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THE GROUP FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

ABSTRACT: *In Democracy for Realists, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue provocatively that the public falls far short of ideals of democratic citizenship, and they turn to political psychology to explain the empirics of mass political behavior. But their model of group identity fails to shed much light on the origins of political behavior and gives members of the public less credit than they deserve, for three reasons. First, group politics is not a hollow exercise; it depends on the identification of a collective grievance that has a potential political solution. Second, concerns about group economics, status, and respect are more likely than individual economic considerations to animate political behavior, yet the former concerns are no less rational than the latter. Third, individuals vary in how strongly they identify with politically relevant groups, masking considerable variation in the degree to which group affiliations shape political behavior. Therefore, group identification is not a monolithic, irrational force that affects people regardless of their perceptions of political reality.*

Keywords: *Christopher Achen; Larry Bartels; Democracy for Realists; group identification; partisan polarization; social identity; status politics.*

In *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue provocatively that the public falls far short of its democratic promise. Achen and Bartels waste little time in dispensing with the notion that citizens hold stable issue preferences and can accurately map such preferences

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onto party positions. They document the failure of citizens to vote based on policies. They show that citizens are often wrong about where the parties and candidates stand on key issues of the day. They provide evidence that citizens project their own issue positions onto candidates or shift their stance on the issues to line up with that of their party. And they demolish, at considerable length, another argument for democratic rationality: the claim that citizens can punish poorly performing governments at the ballot box. Achen and Bartels report that citizens tend to punish governments for things which are not under their control, such as shark attacks, or for very short-term factors, such as economic performance over the most recent two quarters (an indicator that is unlikely to reflect the entirety of an elected government's performance). They argue that such short-term factors are subject to government manipulation and can be managed in the period leading up to an election, deflecting voters' attention from longer-term government mismanagement.

Achen and Bartels conclude that citizens do not make political decisions on an especially rational basis, so they seek alternative explanations for the public's political behavior, turning away from political economy and towards political psychology for inspiration. Their conclusion that the public is far from rational in its political deliberations will not be news to political psychologists (e.g., Huddy et al. 2013). The authors gravitate towards a psychological model grounded in group identity that is reminiscent of the account developed to explain the origins of partisanship in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) and elaborated upon by Donald P. Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler in *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (Green et al. 2002).

Achen and Bartels's group model is not especially well developed, however, and fails to shed much light on the origins of political behavior. At the risk of oversimplification, their model suggests that either directly or through their link to partisan identities, social group affiliations forge political loyalties that may have little foundation in policy and are unreactive to political outcomes. For example, the authors note that people affiliate with a party "because 'their kind' of person belongs" to it, not because they have "carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own" (Achen and Bartels 2016, 307). The authors place considerable emphasis on this tribal aspect of politics, which involves aligning with a party because a member of one's group represents it, or because politicians in that party know how to communicate with group members in a language they can understand. All of this is construed as

being at odds with ideology as an explanation of political behavior. Thus, “citizens make sense of parties in social identity terms, not as ideological frameworks” (ibid., 308).

I agree with the general claim that group loyalties shape partisan affinities but take issue with Achen and Bartels’s position that such affinities are entirely devoid of political content. Their position is unnecessarily extreme and ignores much evidence about the realities of group politics. Achen and Bartels justify the lack of detail in their group model by saying that “just as births have a less finished quality than funerals, the succeeding chapters have a less finished quality than those preceding” (ibid., 230). But this statement belies a wealth of research, some old and some recent, on the group basis of American political behavior. In what follows, I flesh out evidence derived from research on group-based politics to argue that Achen and Bartels are not wrong to doubt the democratic capabilities of the public, but that they give members of the public less credit than they deserve. In doing so, I develop three points. First, group politics is not a hollow exercise but rather depends on the identification of collective grievances with potential political solutions, a process that is central to the politicization of social groups. Second, concerns about group status and respect are more likely than individual economic considerations to animate group-based grievances. Achen and Bartels focus to a large degree on the public’s inability to perceive their individual economic interests accurately, but they say little about the degree to which group members evaluate parties or politicians based on their collective economic or status-based interests. Third, individuals vary in how strongly they identify with politically relevant groups, masking considerable variation in the degree to which group affiliations shape political behavior even among members of the same social group. Ignoring differences in the strength of group and partisan identities results in an overly simplistic and static view of group politics. The reality is more complex.

