GROUP
CHARACTERISTICS AND
SOCIAL NETWORKS

Attempts to explain people's political attitudes and behavior have often relied on social factors to account for both stability and change in American politics. Research based on the American National Election Studies (ANES) has documented a wide range of relationships in the U.S. electorate between social characteristics and political behavior. Furthermore, American journalists and party strategists often attribute political trends to such categories as “white populists,” “soccer moms” or “born-again Christians”; frequently, these explanations rely on so-called bloc voting, such as “the black vote,” “the senior citizen vote,” or “the Hispanic vote,” implying that some social factors cause large numbers of people to vote in certain ways.

Social groups have a pronounced impact on individual attitudes and behavior, including partisanship. Some of this impact occurs directly through face-to-face interactions with primary groups, such as family, friends, and coworkers. Social networks are the people with whom one interacts either face-to-face or via social media, and these social networks affect our political attitudes and behaviors in important ways. Social groups can have an impact in less direct ways as well, especially when secondary groups are involved. Secondary groups are those organizations or collections of individuals with which one identifies, or is identified, that have some common interest or goal instead of personal contact as their major basis. The two major political parties in the United States have courted certain social groups and passed policies that benefit some groups over others. These connections have led to the political parties having an image or “brand” that people have in mind when they think of the parties. For example, the Democratic Party is widely associated with the poor and with minority groups, whereas the
Republican Party is widely associated with the wealthy and white people. We examine who actually makes up the two major parties to see if these images are accurate. We also examine how various social groups—including women and men, racial and ethnic groups, the young and the old, and people who live in different regions of the country—identify as partisans and how these attachments have changed over time.

The interaction of the direct and the indirect can have an especially potent impact for unconventional political behaviors. Voting or putting a candidate’s sign in one’s yard is relatively easy and does not demand much time or effort. Attending a rally, protesting, or joining a social movement demands more from the participant. Connecting one’s behavior to a broader social goal and having people in one’s social network who support and even join the effort can significantly increase the likelihood of joining a rally, boycotting a business, and traveling to Washington, DC, to participate in a march. Understanding the role social context plays in how people think and act when it comes to politics is essential for understanding political behavior. We primarily focus in this chapter on partisanship because it is such an important political identity that drives electoral behavior, but we also consider voting and other types of political participation.

PRIMARY GROUPS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

In some ways, it would make sense if family and friends held a wide variety of dissimilar political attitudes. Many Americans are not interested in politics and therefore do not make it a centerpiece of their dinner conversations, or of any conversations for that matter. If politics is something these Americans want to forget exists, then it is unlikely that they would discuss politics enough to have family and friends influence their political views. On the other hand, family and friends are in close contact, they share many of the same experiences, and they care about each other. Politics might not be at the forefront of people’s minds, but political topics arise and people react to what they see and hear. Whether people like politics or not, the effects of its pervasiveness might play out among family and friends.

Although investigations of the political behavior of primary groups are not numerous, all available evidence indicates that families and groups of friends are likely to be politically homogeneous. This is especially the case among spouses. According to a Pew Research Center study, over three-quarters of married respondents said their spouse would vote for the same major-party candidate they supported. Only 3 percent said their spouse would vote for the opposing major party’s candidate (and the rest did not know). Why are spouses so similar in their political attitudes and behaviors? Researchers have offered three reasons: influence, social homogamy, and assortative mating. We discuss influence, or assimilation, first.
Even if spouses hold different political views when they marry, they can become more similar over time by changing their attitudes to be more in line with each other. Laura Stoker and M. Kent Jennings found that married couples experience “mutual influence” over the course of a marriage and therefore become more similar in their political attitudes and behavior. The influence, however, does not appear to be balanced between husbands and wives. Married women are more likely to bring their views into line with their husbands, and this shift makes married women, married men, and single men very similar on average in their party identification, vote choice, ideology, racial views, and attitudes about gender equality. The outliers are single women who remain significantly more Democratic and liberal than men or married women. Once married, couples share similar experiences, which tends to reinforce shared attitudes.

A second explanation that might explain the similarity in the political attitudes of married couples is social homogamy, the idea that people tend to marry partners who come from the same sociocultural background and therefore share certain social characteristics, including race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion. To the extent that these social groups share certain political views, people will tend to marry for sociocultural reasons but end up sharing political attitudes as a byproduct of this process. Married couples’ social group characteristics can become even more similar after marriage because of their linked circumstances. They will likely, as a couple, attend the same church, have friends in the same social class, rise or fall in social status as circumstances change, and so on. These reinforcements of certain political proclivities through shared social group characteristics contribute to a high level of similarity between married couples in their political attitudes.

The third explanation for couples’ political similarity is assortative mating, where people choose partners because they hold similar traits. Many traits of spouses are positively correlated, including physical characteristics (such as height, weight, and even ear lobe size), social characteristics (such as education level, income, and occupation), personality (such as openness to experience), and, most important for our purposes, political ideology and party identification. Spouses share many political attitudes at the very beginning of their married life, suggesting that people choose spousal partners who share their views on such things as party identification, school prayer, the death penalty, and gay rights. While politics might not be a topic people talk or care a lot about, they do care about basic political values and how society works. When trying to gauge your long-term compatibility with a potential romantic partner, you may be better off finding out whether someone you are interested in is more likely to say “I’m with her” or that it is time to “make America great again” as compared to worrying about their astrological sign, favorite band, or physical attractiveness. Core political values play an important role in whom people choose to marry.

Families, beyond just the spouses, tend to be politically homogeneous as well. Parents naturally pass on to their children some of their political values, including their party identification. It makes sense that the transmission of party identification depends on family context. As we discussed in chapter 4, children whose
parents’ party identifications correspond and are stable across time are more likely to hold that party identification themselves. Most important is the extent to which the family is politically engaged. The more politicized the family environment, with frequent discussions about and engagement in politics, the more signals parents send to their children. In what is equivalent to being hit over the head with politics, children in politicized families both know their parents’ party identification and understand the importance of that identification. The transmission of party identification from parent to child is much higher in politicized and consistent family environments than in apolitical family environments. Along these lines, it is interesting to note that party identification appears not to have much of a genetic basis but partisan strength does. That is, parents who strongly identify with a party tend to have offspring who also strongly identify with a party, although which party they identify with appears not to be based on genetics.

