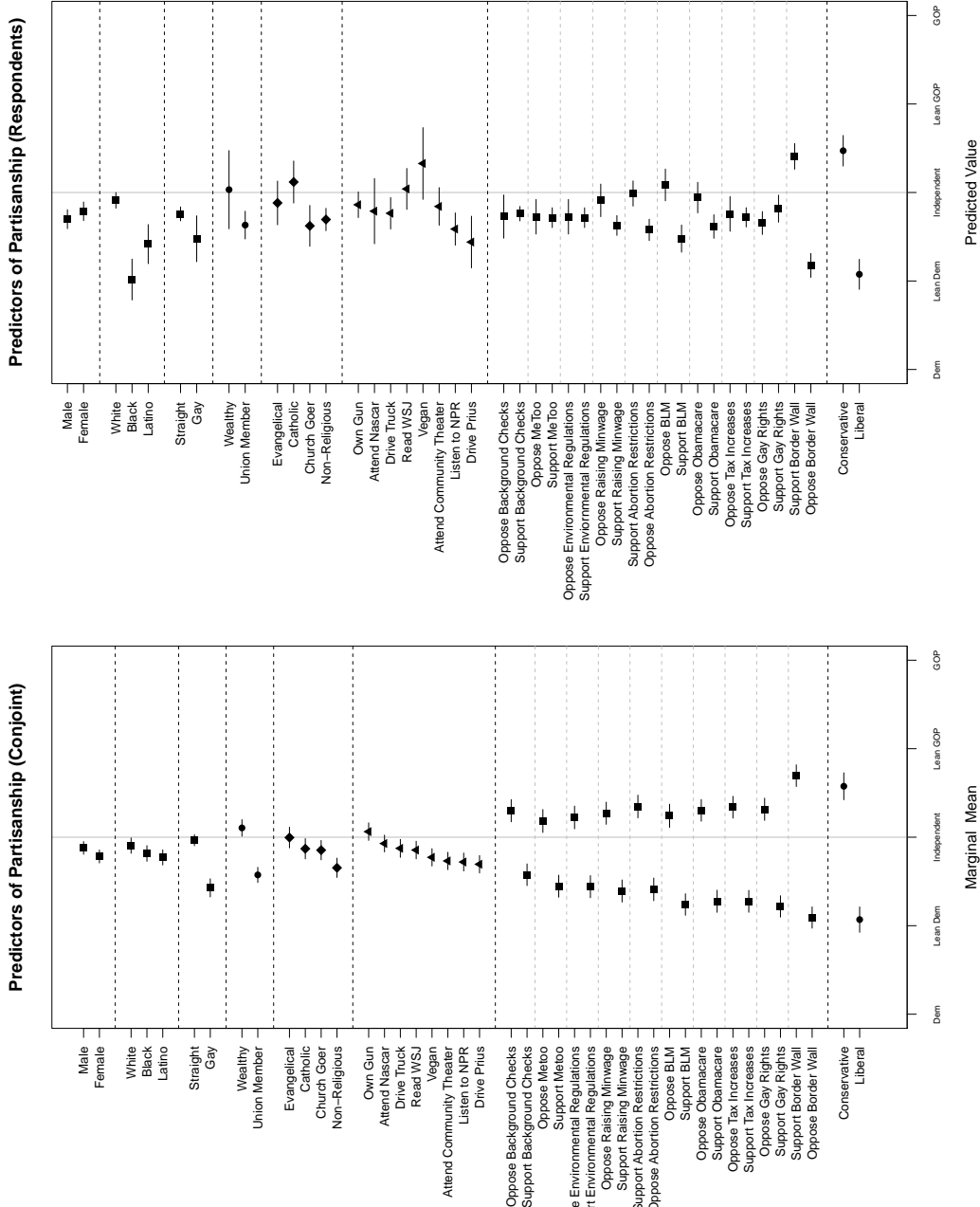
Figure 1: Left panel shows marginal means of our conjoint experiment on what people perceive predicts a person's partisanship. The right panel shows the actual relationship between each of these variables by plotting the predicted values of each feature from a regression model in which each feature is included in a model predicting the respondents' partisan affiliation.

