

# **WORKING PAPER**

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*(El presente texto forma parte de un trabajo en curso sobre partidismo. Aunque proporciona el contexto general de la ponencia “EL PARTIDISMO NEGATIVO COMO FORMA DE IDENTIDAD SOCIAL MÁS ALLÁ DE LA TEORÍA TAJFELIANA”, su contenido no coincide de forma exacta con la exposición oral, que incluye algunos extremos todavía no desarrollados en este texto. Por tanto, se facilita como material de apoyo para la discusión académica y no constituye una versión definitiva del trabajo.)*

## **Introduction**

As political scientist E. E. Schattschneider stated: “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties” (1942: 1). It is no surprising that there is an extensive body of literature on their origins (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), changes (Katz & Mair, 1995), and functions (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Key, 1964). However, few topics have sparked as much interest as the question of how parties shape the way citizens make up their minds.

Since the publication of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) the concept of *party identification* has driven most research on political behavior, whether to validate, extend, or contest it. Outside the U.S., particularly in Continental Europe, scholars were more skeptical, focusing on *ideology* instead. Nevertheless, not only is the relationship between these two concepts uncertain (Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Richardson, 1991), but the left-right schema also operates mainly as a theoretical adaptation of the Michigan model for multiparty systems (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990). Moreover, *negative partisanship* has been on the rise worldwide in recent decades (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Haime & Cantú, 2022; Mayer, 2017; Medeiros & Nöel, 2014).

This paper reviews the most important claims and counterclaims drawn from more than 70 years of research on partisanship with a particular reference to the European context. The major contribution involves integrating the widespread and complex literature on positive partisanship with the contemporary scholarship on negative partisanship. Ultimately, this framework advances our understanding of actual party-individual linkages and charts the course for future theoretical endeavors.

## **The Dual Nature of Partisanship: Identities and Attitudes**

To explore the diverse perspectives on the relationship between parties and individuals, this paper adopts a minimal conceptualization. We use the term *partisanship* to describe the tendency of voters to repeatedly vote for the same party (Converse and Pierce 1985; Miller 1991). Following Bartle & Bellucci (2009), we can distinguish two explanations of this tendency: the identity-based and the attitudinal approaches.

The original formulation of party identification constitutes the precursor of the former. Michigan Four assert that people identify with political parties as they do with groups formed along occupational, ethnic, or religious lines. Furthermore, parties occupy a central position in the world of politics. Drawing on *reference group theory* (Merton, 1957), psychological membership in a party was hypothesized to exert the greatest influence in the individual's orientation to politics (Campbell et. al., 1960: 323-328).

Nonetheless, social psychology was still in its early stages at that time. This limitation most likely led Campbell and his colleagues (1960: 121) to define partisan identity mainly as an affective orientation. Indeed, they developed much of their theory based on findings from the psychology of attitudes. From this perspective, partisanship has been considered a strong attitude (Converse, 1995; Miller & Shanks, 1966) at the center of an interrelated network of them (Lodge & Hamill, 1986). Both acquired before adulthood, resistant to change and reinforced thought life cycle (Converse, 1969; Cassel, 1993).

Attitudes constitute "a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, which exerts a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related" (Allport, 1935). Then, strong partisan attitudes should lead to broad, stable partisan worldviews and behavior.

Regardless, attitude strength is somewhat imprecise construct (Petty & Krosnick, 1995: 2). Michigan heritage also focusses primarily on affective linkages, while attitudes are composed of cognitive components as well (Vallerand, 1994; Smith & Mackie, 2007). The latter, often referred to as *party images*<sup>1</sup>, were supposed to remain favorable to partisan orientation due to the *perceptual screen* raised by identification with a party. But two major criticisms soon prompted further reflection on the exogeneity of partisanship.