Just as people get to choose their mates, so too do they get to choose their friends. The correlations between friends’ political views tend to be fairly strong for the same reasons as spouses’ similarities: being attracted to people who hold similar political values and interacting frequently, including discussing politics when the subject comes up. The tendency of people not to like conflict or disagreement increases the likelihood that friends will hold the same views and that they will not talk politics when they disagree. All of this explains why people’s social networks tend to be highly homogeneous in terms of political views. Democrats rarely have Republican discussion partners (only 16 percent of all discussion partners) and Republicans are reluctant to have Democratic discussion partners (only 22 percent of all discussion partners). The difference between family and friends, though, is that friends are more likely to live at a distance, less likely to be in frequent face-to-face communication, and less likely to share thoughts on politics. Friends, whether close or not, are therefore less likely to influence people’s political views, including their party identification.

Groups of coworkers appear to be somewhat more mixed politically. Presumably, the social forces in families and friendship groups are more intense and more likely to be based on, or to result in, political unanimity. In most work situations, people are thrown together without an opportunity to form groups based on common political values or other relevant traits. Friendship groups, even casual ones, may be formed so that individuals with much in common, including political views, naturally come together. Workplace groups, on the other hand, are formed with a task-oriented goal as the key, leading coworkers to be more diverse in their political leanings.

Table 5-1 presents findings from the 2000 ANES survey that illustrate the homogeneity of primary groups. Respondents were asked the political party of the people with whom they regularly discussed politics. The table shows that agreement on voting between spouses is highest, with 90 percent of the Democrats and 92 percent of the Republicans reporting that their spouses shared their vote choice. Agreement was not so high among other groups but still reflects considerable like-mindedness. Perhaps as important is the relatively low occurrence of
mismatches of Democrats and Republicans in primary groups. Sixty percent of the respondents were in agreement on presidential vote choice with all of their reported primary group contacts.
The homogeneity of political beliefs within primary groups increasingly extends to neighborhoods as well. This might seem odd, and researchers in this area do not suggest that an overriding reason for people to move into certain neighborhoods is partisanship, but the findings are convincing that neighborhoods are becoming more homogeneous in terms of partisanship. Bill Bishop and Robert Cushing argue that people are sorting themselves, through decisions about where to live, into increasingly solid Democratic or Republican counties. Whether people are choosing where to live based on race, education level, or church availability, the outcome is more counties in which the Democratic or Republican candidate wins in a landslide and fewer competitive counties. Wendy Tam Cho, James Gimpel, and Iris Hui find that most people choose where to live based on such factors as how safe, quiet, and affordable a neighborhood is, but both Democrats (29 percent) and Republicans (39 percent) say an important factor in their choice of residence is having the neighborhood populated with fellow partisans. They further find that even taking into account neighborhood characteristics such as race and income level, people choose to move into neighborhoods that are more partisan than their old neighborhood. Republicans are especially likely to move into more Republican neighborhoods, but Democrats have a tendency to move into Democratic neighborhoods as well.

Diana Mutz addresses the importance for democracies of having political discussions with people with whom one disagrees. The United States, she points out, is comparatively a highly partisan nation, with most Americans favoring a party or candidate. This partisan context opens the possibility that people could have exciting political discussions with people from the opposing party. Yet this is not what she finds.

Highly partisan political environments [such as the United States] pose a paradox: on the one hand, the existence of large numbers of people who hold readily identifiable political preferences would tend to suggest a vibrant, active political culture. On the other hand, it appears that many citizens in such an environment will isolate themselves among those of largely like-minded views, thus making it difficult for cross-cutting political discourse to transpire.

Americans talk about politics, whether among family, friends, coworkers, or neighbors, but they overwhelmingly talk to fellow partisans, not to people who might push them to think outside their partisan box. As we will see in chapter 7, this predilection is also extending to the choices people make about what news programs they prefer to watch or read.

Almost half of Americans find it stressful and frustrating to talk about politics with people with whom they disagree. It makes perfect sense that people would prefer to be around or talk to people like them. What is disconcerting about the homogeneity of social networks and neighborhoods is its potential impact on democratic politics. Sometimes, politics can become so contentious that it affects
people’s social lives and discussion networks in atypical ways. When Governor Scott Walker survived a recall election in Wisconsin, one study found that fully one-third of Wisconsinites reported that they stopped talking to someone in their social network because of that person’s views on the hotly contested recall. A democratic political system in as large and diverse a nation as the United States deals with a wide variety of often contentious issues. Lawmakers need to debate competing options and reach compromises on solutions. The more constituents hear the views from just one side, the less likely they are to appreciate that the opposing side might have viable arguments as well and the less likely they are to accept compromises. They will erroneously believe that the vast majority of Americans agree with them when it comes to politics because that is what they hear from family, friends, and neighbors. Why accept debate and compromise when, as one focus group participant put it, “80 percent of the people think one way”? If people talked more with the opposition, they would understand that the focus group participant is wrong and that Americans fundamentally disagree on a lot of issues. As a consequence, they might better understand the need for debate and compromise in Washington.

It would be a mistake, however, to leave the impression that social networks have only a negative impact on democratic politics. Social networks can be the catalyst that promotes participation in politics. Recent research suggests that people in one’s social network might have a greater impact on political behavior than previously thought. Internet social networks, specifically Facebook, influence whether people vote; people who see in their Facebook newsfeed that their friends have voted are more likely to vote themselves. Social networks can also be a catalyst for political activities that fall outside of electoral politics, including involvement in social movements and unconventional activities. These activities can include such things as signing a petition, participating in a demonstration, or expressing one’s views on the Internet. Sometimes the catalyst for participating in politics is simply being asked by someone to get involved. This recruitment is much more likely to happen if people have large social networks. The more people a person interacts with on a daily basis, the more likely it is that the person will learn about a political event and that he or she will be recruited by one of the discussion partners. These recruitment efforts can be as simple as having a friend say, “Hey, are you going to the rally today? You should. It’ll be fun.”