When looking at how identities, behaviors, and issue positions predict the partisan affiliations of actual survey respondents, the picture changes dramatically compared to the conjoint results. While issue positions were most predictive in the conjoint analysis, they are largely uninformative among the actual survey respondents. The one exception is approval/disapproval of the border wall, which remains highly predictive of partisanship in both the conjoint experiment as well as among the survey respondent's own partisanship (predicted value for survey respondents; oppose wall=3.18, support wall =4.41). On the other hand, in the conjoint experiment race was largely unpredictive of partisanship, while among the actual respondents, race is the strongest predictor of partisan affiliation.[8] The predicted partisanship value for Black respondents is 3.02 and the predicted partisanship for Latino respondents is 3.42. On the other hand, being gay is a stronger predictor of Democratic affiliation in both the conjoint results and among the survey respondents themselves (predicted value for survey respondents=3.48).

Across the social behaviors, driving a Prius has the strongest relationship with the partisanship of the survey respondents, with a predicted value of 3.43, which is similar in size to being gay (3.48) and supporting Black Lives Matter (3.48).

When considered together the conjoint results and the survey respondents' actual partisanship reveals an interesting pattern. When asked to consider partisanship for others (in the conjoint), respondents use policy positions more than anything else to associate people with the two parties, contradicting the dominant view of the public as unconstrained and largely incapable of thinking in an ideologically constrained way (and conforming with Fowler (2020)'s view of the public). However, when looking at these same survey respondents' own partisanship identities and how they correlate with their own beliefs, behaviors, and demographics, we see a familiar story of group identities being more predictive of partisanship than people's own views on salient political issues where there is much less polarization. In other words, Converse's (1964) (and Mason's (2018), more recently) view of the public looks very much alive and well among our survey respondents.

As an additional test of our claim, Figure 2 displays the conjoint marginal effects of five key issues set in tension with a an identity that is closely tied to that issue. For example, the top left

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[8]On possible concern is that race was not clearly signaled in the conjoint experiment. However, unlike other conjoint/audit studies that consider race, we explicitly stated the race of the individual rather than using stereotypical names to imply the race of the individual.

panel displays the ACME for being Black among profiles that all approved of the Black Lives Matter movement. The second point in the figure shows the ACME for supporting the Black Lives Matter movement among all profiles that were Black. We do this to see how much issues matter among a group that is stereotypically for or against the issue. In all cases, the issue position (even among those who hold the ascriptive trait most closely associated with that issue) was a better predictor of a person's partisanship than the descriptive feature (even among those who held the issue position most closely associated with that descriptive feature).[9] From these tests we conclude that in general people *perceive* partisanship through the lens of political issues while even when confronted with individual's whose ascriptive traits run counter to that issue position (i.e. a Black individual who is opposed to Black Lives Matter or a Latino individual who is in favor of the border wall).

Discussion

These results show a public that are simultaneously non-ideological in their own views of politics, and yet are very aware of how contemporary political issues connect to the major parties. This awareness of the framework of ideological constraint is clearly shown through the ability of respondents to place hypothetical voters into each party based on the suite of issue positions in those biographies. However, these issues do not neatly place these same respondents into the political parties themselves. Thus, the while the public appear to be aware of the connections between issues and parties—and use them more than any other factors to stereotype people into the parties—they choose not to adopt those connections for their own partisan affiliations.

In one way the results presented here reaffirm the long-standing view that people are unconstrained in their political views. As with previous research there is little evidence of issue constraint in this nationally representative sample of individuals. However, in another way, our results stand in stark contrast to the idea that the public are non-ideological. While the public may not adopt the ideological structure of elite politics, it should be clear that this lack of constraint in the public is a choice, and not simply a reflection of a lack of knowledge or an inability to comprehend the parties' positions. As

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[9]Though the differences between issue position and affiliation was slightly smaller in the case of sexual orientation and gender

shown here, people clearly know the parties' positions on issues well enough to base their inferences about partisanship on those issues—far more than they do any other factors (such as race) that have a strong impact on observed partisanship. And in that sense, the public does appear more ideological in a certain way.

Though affective polarization may be the form most concerning to social scientists, the public's *perceptions* of polarization clearly do extend to issues and are not clearly cabined to a simple disdain for the other party. In fact, our results show that recent polarization of the parties on various issues may have provided voters clearer cues as to which issues go with which parties. We think the implication is that social science must do better at distinguishing *adoption* of ideological views from an *understanding* those views. Though this distinction may seem elementary, it is crucial to understanding an unconstrained public that still comprehends contemporary partisanship largely through issue positions. The public may be simply affectively polarized, but it is perceives ideological polarization, because that is the cue that people use to infer partisanship.

