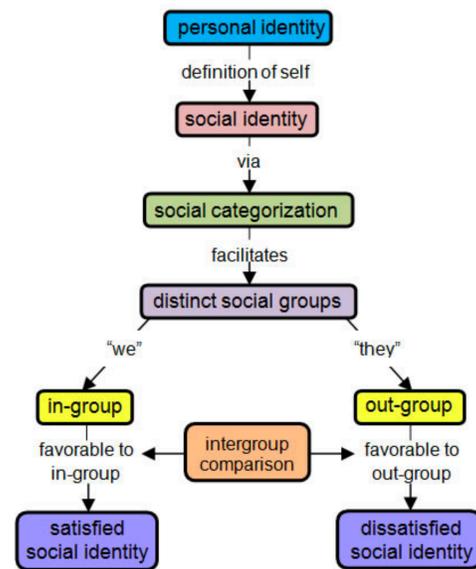


GROUP IDENTITIES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

By: Theo Rose

ABSTRACT

Derived from the expansive field of political psychology, group identities represent a salient subject in the matter of politics. Group identities occur across a wide range of sociodemographic factors, including income, gender, race, and partisanship, to name a few key examples. People tend to form and use groups to simplify their view of the world, with experiments such as the Robber's Cave experiment providing a basic demonstration of such a function. Upon establishing group identities, people make notable political alignments in accordance with their groups. With such alignments, people engage in several psychological and social phenomenon that can alter their conceptions of the world and influence the way they behave socially and politically. In modern American Politics, partisanship serves as an increasingly salient group identity, with its incorporation of other social identities creating a strong polarizing effect and generally challenging governmental efficacy.



HISTORY OF GROUP IDENTITIES

Group theory largely serves as a function of 19th and 20th century social science research. Serving as a major development in social psychology research, Polish social psychologist, Henri Tajfel proposed social identity theory following work completed in the 1960's and 1970's. In their "minimal group" experiments, Tajfel created conditions barely intended to evoke the notion of groups, coincidentally revealing the ease with which ingroup favoritism arises. Social identities assume a definition of "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the emotional significance attached to that membership." Tajfel proposed that stereotyping derives from a normal cognitive process that renders a tendency to group things together, with subsequent exaggerations of the differences between groups and homogeneity within groups (Ellemers). Arthur Bentley assumes a large role in recognizing the role of groups in politics. Political psychology now comes to recognize that individuals tend to base their political thinking around social groups, with considerable implications for party and policy preference (Achen and Bartels).

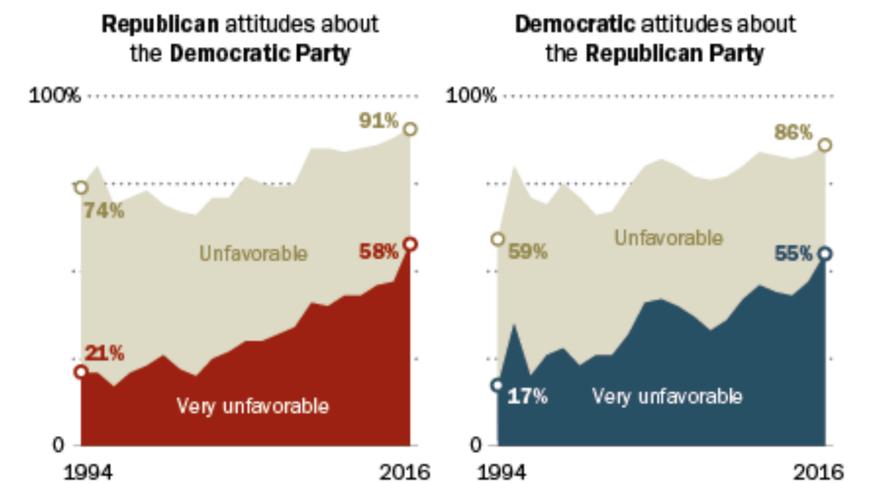
POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