Getting a large group of people to attend a rally or demonstration is much easier with the rise of social media. A Facebook feed urging people to meet at a certain place at a certain time to oppose a recent governmental action or to support a candidate for office can generate enough enthusiasm and participation to make it onto the local or national news, thereby giving the movement an even stronger following. Leading up to the 2016 elections, the Black Lives Matter movement held rallies in many cities and attracted a great deal of media attention. Donald Trump largely ran his campaign by holding rallies in key spots around the United States. After President Trump’s inauguration, the Women’s March on Washington and in cities around the United States and worldwide brought
out women and men in support of women’s rights and in opposition to the new Trump administration. Organizers and participants used Twitter, Facebook, and other social media to spread the word about these rallies and protests, increasing the number of people who participated.

In 2014, the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) asked a sample of Americans how many people they have contact with in a typical weekday. They also asked the respondents if they had been involved in a variety of political activities in the past year. Figure 5-1 shows the relationship between social network size and participation in these activities. Voting is not strongly related to social network size. People who have very few discussion partners are no more or less likely to vote than people who have over fifty discussion partners. All of the other activities, on the other hand, are significantly affected by social network size. The larger the social network, the more likely people are to sign a petition, boycott a product, join a demonstration, attend a political meeting or rally, and donate or raise money for a cause. They are also more likely to communicate their views by contacting a politician or the media or by expressing their views on the Internet. The bottom line is that people who are socially engaged are more likely to hear about and be asked to participate in activities that are not standard activities like voting. This is true even when discussions with others are not focused on politics.

GROUP IDENTITY AND PARTISANSHIP

Primary groups are small and involve knowing the other group members. Interactions among primary group members are personal and often face-to-face. It is perhaps not surprising that the people within primary groups share many political attitudes and behaviors. Large, impersonal, secondary groups, however, also have an impact on people’s political views and behavior. What is the underlying dynamic that drives social group influence? It is not the direct influence of face-to-face interactions given the fact that people will meet only a very small handful of those who share certain social characteristics. Granted, face-to-face interactions with fellow group members can reinforce social group dynamics, but the ability of secondary social groups to influence people’s political attitudes and behaviors has to come from something other than personal interactions. We discuss two interrelated phenomena that drive social group influence on party identification: partisan images and social identity. We begin with partisan images.

Party Image and the Social Composition of Parties

Partisan images affect whether people want to identify with a party. The political parties have become associated with certain social groups, and this social composition
FIGURE 5-1  Social Network Size and Political Participation, 2014

of the parties affects people's images, or stereotypes, of the parties. Donald Green and his colleagues put it this way: "As people reflect on whether they are Democrats or Republicans (or neither), they call to mind some mental image, or stereotype, of what these sorts of people are like and square these images with their own self-conceptions." When people think about the social groups that make up the Democrats or the Republicans, they figure out which group composition best describes themselves and tend to choose the party that is the better fit. Partisan images are not set in stone. Social groups can, for a variety of reasons, switch their party allegiance from one party to the other. An example is the South being heavily Democratic after the Civil War and then moving to the Republican Party in more recent times. The political parties are also proactive in heavily courting certain social groups they want in their voting bloc. Republicans began courting evangelical Christians in the 1980s. Democrats have stepped up their courting of Latinos and Latinas in recent years.

To determine the social characteristics that are associated with the political parties, we can examine the social composition of the political parties. Looking at all people who identify with the Republican Party, for example, what proportion is white? What proportion is evangelical Christians? As can be seen in Figure 5-2, the racial and ethnic composition of the partisan groups is distinctively different. We further break down non-Hispanic whites, the majority racial/ethnic group in the United States, by religious affiliation to draw out major distinctive social compositions across the parties. The Democrats are much more varied in racial and ethnic composition than the Republicans. Almost half of the people who identify as Democratic partisans are black, Hispanic, or other people of color (46 percent) compared to only 17 percent of Republicans. Meanwhile, white Protestants, including those who are fundamentalist, evangelical, or mainline, make up over half of Republican partisans, compared to only 24 percent of Democratic partisans. Independents are made up of a higher percentage of whites who are either unaffiliated with a religious group or non-religious than the Democratic or Republican parties. As we pointed out in chapter 4, independent voters hold the balance of power between the major parties, and both must appeal to them to win elections.

Familiarity with the composition of the parties is useful in understanding the campaign strategies and political appeals that the parties make to hold their supporters in line and sway the independents or opposition supporters to their side. For example, the fact that African Americans constitute a quarter of Democratic partisans but make up only 2 percent of Republican partisans is a significant factor that both parties take into account. The growing importance of the Hispanic vote especially for the Democrats is also reflected in Figure 5-2. In 2000, Hispanics made up only 9 percent of the Democratic identifiers. By 2012, this number had increased to 18 percent but dropped to 14 percent in 2016. The choice of Tom Perez to chair the Democratic National Committee might indicate an interest among the top Democrats to emphasize their appeal to Hispanics in the 2020 presidential election.

The composition of the parties affects politics in another way. In an important book on the evolution of race as an issue in the United States, Edward Carmines and James Stimson argue persuasively that the composition of the parties, particularly the composition of the party activists, influences the perceptions that less involved citizens
hold about the philosophy and issue stands of the parties.\textsuperscript{20} The fact that African Americans are overwhelmingly Democratic and that vocal racial conservatives—in other words, those with a general predisposition to oppose governmental actions to correct racial injustices—are increasingly Republican allows the average voter to
figure out which party is liberal and which is conservative on racial issues, even if race is never mentioned by candidates during the course of an election campaign.

**The Partisan Identity of Social Groups**

The images people have of the social composition of the two major parties can affect how people think about and how strongly they identify with the parties. Group identity involves having a group be a part of how one thinks of oneself. People are born into a variety of social groups, such as race, gender, nationality, and social class, that might or might not become how they think of themselves. People who identify more strongly with a group are more likely to define themselves in terms of that group, feel attached to the group, and evaluate the group in positive terms. When a group identity is salient to an individual, that person is more likely to perceive situations from the perspective of the group and take actions that help the group, even at great personal expense. They are also more likely to take on the norms of the group, which is the most important point here. Group norms include the attitudes and behaviors that in many ways define the group and make it distinct. The more people identify with a group, the more they think and act like fellow group members when that identity is salient. If the norm of a group is to support a certain party, say African Americans’ support for the Democratic Party or...
evangelical Christians’ support for the Republican Party, then people who strongly identify with their social group will be much more likely to identify with and vote for that party.