Finally, our results shed light on the debate between those who see partisan conflict as one of "group conflict" versus those who see it as "a battle of issues." Both camps are correct to a degree. The results here lead us to a more complete account of partisanship as both a source of constraint on issue attitudes in people's minds but not a particularly important actual influence on their own personal partisanship. And we must recognize that as important as group identities are to the contemporary political landscape, the public largely does not *perceive* politics in quite the same way.
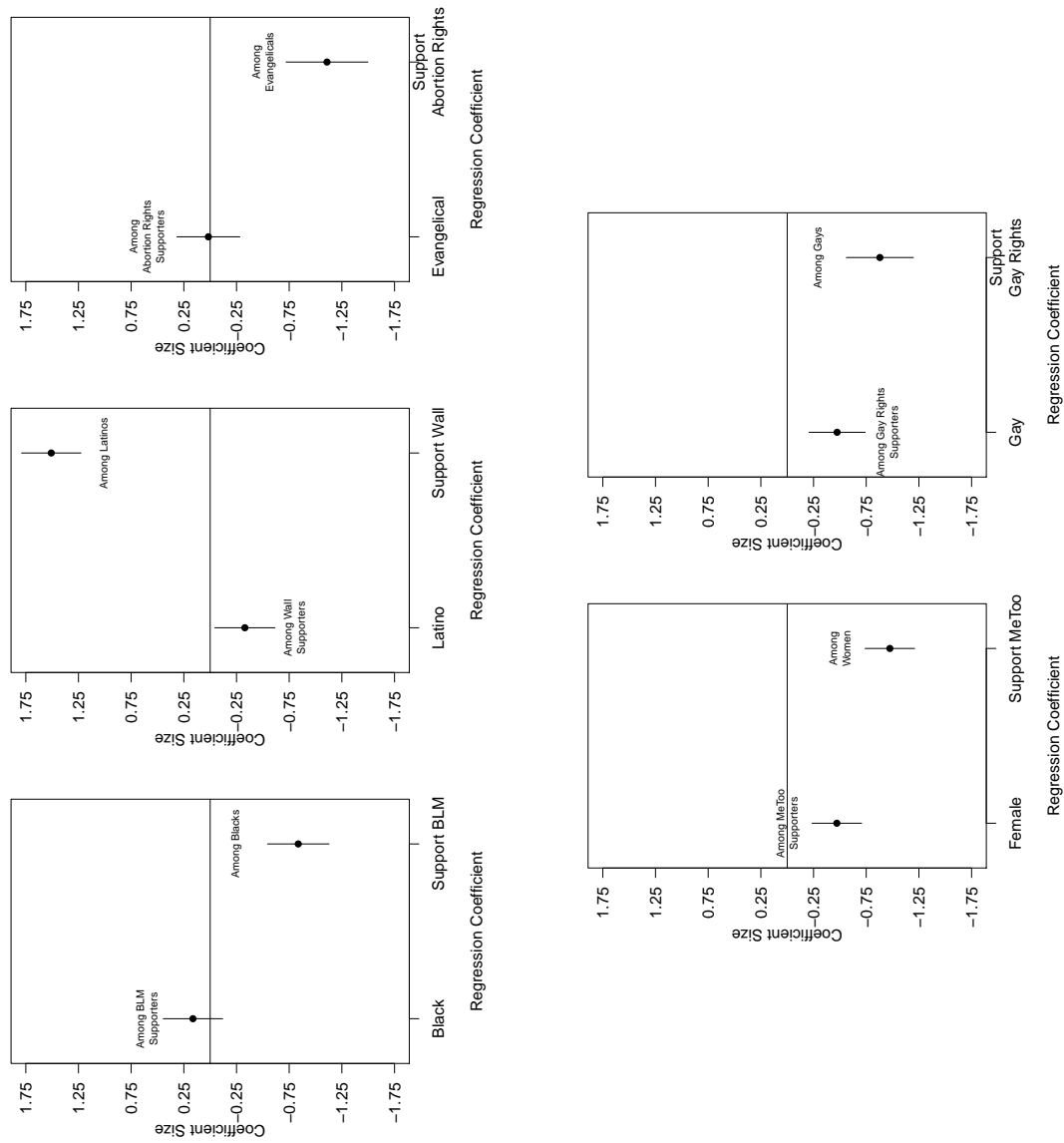
Figure 2: Figure displays marginal effects of identity (in the left half of each plot) against the marginal effects of issue position (in the right half of each plot). Though it is true that identification as gay (or lesbian) and taking a gay rights issue position are indistinguishable and being a woman is not as strong of a predictor of a person's partisanship as supporting the #metoo movement, overall the marginal effect of issue position clearly outperforms identification as a member of the group.

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