European scholarship held that voters' social location (Campbell & Valen, 1966; Budge & Farlie, 1976) or left-right placement (Shively, 1972; Pappi, 1996) were the real anchor of politics (we resume later this point). American revisionist instead viewed party

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<sup>1</sup>Party image is the cognitive representation of parties in citizen's mind composed of its surface features (Butler y Rose, 1960: 17-18)

preference determined by voter's issues stances (Jackson, 1975; Page & Jones, 1979) and retrospective evaluation of party's performance (Key, 1966; McKuen et. al, 1989).

Fiorina (1981) famously claimed that partisanship encapsulate citizens' "running tally" of previous experiences with parties. New observations can affect the overall evaluation of parties, altering cognitions about them —i.e. party images—, and, therefore, party attachments. Partisanship rooted in this form of responsive and informed deliberation is conceptualized as *instrumental*. In contrast, *expressive partisanship* encourages party members to defend group status (Huddy et. al, 2018).

This "pure" identity-based approach to partisanship was introduced by Steven Greene (1999, 2004). Based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), he argued that bipolar partisan attitudes are a predictable psychological consequence of an individual's self-perceived membership in a political party (Greene, 1999: 395).

Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership" (Tajfel, 1981: 255). Social categorization is a cognitive process through which individuals organize the complex social environment by dividing it into two distinct categories: in-group (*us*) and out-group (*them*). Once individuals categorize themselves as members of a group, they strive to maintain a positive self-esteem<sup>2</sup> by emphasizing intergroup differences and comparing their in-group favorably.

Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) also predicts that when partisan identities become salient, individuals depersonalize their self-perception along stereotypical dimensions that define in-party membership. This fosters a unified framework of political attitudes and behavior.

### **The decline of mass partisanship?**

Partisanship was particularly challenged during the 1970s and 1980s because of the weakening of party attachments. American identifiers —and strength of identification— had been falling since the late 1960s (Carmines et al., 1987) and more and more citizens were feeling neutral toward both parties. As a result, straight-ticket voting declined and fortunes of third parties improved (Wattenberg, 1984).

Europe's oldest party systems followed a similar pattern (Crewe y Denver, 1985; Dalton et al., 1984), experiencing a surge in electoral volatility and the emergence of new political parties (Harrop y Miller, 1987; Dalton et al., 2000)

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<sup>2</sup> Greene adopts an ambiguous stance on the role played by this motivation in partisanship. At times, he even argues against it (see Greene et al., 2002: 11) but offers unconvincing arguments.

The decline of mass partisanship was predominantly concentrated among the young cohorts (Niemi & Weisberg, 1976), whose ties to parties were reshaped by structural changes of advanced industrial societies (Dalton et al., 1984). Under the *modernization hypothesis*, this transformation altered both institutions and citizens (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Political parties opened up to broader audiences (Kirchheimer, 1966) and become more professionalized (Katz & Mair, 1995), and candidates assumed a central role in political communication (Wattenberg, 1991). Greater cognitive mobilization —associated with higher educational attainment— allowed new publics to judge politics for themselves (Dalton, 1984) and post-materialist values transcended traditional partisan alignments (Inglehart, 1990).

In Europe, research on partisan dealignment also regarded the erosion of traditional cleavages, particularly class and religious voting (Butler & Stokes, 1974; Franklin, 1992). It was widely anticipated that this phenomenon would become generalized through generational replacement, leading some scholars to predict the “end of parties” (Burnham, 1970).

But affective polarization made parties great again. New polarization had only weak ideological underpinnings. Rather, it was fueled by the power of partisanship as a social identity. Seminal scholars showed that there had been a major change in affective evaluation of political parties in U.S over the past two decades: while feeling of the in-party had changed very little, feelings about the opposing party had become much more negative (Iyengar et al., 2012, Iyengar et al., 2019).

Since then, the negative component of partisanship —*negative partisanship*— has attracted increasing attention.

### **The Forgotten Side of Partisanship: Negative Identities and Attitudes**

The original concept of partisanship already encompassed negative orientations (Campbell et al., 1966: 122). Yet, this dimension was subsequently overlooked in their theoretical and empirical work. Later, just as with its positive counterpart, negative partisanship has been approached from both attitudinal and identity-based perspective.