Partisanship and Abortion

The limitations of Achen and Bartels’s group-level analysis can be seen in their example concerning women and men’s partisan identities in the wake of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. Abortion increasingly polarized the political parties in the 1980s and 1990s, with the Republican Party moving toward opposition to legalized abortion and Democrats moving toward support. Drawing on Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi’s panel

study of 1965 high-school seniors, Achen and Bartels show that pro-choice women moved away from the Republican Party and toward the Democratic Party between 1965 and 1982, whereas men changed their own positions on legalized abortion to match that of their party. Men's shifting positions on abortion confirm Achen and Bartels's view that partisan loyalties are far more influential than political beliefs and ideology, leading them to conclude that "even in the context of hot button issues" such as abortion, "most people make their party choices based on who they are rather than what they think" (ibid., 264). But this conclusion is difficult to reconcile with the authors' own evidence that women shifted their partisanship to identify with the party that better matched their views on abortion. This is not hollow tribal politics.

The abortion example underscores the need to better develop key aspects of Achen and Bartels's group thesis and raises a number of other questions. First, what is the relevant group identity that led women to align their partisanship and views on abortion? And how is the link forged between an identity and a political party? Throughout the book, the authors suggest a simple association between a given social identity and politicians or parties based on factors such as childhood socialization. This may be relatively straightforward for ethnic and racial groups. For example, norms within the black community make it difficult for blacks to identify with the Republican Party (White, Laird, and Allen 2014). But how does this work for women? A greater number of American women than men support the Democratic Party, but women's support for the party is far from monolithic (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2004; Chaney et al. 1998; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Norrander 1999). In that sense, gender identity is a very crude guide, at best, to partisanship among women. Feminism is a far more meaningful distinction that helps to explain diversity in women's partisanship: feminist women tend to support the Democratic Party while anti-feminist women support the Republican Party (Conover 1988; Cook and Wilcox 1991; Huddy and Willmann 2018). The alignment between feminism and Democratic identification among women is a likely outcome of the Democratic Party's stronger support of gender equality, the promotion of women within the party, and support for feminist interests (Wolbrecht 2000). So there is nothing irrational about this aspect of women's partisan identities; their identities follow from their beliefs, not vice versa.

Second, it is far from irrational for women to shift partisanship based on their support for or opposition to legalized abortion, if that is what Achen

and Bartels meant to imply by this example. Legalized abortion affects women's economic interests and it is even more strongly tied to women's societal status and worldviews. Kristen Luker (1984) studied right-to-life and pro-choice activists in California in the late 1960s and 1970s and found that they lived very different lives. Right-to-life activists were less educated than pro-choice activists, less likely to work, and more likely to have large families. The two groups of women also differed in the degree to which they thought women and men had intrinsically similar or different roles to play in life. Disputes over abortion were linked to very fundamental conflicts among women over motherhood, work, and their gendered world view.

Third, if we assume that women's political attitudes are driven more by an "identity" as feminist than as a woman, it is important to understand gradations in this identification. Somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of American women identify as "feminist" in recent polls (Hamel et al. 2016; Huddy and Willman 2018; Radke, Hornsey, and Barlow 2017). But the strength of their feminist identification varies. In the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES), 12 percent of women described themselves as strong feminists and 39 percent said they were not-so-strong feminists, leaving 49 percent who said they were not feminists. On average, feminists are far more likely than non-feminists to be pro-choice on abortion. It is likely that the most feminist women led the move away from the Republican Party between 1982 and 1997.

Even within racial and ethnic groups that are powerfully aligned with a political party, such as African Americans, not all group members identify with the group equally strongly and some will not identify with the group at all. Group members' support of a political party will depend heavily on the degree to which they have internalized group identity.

The Politicization of Social Identities

As these examples suggest, membership in a social group does not necessarily prescribe a specific political outlook, nor does it dictate political action on a group's behalf. Socio-demographic groups based on social class, age, gender, and marital status exhibit only very modest levels of political cohesion in the United States and other Western democracies (Dalton 1996; Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Wattenberg 2008). Subsets of such groups may develop cohesive political ideologies and outlooks that conflict with other members of

the demographic grouping. Feminists and anti-feminists are only two examples. Gay, lesbian, and transgender activists form a politicized subgroup of the broader LGBTQ community (Garretson 2018; Egan 2012; Simon and Klandermans 2001). Such politicized group identities are potent and become even more so when aligned with a political party. Achen and Bartels claim that Americans identify with parties in part because others in their group do so, but only some groups serve this role. In largely non-political groups, such as those based on marital or parental status, there is no necessary connection between partisanship and identification with other parents, married people, or single people.