Early survey work done on social groups and political behavior appeared in the classic *The American Voter*. By controlling many outside social influences with matched groups, the authors demonstrated the degree to which an individual’s political behavior was influenced by secondary group membership among union members, blacks, Catholics, and Jews. They were able to show that union members, blacks, and Jews were considerably more Democratic than one would expect from the group members’ other social characteristics, such as urban-rural residence, region, and occupational status. The fact that Catholics were not more Democratic in the 1950s than would be expected from their other social characteristics is consistent with Catholics becoming less Democratic as they moved into the middle class in more recent years.

The social factors that underlie partisanship reflect the partisan alignment in effect at any given time. During the New Deal alignment that began in the 1930s, partisan choices tended to fall along economic and social class lines. Blue-collar workers, those with lower incomes, those with lower education, recent immigrants, racial minorities, and Catholics were all more likely to vote Democratic. Members of the middle class, white-collar workers, the college educated, those with high incomes, whites of northern European background, and Protestants were more likely to vote Republican.

The remnants of the New Deal alignment can still be seen in the partisan choices of today. Table 5-2 displays the party identification, broken down by strength of identification, of various social groups in 2016. Unlike the earlier analysis of party images, the focus here is on the percentage of people within a social group who identify as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. Race and ethnicity are important, with a much higher proportion of Hispanics and especially blacks identifying as Democrats than whites. Because regional differences in partisanship have long been an important feature of the American political landscape, we look at Southerners and non-Southerners and further break down these categories by race. When looking at the aggregate numbers, the South and the rest of the country look similar. But significant differences across racial groups, especially whites, are clear. Southern whites are much more likely to be strong Republicans than their non-Southern counterparts. Similarly, Southern blacks are more likely to identify as strong Democrats than their non-Southern counterparts. Religion still has an impact on partisanship, but it has become more complicated than the difference between Protestants and Catholics in the 1950s. Fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants differ from more traditional mainline Protestants, and these differences have become more important politically in recent decades. This religious distinction is complicated by race, however, given that many African Americans belong to fundamentalist and evangelical churches but remain overwhelmingly Democratic. White evangelicals and fundamentalists are heavily Republican. The importance of religion in one’s life, referred to as “religiosity,” is another factor that influences
## Table 5-2: Party Identification, by Social Characteristics, 2016

<table>
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<th>Category (percentage of sample)</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Lean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men (48)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women (52)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics (12)</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-South (64)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South (36)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>18–24 (13)</td>
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<td>25–34 (16)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate (34)</td>
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<td>18</td>
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one’s partisanship. In Table 5-2, this can be seen most starkly in the disproportionate preference for the Democrats and independents among those who report having no religious affiliation. Union households remain a Democratic stronghold. Finally, the relationship between partisan identification and gender and education have shifted since the 1950s. Women are more likely to identify as Democrats than men, as are the highly educated.

To get a better sense of the relationship between social groups and party identification, we take a closer look at the partisanship of certain social groups over time. The context of specific elections can lead to a shift in partisanship, but the overall trends highlight the continuity of social group attachments to the two major parties. To make these analyses easier to interpret, we focus for the most part on the difference between the percentage of people within a particular social group who identify as Democrats and those who identify as Republicans. (We include people who lean toward a party with that partisan group.) A positive number means there are more Democrats than Republicans in that social group, whereas a negative number means there are more Republicans than Democrats.

From the early 1950s to the current time, there have been more people identifying as Democrats than as Republicans, so most of the numbers are positive.

**Gender**

The gender gap in the political preferences of men and women has been a favorite topic of political commentators since the early 1980s. Up until 1964, as Figure 5.3 shows, men were more likely than women to identify as Democrats. Since 1964, the reverse has been true. Women have been more likely than men to identify as Democrats, and this difference became especially pronounced after the 1980 presidential election when Republican Ronald Reagan defeated Democrat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (percentage of sample)</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Weak</td>
<td>Lean Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union households (16)</td>
<td>30 10</td>
<td>22 5</td>
<td>12 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestants (24)</td>
<td>18 12</td>
<td>23 7</td>
<td>15 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalists, evangelicals (21)</td>
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<td>6 6</td>
<td>18 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>No religion (15)</td>
<td>19 14</td>
<td>23 14</td>
<td>19 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5-3: Gender and Party Identification, 1952–2016


Note: Values represent the difference in the percentage of Democrats (strong, weak, and leaning) minus the percentage of Republicans (strong, weak, and leaning) in each category. Negative values mean there is a higher percentage of Republicans in the category than Democrats. Positive numbers mean there is a higher percentage of Democrats in the category than Republicans.

Jimmy Carter. The party identification gap between men and women became even wider in 1988 and was at its widest during the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies of the 1990s and early 2000s. The shifts in party identification have become more extreme beginning in 2008. Both men and women were much more likely to identify with the Democrats in 2008, although women remained more Democratic than men. In 2016, both men and women declined significantly in their Democratic attachments, with men becoming more Republican than Democratic for the first time since 1988. Women remained more Democratic, but the difference between Republican and Democratic identifiers decreased to an 11-point gap (compared to the 38-point gap in 2008). Given the earlier discussion about the influence of primary groups, the size of the gender gap may be surprising. Men and women interact with each other in primary groups throughout society, they select friends and spouses from among like-minded individuals, and they respond, as family units, to similar social and economic forces. The views of men and women differ on certain issues, with women usually being less approving of military action in international affairs and more supportive of...
humanitarian aid, but given the general influence of primary groups, differences in overall political preferences are seldom large.

The at times large gender gap in partisanship makes sense if we look at the “marriage gap.” Data show that married people are more likely to gravitate to the Republican Party, whereas unmarried people, especially unmarried women, are more likely to be Democrats. The reasons alleged for this range from commitment to traditional values to the economic positions of married versus unmarried heads of households. In looking at a possible marriage gap, the effects of age need to be taken into account, given that younger people are both more likely to be unmarried and more likely to identify as politically independent. Figure 5-4 shows the net difference in partisanship for white married and unmarried men and women. Married men and married women are more likely to be Republican regardless of age, and the slant toward the Republicans is especially large for younger married men. Single women are much more likely to be Democrats, especially single women thirty-five and older. Among single men, age matters a great deal. Younger single men lean toward the Republicans, whereas older single men lean toward the Democrats. The increased interest in the marriage gap appears to be warranted.