- The tendency to engage in stereotyping, prejudice, and emotional volatility generally reflects social polarization
- Early Studies emphasized the role of interest groups in representing manifestations and actions of groups
- Out group stereotyping proves most pertinent in the presence of salient or threatening situations (Achen and Bartels)
- Salient identities in American politics include those formed along racial, religious, and ideological lines
- Alignment of multiple social identities under one construct such as partisanship creates a heightened effect for the role of groups and renders considerable chance for polarization (Mason)
- Despite evidence to the contrary, citizens presently perceive a considerable difference between the two parties in the country
- The increase in in partisan-ideological-identity differences occurred at more than double the size of the increase in partisan policy differences (Mason)
- Cross cutting cleavages serve as a means for people to look past multifaceted group identities in order to achieve more favorable political outcomes, with increased partisan sorting rendering fewer cross-cutting cleavages in American politics (Mason)
- Given peoples' desire for group victory and value of group belonging, a greater interest exists in achieving party victory than reaching ideal outcomes based on the effect of policy (Achen and Bartels)

BROADER EFFECT

- Partisanship presently assumes many social consequences ultimately manifesting in social-distance-bias
- People reveal less willingness and desire to spend occasional social time, live as next-door neighbors, have as close friends, or marry members of the opposite political party
- Strong partisans with cross-cutting cleavages reveal the greatest tolerance for out party members (Mason)
- Issue positions depend highly upon group and partisan cues, without people recognizing the effect their identifications have (Cohen)

Majorities have deeply negative views of other party



Source: Survey conducted April 12-19, 2016.

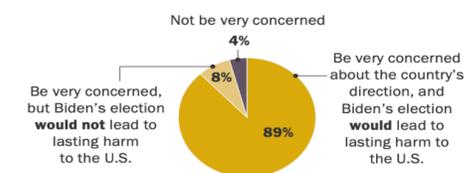
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Future Research

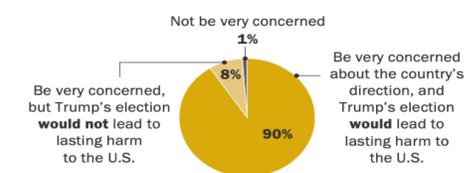
- Addressing polarization must reach beyond its political manifestation and address social psychological underpinnings
- Intergroup contact can generally help reduce prejudice between groups, with civic assemblies serving as a potential means to accomplish greater interaction
- Perspective taking can provide a method for people to recognize their commonalities
- Identification of common, "superordinate" goals serve as a major method in social psychology to help reduce the animosity between groups
- Increases in policy-based voting through referendums could increase policy based voting (Brick)

Both Trump and Biden supporters say if the other wins, it would result in lasting harm to the country

% of **Trump supporters** who say they would _____ about the direction of the country if Joe Biden was elected president



% of **Biden supporters** who say they would _____ about the direction of the country if Donald Trump was reelected president



Note: Based on registered voters. No answer responses not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 30-Oct. 5, 2020.

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Figure 1. Attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 by political party of respondent, March to August 2020



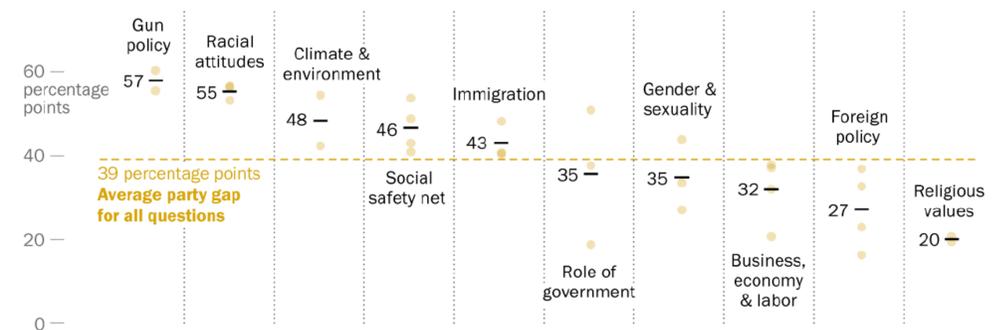
Source: Gallup Panel COVID Tracking Survey. Note: 117,602 responses from U.S. adults from March 19 to August 30, 2020.

BROOKINGS

Wide partisan gaps on political values across a number of areas, but the largest differences are on guns and race

Difference between Republicans and Democrats on 30 political values items

— Average party gap for all questions within the topic
● Party gap on one question within the given topic



Notes: Data above represents gaps on 30 different values questions grouped thematically. See appendix for full details and question wording. Partisans include leaners.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Sept. 3-15, 2019.

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