How do social groups get politicized? At a minimum, it requires group members to have common interests that are affected by government policy. In former times, unions were an especially potent political force because they identified specific political parties and candidates most likely to promote or hinder their members' common economic interests. Currently, identity politics works in a similar fashion. Leaders of specific ethnic, racial, geographic, and gender-linked groups identify group-based grievances and advocate support for the political parties, candidates, and government policies most likely to address perceived inequities. Police brutality against African-Americans constitutes an example of a racial grievance that can be remedied by changes in police procedures (e.g., police officers wearing body cams), the prosecution of police officers who shoot black victims, and police force training programs. The Black Lives Matter movement is an example of the development of group consciousness (Leach and Allen 2017; Miller et al. 1981).

A second route to group politicization concerns the identification of government actions that violate or instantiate group norms, values, and morality that may be opposed to group members' interests. Gay marriage and legalized abortion are seen to violate evangelical Christians' basic values and thus generate opposition to the political parties that support them. This process is inherently collective. An individual evangelical Christian does not need a group identity to oppose legalized gay marriage. But the emergence of norms that emphasize the group's opposition to gay marriage and support for the Republican Party elicits greater political conformity and cohesion among evangelical Christians (Williams 2010). The development and strengthening of such norms enhances the group's link to politics, including partisan politics. It can also increase the perception that the group's status and values are threatened by the other side (Campbell 2006).

In the past, the recognition of shared identities, values, and interests that coalesced into common partisanship may have been fostered by geographic proximity to other group members. Physical proximity to co-ethnics living in the same neighborhood, or common attendance at church services, was a catalyst for the development of politicized identities that mapped onto partisanship (Reese and Brown 1995). This process seems implicit in Achen and Bartels's call for increased research on local communities as a way to better understand the development of partisanship and political ideology. But in the current world of online networks and the unmediated politics of Twitter, physical proximity may be unnecessary for the creation of politicized groups. Groups can form and be politicized online by coalescing around shared beliefs, values, norms, or consciousness when these can be linked to a specific political party. It may be fruitful to examine local communities for the roots of this process, but it is important to extend this research to communities that develop or are reinforced within online social networks.

Group Economics, Status, and Respect as Meaningful Political Cues

Achen and Bartels place considerable emphasis on the public's lack of knowledge about economic matters, especially in Chapters 6 and 7, on economic voting and the New Deal respectively. Other examples include the public's inaccurate perception of the budget deficit in 1996 and erroneous perceptions of where one's political party stands on the question of greater government services or reduced government spending.

However, these are not the only issues that dominate group political thought. Questions of group respect and the violation of group values and morality also play a key role in public thinking, as we have seen. Group members may also be more inclined to think about economic outcomes in group rather than individual terms, assessing how their group is faring relative to others. If the public performs poorly on questions of economic self-interest, do they fare better when it comes to an understanding of group-based economic grievances and other political considerations linked to questions of group status?

Americans commonly refer to group outcomes, including economic outcomes, when asked what they like and dislike about the political

parties and presidential candidates in the ANES (Lewis-Beck 2008). Fraternal deprivation, the sense that one's group is doing worse than another, also drives group political cohesion. For example, whites who felt they were doing worse than blacks were more inclined to support George Wallace's presidential candidacy in 1968 (Vanneman and Pettigrew 1972) and to become involved in the Boston anti-busing movement (Begley and Alker 1982). David O. Sears and John B. McConahay (1973) found that a sense of racial economic grievance had its most pronounced impact on participation in the Watts riots among those who identified as black. Americans may be unaware of specific economic facts but may be more likely to judge politics based on their group's relative outcomes, which may be especially true for those who hold a strong group identity. It is unclear why this should be considered irrational.