**FIGURE 5-4**  Net Partisan Advantage among White Married and Unmarried Men and Women, 2016

![Net Partisan Advantage among White Married and Unmarried Men and Women, 2016](chart)


*Note: Values represent the difference in the percentage of Democrats (strong, weak, and leaning) minus the percentage of Republicans (strong, weak, and leaning) in each category. Negative values mean there is a higher percentage of Republicans in the category than Democrats. Positive numbers mean there is a higher percentage of Democrats in the category than Republicans.*
Race and Ethnicity

The two major political parties have championed a variety of policies that have been associated with certain racial or ethnic groups. For example, the Republican Party came into existence in the 1850s in part because the Democrats and the Whigs did not offer opposing stands on the issue of abolition. Abraham Lincoln, who ran for president as a Republican, supported the end of slavery, and after the Civil War, Republicans pushed for the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments that expanded the rights of blacks in the United States. In more recent times, Democratic President Harry Truman pushed legislation integrating the then segregated military in 1948, and Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson pushed through both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which expanded the rights of African Americans. It is not surprising, given this history, that African Americans have been strongly Democratic in partisanship since the 1950s (see Figure 5-5) and typically vote more than 90 percent Democratic in presidential contests. The impact of group identification was dramatically revealed by increased black turnout and near unanimous black support.

FIGURE 5-5  Race, Ethnicity, and Party Identification, 1952–2016


Note: Values represent the difference in the percentage of Democrats (strong, weak, and leaning) minus the percentage of Republicans (strong, weak, and leaning) in each category. Negative values mean there is a higher percentage of Republicans in the category than Democrats. Positive numbers mean there is a higher percentage of Democrats in the category than Republicans.
for Obama in both 2008 and 2012. The percentage of blacks calling themselves “strong Democrats” jumped from 31 percent in 2004 to 48 percent in 2008 and 56 percent in 2012 with a black candidate on the Democratic ticket. This strong party identification slipped back to 41 percent in 2016, but African Americans remained the most Democratic racial group (see Table 5-2).

Whites have been the least Democratic of the racial groups in modern history, and this tendency to be more Republican has increased over time. Figure 5-5 shows a shift among whites from being 10 to 20 percent more Democratic than Republican to being evenly divided or slightly more Republican to being more decidedly Republican in 2016. Part of this shift can be explained by Southern whites moving from being heavily Democratic to being more Republican. Whites have for a long time, however, voted Republican in presidential elections, even when they tended to identify with the Democratic Party. Since 1952, whites have voted for the Democratic candidate in only three elections: 1964, when 64 percent of whites voted for Lyndon Johnson; 1992, when a plurality of whites (41 percent) voted for Bill Clinton; and 1996, when once again a plurality (46 percent) voted for Bill Clinton.23

Asian Americans and Latinos fall in between whites and African Americans. Asian Americans have varied in their partisan leaning, although the small number of Asian Americans in the ANES samples likely explain the large swings in partisanship. Nevertheless, Asian Americans in recent years have tended to identify more as Democrats than as Republicans. An ethnic group that has gained a great deal of attention in recent elections is Latinos. Both Democratic and Republican candidates have courted Latinos by doing such things as speaking Spanish at rallies and eating Mexican food at Mexican heritage festivals. Donald Trump’s promise to build a wall to keep people from Mexico and Central and South America from coming illegally into the United States was part of his broader promise to push for major immigration reform if he were elected president. Trump’s promises concerning immigration did not create a pro-Democratic Party groundswell among Latinos. While Democrats still outnumber Republicans among Latinos, the difference diminished in 2016.

**Religious Groups**

Religion has varied in its relative importance from election to election. Religion was a major factor in the 1960 presidential election when Democrat John F. Kennedy’s Catholicism was a major issue throughout the campaign and of great importance to both Catholics and non-Catholics. Religion continues to play an important role in politics today, even as the religious views of Americans have shifted over time. About 70 percent of Americans were Protestants through the mid-1960s; today they make up only 37 percent of the population. Those who say they have no religion have risen from 5 percent in 1972 to 21 percent in 2014.24 Historically, Protestants have tended to be more Republican and Catholics and Jews more Democratic. Figure 5-6 shows the shifts in party identification of the major religious groups over time. Again because of small numbers in ANES samples, the variation in party identification among Jews is large from election to


Note: Values represent the difference in the percentage of Democrats (strong, weak, and leaning) minus the percentage of Republicans (strong, weak, and leaning) in each category. Negative values mean there is a higher percentage of Republicans in the category than Democrats. Positive numbers mean there is a higher percentage of Democrats in the category than Republicans.

election, but it is clear that they have identified strongly with the Democrats and continue to do so today. Catholics, a traditionally Democratic-leaning group, has become more divided in recent years, and in 2016 there were equal percentages of Democratic and Republican Catholics. Protestants, both mainline and evangelical or fundamentalist, have tended to be the least likely religious group to identify with the Democratic Party, although they, like all religious groups, saw a spike in Democratic identification in 2008 when Barack Obama was elected to the White House. In 2016 there were more Republican (52 percent) than Democratic (41 percent) Protestants. The “Other” category includes all religious affiliations other than Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish as well as people who do not have a particular religious affiliation or who do not hold religious beliefs. This admittedly miscellaneous group has varied over time but in recent years has been the second most Democratic group (after Jews).

To get a more refined view of the impact of religion on party identification, we turn to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which conducted the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey in 2014. Figure 5-7 shows the party affiliations of a wide variety of religious groups. Mormons and evangelical Christians were the
most likely to identify as Republicans (70 percent and 56 percent, respectively). People affiliated with historically black churches were much more likely to be Democrats (80 percent), as were about two-thirds of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. Those unaffiliated with a religion, including atheists and agnostics, were more likely to be Democrats as well (54 percent). Mainline Protestants were almost evenly divided in their partisanship, with 44 percent identified as Republicans and 40 percent as Democrats. In 2014, Catholics who identified as Democrats (44 percent) outnumbered those who identified as Republicans (37 percent).