Attitudinal approach to negative partisanship —also known as *partisan disdain* (Lelkes, 2021)— explain party loyalty exacerbated by aversion toward the out-party (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Formulated early on as the *hostility hypothesis*, it is argued that makes compromise with opposition unthinkable (Maggiotto & Piereson, 1977: 766).

In psychology, attitudes can possess positive, negative, or neutral valences (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), with each stemming from unique mechanisms and being activated by different events (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). Negative partisan evaluations are not

simply the mirror image of positive ones but rather play a distinct and independent role in vote choice (Medeiros & Noël, 2014).

No negative partisanship research can be ascribed to instrumental partisanship *per se*. Citizens may simply dislike a political party due to negative evaluations of its leadership, performance, or policies (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022). Still, negative partisanship has been considered as a strong attitude: “an affective repulsion [...] more stable than a current dislike and more strongly held than a passing opinion” (Caruana et al., 2015: 772).

The dominant identity-based approach to negative partisanship relies on post-SIT frameworks. Here, social identity is viewed as an equilibrium point reached from a fundamental tension between human need for belonging and distinctiveness. Because this equilibrium is context-specific, the relative weight of positive and negative identification varies accordingly (Brewer, 1991). Negative and positive partisanship are probed to be distinct constructs that differentially influence political behavior (Areal, 2024; Bankert, 2021).

Others have extended this view by considering outgroup-only categorizations as a possible self-categorization in intergroup contexts (Leonardelli & Toh, 2015). Characterized by the exclusive psychological relevance of “them”, this phenomenon is known as *negational identity* (Zhong et al., 2008). For instance, American leaners (Weisberg, 1980; Lee et al., 2022) or Brazilian antipetistas (Samuels & Zucco, 2018; Fuks et al., 2021) tend to be negative partisans.

Social groups also influence an individual’s self-concept by shaping their values. Values build a sense of unified and transsituational personal identity by providing guiding principles or conceptions of what is desirable (Hitlin, 2003). In politics, negative partisanship involves a fundamental rejection of an opposing party’s worldview and signals an individual’s political belonging and moral boundaries (Mayer & Russo, 2024).

### **The Origins of Mass Partisanship**

Both attitudinal and identity-based approaches agree that partisanship is a consequence of limited human cognitive resources. Categorization is central to cognition across all domains of experience because it allows us to identify objects and stimuli and assign meaning to them. Adults naturally classify people —and frequently themselves— into social categories and develop a belief system that assigns them a place in the social world. In this manner, partisanship serves as a *heuristic* device that reduces the mental effort required to organize and interpret political stimuli. Yet, what drives individuals to align with specific political groups rather than others?

Party affiliation seemed almost complete in earlier life (Hyman, 1959: 64) so it was established that parents play a dominant role in shaping children’s political orientations

(Campbell et al., 1960). This classic assumption remains supported by recent empirical evidence (Boonen, 2015; Jennings et al., 2009) but intergenerational transmission is far from automatic (Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Rico & Jennings, 2016).

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1969, 1986), human learning is fundamentally observational. Children frequently reproduce the attitudes and behaviors displayed within the parental household. Nonetheless, this cognitive-behavioral process is contingent upon several factors. Transmission success is enhanced by the parents' political involvement, attitudinal extremity, and cue consistency —both between parents and across time (Jennings & Niemi, 2009).

Salient identities are not only better transmitted but also shape the development of other political attachments (Rico & Jennings, 2016). Likewise, labels carrying higher heuristic value are more commonly transmitted from parents to offspring. Left-right and political bloc labels thrive in multiparty systems with either a single central cleavage or cross-cutting cleavages. Conversely, partisanship offers a more efficient solution in two-party systems and systems with limited pluralism (Ventura, 2001).

That is, under conditions of low competitiveness, partisan identities can crystallize even within multiparty settings (see also Ortega & Montabes, 2011). But even within multiparty systems characterized by high levels of volatility, a strong parent-child party preference correlation persists (Hooghe & Boonen, 2015). To account for this, two distinct transmission pathways must be considered: a direct route, whereby parents pass down their specific party preferences, and an indirect route, in which they transmit their left-right orientations and issue positions to their offspring (Durmuşoğlu et al., 2023).