Other instances of political decisions based on group status can be found among members of majority and minority racial and ethnic groups. In a series of recent studies, Craig et al. (2017) demonstrate the effects of threatened white status on intergroup relations and heightened outgroup prejudice. More specifically, they find that perceived threats to white identity increased Republican identification among white political independents. They also observed increased support for conservative policy positions among a national white sample when threatened with future minority ethnic status, an effect that was mediated by perceived threats to white status (Craig and Richeson 2014). Others have also documented the increasing association between being white and being Republican (Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Medeiros and Noel 2014). Similar effects are observed among members of minority groups. In survey data collected among Latinos before and after the 2012 presidential election, a strong Latino identity combined with perceived discrimination against Latinos increased positive feelings toward and identification with the Democratic Party. Moreover, the link between a Latino identity and the Democratic party further intensified over the course of the 2012 election. In contrast, policy stances on immigration, gay rights, and abortion played a lesser role in shaping Latino partisanship, although support for government-funded health care additionally boosted support for the Democratic Party (Huddy et al 2016). This point is further underscored in research by Efrén Pérez (2015), who finds that ingroup pride is enhanced among strongly identified Latinos but dampened among low identifiers when they encounter anti-Latino political rhetoric.

In sum, group-linked economic and status considerations shape partisan political preferences among group members. This process may not conform to the ideals of a fully informed democratic citizenry among whom each issue is considered on its merits, but it does suggest a reasonable basis for the public's political decision making. Feminist women, African Americans, or Latinos who support the Democratic Party and evangelical Christians who support the Republican Party because they believe it is more likely to serve their collective interests are not entirely wrong in their estimate of which party is better for their group (Layman and Carsey 2002; Wolbrecht 2000).

Identity Strength

Achen and Bartels acknowledge the importance of subjectively strong identities in shaping group-based political behavior. For example, they show in Chapter 9 that the realignment of white Southerners away from the Democratic and towards the Republican Party since the 1950s was most pronounced among whites who felt positively towards Southerners (and who likely identified strongly as Southerners). Likewise, Catholics who felt close to co-religionists and were interested in how they were doing were more likely to support John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the Catholic Democratic presidential candidate in 1960. But other examples lack such nuance. For example, women and men are treated as discrete objective categories in Achen and Bartels's analysis of abortion attitudes and shifting partisan loyalties. As noted, subjective feminist identity provides far greater insight into the group basis of women's partisanship.

Individual group members with strong, subjective identities are most likely to adopt group-based political reasoning. But even weak subjective identities have a more powerful influence than objective group membership on partisan affiliations, as noted in the earliest voting studies (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). In contemporary American politics, African Americans who identify strongly with their race are more likely than others to support the Democratic party and take a pro-group, liberal position on a variety of racial and social welfare issues (Tate 1994). Similar evidence exists for Latinos, including Latino immigrants (Huddy et al. 2016).

Many of Achen and Bartels's comments about group-based politics apply largely to those with strong subjective group identities. Strong

identifiers are defensive in the face of group criticism (Andreychick and Gill 2009), angry when threatened with political defeat (Huddy et al. 2015), and most likely to engage in motivated reasoning in defense of their views. They are more likely to take political action. For example, strong partisans are more likely than weak partisans to have given money or volunteered their time to work for a political candidate or political party, to have voted, and to have engaged in other political activities (Fowler and Kam 2007; Huddy et al. 2015). There is ample evidence that strong identities fuel collective action and related forms of group-based political activity (Simon et al. 1998; Klandermans and van Stekelenburg 2013).

The alignment of multiple social identities further intensifies partisan loyalties. Lilliana Mason (2016) has developed a model of social partisan sorting in which convergent racial, religious, and ideological identities fuel ever-stronger partisan identities. White, Christian, and conservative identities align to strengthen Republican identity while Black, Latino, secular, and liberal identities strengthen Democratic partisan identity. Mason and Wronski (2018) report that being more strongly aligned with the groups associated with the Republican Party (white, Christian, conservative) or the Democratic Party (Black, Latino, atheist, liberal) leads to stronger partisan identities and greater warmth towards fellow partisans. Conversely, it is also possible to weaken agreement with partisan leaders by experimentally forcing conflict between people's social groups and their self-identified parties (Schufeldt 2017).

Levels of identification with politically relevant social groups thus vary among individuals, such that group political influence is far from monolithic. Those most strongly identified with a social group will be most likely to support the party seen to further the group's interests. This process intensifies when social identities align, leading to an especially strong partisan identity. But there are many people who don't conform to group dictates, do so weakly, or have cross-cutting social identities. Groups shape partisan loyalties, but with greater nuance than acknowledged by Achen and Bartels.