The partisan affiliations of religious groups are partially dependent, however, on religious beliefs and frequency of religious service attendance. For example, only 44 percent of Jews who pray at least daily identify as Democrats compared to 76 percent of Jews who seldom or never pray. Over 60 percent of evangelical Protestants who attend religious services at least once a week identify as Republicans compared to only 45 percent of those who seldom or never attend

![Figure 5-7](http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/party-affiliation/)

**FIGURE 5-7 Partisanship of Religious Affiliations in the United States, 2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Republican/Lean Republican</th>
<th>Democrat/Lean Democrat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical churches</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline churches</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historically black churches</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

relational services. Religious beliefs and practices are even more strongly related to ideology. People who are very religious are much more likely to be conservative than the less religious, and this holds true among evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, Catholics, black Protestants, and Jews. 25

A big question in the 2016 election concerned how evangelicals would vote given Donald Trump's marital history and his comments about groping women. While evangelical leaders were divided in their support for Trump before the election, evangelical voters overwhelmingly supported him in the election (80 percent voted for Trump, 16 percent voted for Clinton). 26 Political strategist Karl Rove's plan to utilize the evangelical churches as a way to mobilize conservative votes for George W. Bush in 2004 was based on an understanding of the importance of group interaction in reinforcing opinions and motivating political activity. Large social groups can influence people's political attitudes and behaviors through social identity and partisan images, but group identification reinforced by social interaction has an especially potent effect on group members. Regular church attenders can more easily pick up on group norms and have their political views reinforced through casual conversations with fellow congregants.

Age

One social group that has become increasingly important to American elections is youth. As mentioned in chapter 3, young people have turned out to vote at higher rates than usual in recent elections, and they have voted decidedly Democratic. When looking at those who identify with a party, eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds have been more likely to identify as Democrats than Republicans in recent elections, but this pattern did not hold in 2016. Figure 5-8 compares the partisan leanings of the young, the middle-aged, and older Americans. While all age groups are affected by what happens in specific elections, younger Americans leaned heavily Democratic in 2004 and continued that trend through 2012. In 2016, however, younger people became the only age group in which Republicans outnumbered Democrats. Those who are 65 or older are generally the least Democratic group, but not in 2016.

One possible explanation for the shift in party identification among young people is the category not included in the figure, namely, independents. A frequent story in the 2016 election was young people's support for Bernie Sanders and their frustration with the Democratic Party for not doing more to support Sanders in his bid for the nomination. If young people switched their party identification from Democrat to independent, we should see a spike in independents among the younger age cohort in 2016. Young people have historically had a tendency not to affiliate with either of the major parties. The ANES asks people if they think of themselves as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or something else. People who answer independent or something else are asked, in a follow-up question, if they think of themselves as closer to the Democratic or Republican Party. As we discussed in chapter 4, people who initially answer independent or something else but then say they feel closer to one party are referred to as leaners, and
these leaners behave very much like partisans. In fact, some political scientists consider them “closet partisans.” While leaners are very similar to partisans in their behavior, it is interesting to note differences in people’s willingness to claim a partisan versus an independent attachment right off the bat. As Figure 5-9 shows, older people (65 or older) are more likely to identify as Democrats or Republicans and less likely to say they are independents or something else, but this tendency has become less pronounced over time. Younger people (ages 18 to 29), on the other hand, have been almost evenly divided between partisans and independents since 1968. It was not until 2012 that partisans began to outnumber independents among younger people, and this tendency continued into 2016. Looking only at “pure” independents, which includes people who say they are independents and that they do not lean toward one party or the other, only 9 percent of people in the youngest age group placed themselves in this category, a number comparable to the other age groups and comparable to previous years. Given these results, it is difficult to point to independent versus partisan identifications as the explanation for young people’s 2016 shift to the Republican Party.

Another explanation could be ideology. Perhaps young people became much more conservative in the recent election, thereby pushing them into the Republican
Party. Unfortunately, this explanation is not supported by the data either. Ideology is measured by the ANES on a 7-point scale from extremely liberal (at 1) to extremely conservative (at 7). People in the eighteen to twenty-nine age group had a mean ideology score of 4.1, so almost right at the midpoint of “moderate.” People in the two oldest age groups (forty-five to sixty-four and sixty-five and older) were slightly more conservative, each with a mean of 4.4. The only age group on the liberal side was in the thirty to forty-four age group, who had an ideology mean of 3.8.

Finally, we consider race and ethnicity as a possible explanation for the shift among young people toward the Republicans in 2016. According to the ANES data, people under thirty in 2016 were 63 percent white and 37 percent people of color. The numbers look very different for those thirty and over: 83 percent were white and only 17 percent people of color. Given the tendency of people of color to identify more with the Democrats than whites, we can see if younger whites identify more as Republicans than older whites, if younger people of color identify more as Republicans than older people of color, or if all younger people shifted toward the Republicans. Table 5-3 shows that younger people, regardless of race or ethnicity, were more Republican in 2016 than people thirty and older. Among whites, 58 percent of young people identified as Republicans, compared to 51 percent of older people. An even larger gap exists among people of color. One-third of young people of color (34 percent) identified as Republican compared to 22 percent of older people of color.
Figure 5-8 shows a tendency of younger people to move more strongly in the direction of the winning party than other age groups. Party identification is measured by ANES in the survey administered before the election, so this tendency is not a reflection of younger people wanting to be on the winning side. Rather, younger people tend to be less entrenched in their party identification and therefore are better situated to be reactive to what is happening during the election cycle. All age groups were more likely to identify as Democrats when Barack Obama ran for president in 2008 and 2012, and younger people were especially likely to do so. In 2016, all age groups became more Republican, but younger people were more likely to move in the Republican direction. The explanation for the shift in party identification among younger people might therefore be that they are an especially good bellwether of the times.