Transmission should also be considered an interactive process<sup>3</sup> in which both parents and offspring exhibit perceptual and motivational differences (Hatemi & Ojeda, 2021). When children perceive themselves to be closer to their parents, they are more likely to adopt their partisanship. The greater the quality of family communication, the higher the likelihood of transmission of partisan attachment (Mayer et al., 2024). In contrast, upper educational attainment, by fostering independent thinking and exposing individuals to alternative socialization agents<sup>4</sup>, increases the likelihood of diverging from parental values (Dinas, 2014).

While political predispositions formed early in life foster long-term adult stability (Boonen, 2015; Jennings et al., 2009), generational replacement is considered one of the

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<sup>3</sup> Bidirectional influences are also found, particularly in first-generation immigrant families (Benish-Weisman et al., 2013)

<sup>4</sup> Although general attitudes of young people, like partisanship, seem to be more strongly influenced by parents than by peers (Tedin, 1980), peer environments can alter youthful preferences (see Newcomb, 1943).

main forces driving social change (Hooghe, 2004). During their *formative* or *impressionable years*, between ages 15 to 25<sup>5</sup> (Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Rekker et al., 2019), individuals undergo significant cognitive maturation. Their political preferences increasingly align with their social characteristics and issue stances (Sears & Valentino, 1997), a process also known as *partisan sorting* in U.S. studies.

Young people learn about the party system as it is structured around the conflict dimensions salient at that specific historical moment. Political context offers opportunities to abandon inherited partisan allegiance, driving broader processes of partisan dealignment or realignment (Carmines et al., 1987). Van der Brug and Rekker (2021) show that the determinants of party preference vary across generations of voters socialized in different historical periods. Specifically, sociocultural issues now exert a stronger influence on the party choices of younger generations. Attention to gender equality, often associated with left-wing positions, may account for daughters' lower probability of taking over their parents' right-wing positions and far right party affinities (Avdeenko y Siedler, 2017; van Ditmars, 2023). Yet, the generational component driving these changes remains a matter of ongoing debate (see van der Brug & Kritzinger, 2026 for an extensive discussion).

Despite their low levels of political sophistication, children use political markers to divide their social world (Schwartzstein & Hwang, 2026). Moreover, parental influence extends to negative orientations, shaping aversion toward opposing political parties (Boonen, 2019). Due to rising parental homogeneity and polarization, contemporary adolescents manifest greater out-party distrust and become more polarized than earlier generations (Tyler & Iyengar, 2023). Indeed, some children manifest outgroup derogation during early childhood (Lay et al., 2023).

While the inherited social milieu exerts little influence on youthful orientations, a suggestive body of scholarship highlights the role of genetic factors (Rico & Jennings, 2016). Twin and adoption studies conclude that genetics account for a substantial share of variance in political attitudes (Alford et al., 2005; Cesarini et al., 2014). Complex interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental stimuli should prompt political scientists to avoid oversimplified direct pathways to parent-child resemblance—rejecting both biological determinism via genes and automatic transmission via imitation.

In conclusion, adolescence represents a clear period of heightened sensitivity to political events. As people grow older, they tend to “get set on their ways” and become less like to change (Franklin, 2004). Partisanship generally becomes less responsive to political events throughout the life-course (Bartels & Jackman, 2014). Furthermore, the prevalence

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<sup>5</sup> These learning effects peak around age 18, potentially driven by the attainment of voting rights in most countries.

and strength of partisanship increase as people age (Van der Brug & Franklin, 2018). One possible causal mechanism is given by turnout as elections offer individuals the opportunity to reaffirm their identity by casting a vote for their preferred party (Dinas, 2014: 451). This behavior heightens the sense of fitting a prototypical partisan stereotype and prompts individuals to view their party more positively than before the election.