The Democratic Implications of Group Politics

Is democracy doomed? Is it hard to feel optimistic about its future after reading Achen and Bartels's account of the public's democratic limitations. They castigate the public at length for its cognitive failings and,

to understand the realities of people's political reasoning, point to what seem like rather mindless group processes linked to early socialization and group conformity. Yet matters are not as dire as they suggest. As we have seen, the public's reasoning is not devoid of policy content even if it is not based on selfish economic calculations. In preferring one to the other party, Americans are likely to privilege status considerations and the eradication of discrimination and group-based economic inequities over individual economic outcomes. Moreover, group influence is graded in strength, suggesting that not everyone is swayed politically by group loyalties.

The public's reliance on group-based economic and status grievances to form judgments about political parties and candidates has its pitfalls, but it can enhance democratic accountability too. Political parties can attract supporters by championing issues of relevance to group members, such as opposition to racial profiling to attract African Americans. On the other hand, the parties can signal symbolic group support by appointing group members to positions of political prominence and thus maintain the loyalty of group members without adopting any specific policy agenda. The Democratic Party has sent these kinds of signals to feminists over the last several decades, promoting women to positions of prominence within the party, taking a feminist stance on policy issues, and addressing gender equality in presidential debates and party acceptance speeches (Hansen 2014; Wolbrecht 2000). A woman sorted into the Democratic Party based on feminist beliefs will expect the party to take a strong stance on gender equality, appoint women to key positions, and develop a party platform that commits to the greater equalization of male and female power within American society. But it may also be possible for the party to satisfy some of these considerations, such as the appointment of women to higher office, without ameliorating pay inequities or advancing affordable child care.

The existence of both tepid and strong group loyalties holds potentially good news for democratic polities to the extent that weak or cross-cutting loyalties force greater depth of thought and consideration of competing arguments (Lavine et al. 2012). This furthers the ideal of a pluralist democracy characterized by numerous cross-cutting cleavages within large omnibus political parties. Yet when multiple strong social identities and political parties powerfully align, the result can be affective partisan polarization characterized by growing partisan intolerance (Levendusky 2009; Iyengar and Westwood 2012). But even this heated partisan environment

has at least one upside: increased political interest and engagement (Huddy et al. 2015). Perceived zero-sum conflict between major societal groups is likely to enhance competing partisanship, heighten angry reactions to the other side, and reduce the willingness to compromise. This can be seen in some white Americans' reactions to policies designed to improve the conditions of racial and ethnic minorities. Programs such as affirmative action for African Americans and accusations of police brutality perpetrated by white officers threatens a subset of white Americans who feel they are losing ground in American society (Craig and Richeson 2014). Paradoxically, angry reactions to policies seen to threaten group status or economics are likely to be strongest among the majority who fear losing societal status and privilege (Keltner and Robinson 1997). The development of group consciousness among members of minority groups is designed to counteract this power imbalance but likely further escalates conflict. This grudge-match style of politics would seem to have few winners and many potential losers.

Zero-sum conflict is not necessarily the norm, however, in American politics. The existence of weak and cross-cutting loyalties ensures affinity across group lines. There is ample evidence that some whites went out of their way to support Barack Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections because he was African American, in an expression of racial affinity (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler and Sears 2010; Tesler 2016). Similarly, some men have a feminist affinity: they perceive discrimination against women, support women's efforts to call out discriminatory practices, and support a greater number of women in politics. These views translate into stronger support for the Democratic Party independently of other ideological considerations (Huddy and Willmann 2018). Sirin, Villalobos, and Valentino (2016) document what they call intergroup empathy, the tendency for members of one group to be concerned about the outcomes of others. They report experimental evidence of African-American and Latino empathy for mistreated immigrants and show that members of minority groups support civil rights for groups such as Muslims based on feelings of intergroup empathy even when this is at odds with their own interests (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017).

Achen and Bartels have performed an invaluable service. They have demonstrated that Americans do not make political decisions based on their issue proximity to candidates and parties or their retrospective evaluation of government economic performance. And they have suggested a

way forward through the examination of the role played by group loyalties in shaping political views and partisan identification. But they provide few specifics of this process. When we look at these specifics, we find that group identification is neither irrational nor monolithic; and that politics founded in group affiliations does not necessarily lead to tribal politics—although it can.

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