### Social Class

Social class received a great deal of attention in *The American Voter*. In general, analysis of social class assumes that differences exist in the economic and social interests of social classes and that these conflicting interests will be translated into political forces. Given a choice between “middle class” and “working class,” a majority of Americans are able to place themselves in a general social position, even to the point of including themselves in the “upper” or “lower” level of a class. Even though individual self-ratings are not perfectly congruent with the positions that social analysts would assign those individuals on the basis of characteristics such as occupation, income, and education, a general social class structure is apparent. Nonetheless, about one-third of American adults say that they never think of themselves as members of a social class, a much higher percentage than occurs in European countries. Relatedly, union membership, a key aspect of working class identification, has decreased significantly since the 1950s, falling from 35 percent of wage and salary workers in 1954 to only 11 percent in 2015. Union members have historically been one-sidedly Democratic, but in recent years, they have been

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**TABLE 5-3  Party Identification by Age and Racial/Ethnic Group, 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18–29 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>18–29 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>old</td>
<td>and older</td>
<td>old</td>
<td>and older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

volatile in voting for presidents and willing to ignore the announced preferences of their union leaders. After an all-out effort by union leadership for Walter F. Mondale in 1984, Mondale barely outpolled Ronald Reagan among union households. Conversely, Bill Clinton did very well among union members, despite union leaders’ general lack of enthusiasm for him. In 2016, 40 percent of people in union households identified with the Democratic Party versus 22 percent with the Republican Party (excluding leaners), and Hillary Clinton outpolled Donald Trump 61 percent to 35 percent in this demographic.29

Serious questions have been raised about whether social class still makes sense in American politics. Some people such as Thomas Frank in his book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* argue that lower- and working-class whites are more likely to be Republicans these days because of their conservatism on social issues. When they vote Republican, they are voting against their economic interests. In an in-depth empirical analysis of Frank’s claims, Larry Bartels finds that there is still a relationship between social class, economic interests, and party identification, with those in the lower and working class being more supportive of liberal economic policies and the Democratic Party. On top of this, Americans still associate the Democratic Party with the working class and poor and the Republican Party with the upper class and rich. There is some suggestion in the data, however, that being in a lower social class is related to more conservative positions on social issues.30

A major issue in the 2016 election was whether the economic recovery from the economic crisis of 2008 had been felt by the lower and middle classes. Along with Canada, the United States is usually regarded as an extreme case among developed democracies for the insignificance of social class in political behavior; in most European democracies, social class is of greater consequence. Figure 5-10 offers an opportunity to assess whether Donald Trump’s economic appeals to the working and middle classes affected partisanship. It shows the difference between Democratic and Republican identifiers, when data are available, within each of the social classes. People who identify as lower or working class are consistently more likely to identify with the Democratic Party whereas the upper-middle and upper classes are more likely to identify with the Republican Party. The middle class, often considered the mainstay of American politics, falls in between these two groups, although it leans Democratic. This pattern holds in general in 2016, although the Trump campaign’s emphasis on the lagging economic recovery for the working and middle classes throughout the campaign appears to have had an effect especially among the lower and working class. Whereas this group was heavily Democratic in 2008 and, less so, in 2012, there was only an 11-point gap between Democrats and Republicans in 2016.

The dissatisfaction among the lower and working classes with the recovery after the 2008 recession reflects the fact that the recovery did not help to reduce income inequality in the United States. The disparity between the rich and the poor in the United States has reached, since the 1980s, historically high levels. Disparity in wealth that increased significantly in the late 1990s and throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century did not decrease after efforts to dig the nation out of the recession were put in place by the Obama administration. In 2013, the wealthiest
families (those in the top 10 percent of the wealth distribution) possessed 76 percent of family wealth in the United States. The bottom 50 percent, in contrast, held only 1 percent of family wealth.\(^{31}\) Even with the increased disparity in wealth, social class was less likely to be related to party identification in 2016 than it was in 2008, before the effects of the economic crisis were keenly felt by most Americans. However, this is not to say that social inequality means nothing to Americans, nor is it to suggest that there are not political consequences to increasing perceptions of social inequality. Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal have shown how increases in the divide between the rich and the poor are highly correlated with polarization in Congress.\(^{32}\) This polarization has bled to the mass level as well; some argue that anger over the gap between the wealthiest 1 percent and everyone else was the impetus for the social movement Occupy Wall Street, which was supported by a strong majority of Democrats and opposed by a large majority of Republicans.\(^{33}\)

**Regions**

The regions of the United States have distinct cultures, histories, and social makeups that affect their attachments to the political parties. The Civil War, which
pit Americans against Americans in deadly battles from 1861 to 1865, established a major partisan rift that lasted over a century. The Republican Party, led by President Abraham Lincoln, argued for the Union and championed abolition. The Democratic Party split, with the Southern Democrats taking the side of having the South secede and continuing slavery. Not surprisingly, the South was strongly Democratic and the North strongly Republican for years following the end of the Civil War. As the parties addressed different issues over time, the regional makeup of the two parties began to shift. A major shift occurred when the Democrats, under President Lyndon B. Johnson, pushed through civil and voting rights legislation in the mid-1960s. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler provide evidence that Southerners did not suddenly change from the Democratic to the Republican Party after this legislation passed. Rather, the shift was slow and involved younger Southerners identifying with the Republicans rather than older Southerners shifting their partisan identity from the Democrats to the Republicans.

At the same time the South was becoming more Republican, the Northeast region of the United States was becoming more Democratic. These shifts have led to less regional differentiation in party identification across the United States, as Figure 5-11 shows. The differences in partisanship across

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**FIGURE 5-11**


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**Source:** American National Election Studies, available at www.electionstudies.org.

**Note:** Values represent the difference in the percentage of Democrats (strong, weak, and leaning) minus the percentage of Republicans (strong, weak, and leaning) in each category. Negative values mean there is a higher percentage of Republicans in the category than Democrats. Positive numbers mean there is a higher percentage of Democrats in the category than Republicans.
the four major regions of the United States that were apparent in the 1950s have essentially disappeared in current years. While the partisan makeup of regions has largely converged, voting in presidential elections has a definite regional flavor. The “blue state-red state” distinction is real when it comes to state-level winners and losers in recent presidential contests. The South and much of the Midwest and near West have consistently voted for Republican candidates, whereas the Northeast and West have consistently voted for Democratic candidates. Only a handful of states are competitive and, as we discuss in chapter 8, these “swing” states get a great deal of attention from campaigns.

