PREDICTING PARTY IDENTIFICATION, 1956-80: Who Are the Republicans and Who Are the Democrats?

Carol A. Cassel

Multivariate predictions of party identification have been based on father's party and social or demographic characteristics in past studies. This paper uses two policy attitudes to predict party along with the usual predictors of partisanship, from 1956 to 1980. The policy attitudes—domestic welfare policy opinion and civil rights policy opinion—have theoretical links to partisanship stemming from the New Deal and the 1960s. Domestic welfare policy opinion is found to be a major predictor of party identification. Despite the inclusion of the two policy attitudes and correction for attenuation caused by measurement error, only about 50% of the variance in party identification can be explained.

The most important finding of early voting studies was that voters in a community had long-standing political loyalties that limited the effects of campaigns on election outcomes (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Berelson et al., 1954). These political loyalties—or party identification—became central to a social psychological theory of voting behavior developed at the University of Michigan. A particular election outcome is considered to be the net impact of temporary short-term forces (issues and candidates) on the long-term distribution of partisans in the electorate. Party identification serves as both a major explanation for vote choice and a baseline for interpreting elections as the normal or expected vote (Campbell et al., 1964; Converse, 1966a).

Despite the importance of party identification for understanding election outcomes, social scientists have not been very successful at predicting people’s party identification. This paper attempts to improve our ability to
predict who among the electorate call themselves Republicans and who call themselves Democrats.¹

BACKGROUND

Several studies include party identification as a dependent variable antecedent to presidential vote in path analytic models. Goldberg (1966) used (SRC) data to develop a model for the 1956 presidential vote that found father's party identification and "respondent's social characteristics" to be significant determinants of respondent's party identification. Goldberg created the social characteristics variable from respondent's religion, social class, size of community, region, and race. In this first attempt to examine the relative effects of predictors of partisan preference, father's party was found to have more impact on party identification than respondent's social characteristics combined.

A model for the 1964 and 1968 presidential elections examined social characteristics separately as determinants of party identification (Knoke, 1976). Father's party identification remained the major determinant of respondent's party. Since this study reported residual paths, the amount of variance in party identification explained in this model can be computed to vary from 29% to 31%. Path models for more recent elections report similar findings (Schulman and Pomper, 1975; Declercq et al., 1975).

Father's party and social characteristics have been used to predict party identification as the dependent variable in some studies (Knoke, 1974; Knoke and Hout, 1974; Knoke, 1976). Again, parental party identification had a substantially greater impact on party identification than any other variable in the model. Knoke and Hout's model explained 25% to 31% of the variance in party identification from 1952 to 1972. Correction for random measurement error in the data using reliability estimates of the variables (explained below) boosts the explained variance to 41% to 47% (Knoke, 1976).

From these studies, it seems clear that a person's party identification is surprisingly unpredictable. Although party identification is supposedly inherited from one's parents and supposedly follows predictably from one's background characteristics, these variables together account for only one-third of the variance, at best. Although some of this imprecision is caused by unreliable measurement, Knoke's adjustment for random measurement error still leaves over one-half the variance in party identification unexplained.

How can it be that the core political attitude of party identification is so unpredictable? This paper employs two research strategies in an attempt to account for this puzzle. First, the assumption is made that a person's