U.S. National Elections
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Week 5: Parties
The Debates

- How did you watch?
Party is the most important factor influencing voters’ political understandings and choices.

Party is an (emotional) identity and a (rational) heuristic.

The size and composition of the party coalitions define the balance of power and terms of political conflict.

Party elites have polarized, whereas citizens have sorted.
What Is a Party?

Several definitions:

- Team of politicians ("office seekers") cooperating to win electoral office
- Coalition of interest groups and activists ("policy seekers") seeking control of and benefits from government
- Voters (like consumers) not included in the party
Why Parties?

Solve several problems:

- Regulate access to ballot through nominations (coordination problem)
- Mobilizing resources and voters (collective action problem)
- Structuring political decisions (problem of social choice)
Party in the Electorate

Three aspects:
- Party in government
- Party as organization
- Party in the electorate

Party Identification (PID)
- Classic definition (The American Voter, 1960): a voter’s enduring emotional attachment to the party as social group
  → socialized (like religion)
  → pre-political
  → perceptual screen
Updates to Classic PID

Rational Choice
- PID based on policy preferences/ideology
- Information-saving decision rule (heuristic)
- Updated quickly based on experience (“running tally”)

Social Identity (Partisan Hearts and Minds)
- Identification “with” vs. identification “as”
- Self-categorization based on party coalitions
  → What kind of person is a Democrat? A Republican?
- Group competition and group status
Partisan Bias?

How do partisans respond to new information?

- Example: the presidential debate
  - Did Democrats, Republicans, and Independents have different impressions?
  - Explanation based on emotional bias?
  - Rational explanation?

- Inflation during the Reagan Administration, Saddam Hussein and September 11th,...
Chicken or Egg?

policy positions / ideology $\rightarrow$ PID

OR

group identities $\rightarrow$ PID $\rightarrow$ policy positions / ideology
Partisan Realignment

How and why do partisan identities change?

- Partisan politicians and voters are both resistant to change, for different reasons

- Activists and interest groups push for change, either from within party or from without
  - (Northern) Democrats and civil rights
  - Republicans and Abortion

- Changes in groups associated with parties → (slow) change in voters’ PID (concentrated among young)
Growing polarization of partisan elites (office holders, activists)
Mass-Level Sorting

- Unlike elites, most voters are moderates, and they have \textbf{not} become more extreme.
- Still, the average ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans has increased. How is this possible?
- Sorting
Macro-level Consequences of Parties

- Structures political conflict (simplifying but also limiting)
- Defines political “equilibrium” (cf. Mayhew)
- Dampens political volatility
Normative Considerations

- Democracy “unthinkable” without parties
- But parties represent extremes, not necessarily the public
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