SOCIAL CROSS-PRESSURES

The discussion so far has focused on social characteristics one at a time. Of course, people are members of many social groups, not just one. A woman is not just a woman; she is also from a certain racial or ethnic group, social class, age group, religious affiliation, and so on. One of the major ideas developed in the early voting studies by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and other researchers at the Bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University was the “cross-pressure hypothesis.” The idea behind the cross-pressure hypothesis is simple: if all of your social groups lean toward one party, you are likely to hold that party identification more strongly because it is consistently reinforced; if your social groups lean toward differing parties, you are pulled in two directions, and you will likely moderate your partisanship or be an independent. Basically, the hypothesis concerns the situation in which two (or more) social forces or tendencies act on the individual, one in a Republican direction and the other in a Democratic direction.

In the diagram below, we use the dimensions of rural-urban residence and age, which is taken from Ted Brader, Joshua Tucker, and Andrew Therriault. People can live in urban or rural areas, and they can be younger or older. How these two characteristics combine can make a big difference politically.
Some individuals are predisposed or pushed in a consistent way, such as urban youth, whose residence and age both predispose them in a Democratic direction, or rural older people, who are predisposed in a Republican direction.

Some individuals face a social context in which they are pulled in both directions, or cross-pressured, because their social groups support different parties. Young people who live in rural areas are being pulled in different directions by the two parties, as are older people who live in urban areas.

The cross-pressure hypothesis asserts that individuals under consistent pressure behave differently from individuals under cross-pressure. The predictions made under the cross-pressure hypothesis are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consistent pressure</th>
<th>Cross-pressure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight-ticket voting</td>
<td>Split-ticket voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early decision on vote</td>
<td>Late decision on vote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High interest in politics</td>
<td>Low interest in politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of information</td>
<td>Low level of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent attitudes</td>
<td>Conflicting attitudes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Receiving consistent cues from one’s social groups makes thinking about and engaging in politics easy. A strong party identification makes it easier to decide for whom to vote, to decide earlier, and to care enough about electoral outcomes to get informed. When people face cross-pressures, on the other hand, dealing with politics becomes more difficult.

People who face cross-pressures in their primary or secondary groups can respond in a variety of ways. One response is not to care about the cross-pressures. People do not have to feel a sense of identity with all of the groups to which they belong. A rural young person can strongly identify with and feel strongly attached to rural America and not identify with young people. While her social groups differ in their partisan leanings, she doesn’t experience the cross-pressure because her rural identity leads her to fully endorse being a Republican. People in the group with whom she does not identify, in this example young people, do not hold any sway in her thinking. Another option is that people can respond by fully embracing the conflict that cross-pressures introduce and not giving in to the oppositional forces. People who care a great deal about politics and hold strong political attitudes do not view the prospect of facing opposing attitudes as a problem. A rural young person might get push back from young people she knows, but she will continue to espouse her Republican opinions regardless of what they think.

While some people seem to be invigorated by taking on the opposition, many people do not like conflict when it comes to politics and therefore have to deal with cross-pressures in a different way. One common response is ambivalence. People who hear opposing viewpoints within their social contexts can end up holding opposing viewpoints themselves. When it comes to welfare, for example, people can “extol individualism and decry big government” while at the same time feel “sympathy for the poor” and support “state action to ameliorate existing social ills.” The more people hold ambivalent attitudes, the more intrapersonal conflict they experience. And the more uncertain they are in their political choices, the longer it takes to make decisions and the more moderate their decisions tend to be.” These people are the swing voters who attract so much attention during elections. The ambivalent pay attention to politics and understand the arguments; they just wait until the last minute to decide.

Another common response to cross-pressures is avoidance, specifically avoidance of politics. Within primary groups, people are often averse to the interpersonal conflict that can occur when the subject of politics comes up. They “care more about social harmony in their immediate face-to-face personal relationships than about the larger political world.” It is easier to dismiss politics and view it as unimportant and not interesting than to be politically engaged and face frequent conflict with friends, family, and coworkers. The cross-pressed people who respond with avoidance are less likely to form opinions about the parties or candidates and are less likely to vote.

Fortunately for these poor souls who feel cross-pressured, it is likely that the extent to which cross-pressuring occurs is declining. As we mentioned earlier, people tend to have social networks that are quite homogeneous, which means they
will have their partisanship and political attitudes reinforced rather than cross-pressured. We also know that people have sorted themselves into the two major parties along ideological grounds. Democrats are now much more likely to be liberal, and Republicans are much more likely to be conservative, which means that people will feel less attitudinally cross-pressured. Matthew Levendusky argues that this partisan sorting has made people “more loyal voters of their team” in the sense that they are more likely to vote a straight party ticket and be biased in favor of their party. It is also likely that partisan sorting has led to the increased partisan homogeneity of social networks. However, as discussed in chapter 6, as much as 40 percent of the public holds ideological positions on social and economic issues that are at odds with the contemporary partisan divide, leaving these people stuck in the middle of a system that does not represent the totality of their views. Cross-pressures can play an important role in moderating social conflict so long as groups are willing to get along. In the current polarized environment, the political parties are increasingly hostile to each other and often appear unwilling to work together. Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood found that partisans increasingly view supporters of the opposing party as the outgroup and “enthusiastically voice hostility for the opposing party and its supporters.” They find that hostility toward and discrimination against opposing party supporters is higher than hostility or discrimination based on race. With fewer cross-pressures to moderate the intensity of ingroup-outgroup relations, there is little to mellow partisan polarization among Americans.

Notes


10. While these data are dated, there is no reason to expect the dynamic to have shifted toward greater heterogeneity over time, and with the increased polarization in the United States, the homogeneity of partisan matches might even be higher.


27. Bruce E. Keith, David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth Orr, Mark C. Westlye, and Raymond E. Wolfinger, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: Copyright ©2019 by SAGE Publications, Inc. This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.


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**Suggested Readings**


Klar, Samara, and Yanna Krupnikov. *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. An innovative study showing that many independents hide their true partisanship from friends and colleagues and are also less likely to engage in important political activities that sustain democracy.


Internet Resources

The website of the American National Election Studies, www.electionstudies.org, has extensive data on social characteristics and party identification from 1952 to the present. Click on Resources menu and then click on the link for tables and graphs under “The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior.” Scroll down to “Partisanship and Evaluation of the Political Parties.” For every political item, there is a breakdown for each social characteristic in every election year.

For current data on partisans and independents, you can find analysis on websites, such as the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press at www.peoplepress.org and the Gallup poll at www.gallup.com.