

# Partisan Intoxication or Policy Voting?

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## Abstract

Many political scientists believe partisanship is an arbitrary psychological attachment that exerts a drug-like effect on voters' decisions. An implication is that voters don't care much about policy or government performance, and instead, elections are just a roll call of intoxicated partisans. I review and reassess the evidence for this view, concluding that there is no compelling evidence to support it. For many empirical tests, partisan intoxication and policy voting are observationally equivalent. Rare opportunities to partially distinguish between these possibilities like the southern realignment suggest that policy voting is more prevalent. When I conduct new tests utilizing survey experiments about hypothetical candidates, the weight of the evidence favors policy voting.

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How do American voters decide which candidates to support in elections? One possibility is that voters' decisions are largely influenced by their policy preferences and beliefs about government performance. This appears to be the default assumption of many formal models of elections (e.g., Downs 1957) and many pundits, journalists, and campaigns. Perhaps voters make inferences about the policies that each candidate will likely enact, they determine which bundle of policies, priorities, and abilities they prefer on net, and they cast their votes accordingly. Another possibility is that voters don't think much about policy or government performance, and instead, they are intoxicated partisans. They arbitrarily form psychological attachments to their party and blindly support that party in elections regardless of the candidates' policy positions, priorities, or abilities. This latter view appears to be the predominant one among current, empirical scholars of American political behavior. For example, in a recent interview for the *New York Times*, Frances Lee states that "Partisan identification is bigger than anything the party *does*" (Taub 2017). For convenience, I will refer to these two accounts as *policy voting* and *partisan intoxication*.

The partisan intoxication hypothesis is perhaps best associated with *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). The authors assert that "Most Americans . . . hold a form of psychological membership in the party that exerts great influence on their political behavior" (p. 295). Their argument extends beyond political parties, as they also argue that other forms of psychological group identification with, for example, unions or the Roman Catholic Church, also influence political behavior. As I will discuss in the conclusion, most of the arguments in this paper apply generally to claims about any form of identity—not just partisan identity—influencing vote choices. However, since partisan intoxication is the most prevalent form of identity voting discussed in the literature, I will primarily focus on this particular claim.

The notion that arbitrary partisan attachments influence voting behavior was around at least a decade before *The American Voter*. Providing no supporting evidence or citations, Key writes

“Although the great issues of national politics are potent instruments for the formation of divisions among the voters, they meet their match in the inertia of traditional partisan attachments formed generations ago. Present partisan affiliations tend to be as much the fortuitous result of events long past as the product of cool calculation of interest in party policies of today” (1949, p. 285). Key allows some room for policy interests to influence partisan attachments and vote choices, but for the most part, he concludes that voters support the candidates they do for arbitrary reasons. Some form of the partisan intoxication hypothesis has been around for at least seven decades, although it’s hard to know exactly how it arose or what evidence, if any, generated it.

The partisan intoxication hypothesis continues to pervade the research, teaching, and public commentary of scholars of political behavior. Bartels interprets the strong correlation between party identification and vote choice as the “impact of partisanship” (2000, p. 35). Mason writes that “More often than not, citizens do not choose which party to support based on policy opinion; . . . Partisanship muddies the folk pathway from interests to outcomes” (2018, pp. 20-21). And Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe take “the powerful influence of partisanship on vote choice independently [sic] of issue preferences” for granted without providing evidence or citations (2015, p. 1). Summarizing the canonical view in a video accompanying a popular undergraduate textbook on American politics, John Sides states, “Political scientists talk about the concept of a party identification. And what that means is that we have a psychological tie to a political party. We feel as if we’re part of this party. . . . And ultimately it’s a powerful influence on how we vote” (2010).

Illustrating the pervasiveness of the partisan intoxication hypothesis, there is a meme among political scientists on Twitter stating that “partisanship is a hell of a drug.”<sup>2</sup> Brendan Nyhan appears to have popularized the meme shortly after the 2016 general election, and many other political

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<sup>2</sup> Alternative versions state that partisanship is a “helluva drug” (e.g., Klein 2016) or simply “a strong drug” (Rudalevige 2018).

scientists, including Daniel Drezner, Joshua Kertzer, Jonathan Ladd, Daniel Nexon, and David Redlawsk, have since utilized it. In one such use of the meme, Nyhan linked to a blog post showing that party affiliation was one of the best predictors of vote choice in 2016.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the fact that Republicans were more likely to vote for Trump than Democrats was interpreted as evidence that partisanship is analogous to a psychoactive drug.

To be clear, my use of the term *partisan intoxication* refers specifically to the claim that psychological attachments to a party influence the way a person *votes*. Partisan attachments might have all kinds of other interesting effects on, for example, attitudes toward members of the other party (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, but see Orr and Huber 2018), religious choices (Margolis 2018), or economic behavior (Gerber and Huber 2009, but see McGrath 2017 and Mian, Sufi, and Khoshkhoh 2017). Some of the arguments in this paper will also apply to these literatures because it's difficult to estimate the effects of party in general. But in order to focus on one important question, I will restrict my attention in this paper to the determinants of vote choices.

My use of the term *policy voting* refers to the possibility that voters make their choices according to beliefs about future outcomes under each candidate. If voters are making their decisions according to the candidates' policy positions, abilities, or likely performance in office, they are engaging in policy voting. This definition would include voting with the intention of electing trustees or delegates, it acknowledges that policy preferences might be complex and multi-dimensional, and it allows for uninformed voters to engage in policy voting so long as they are making inferences about policy or performance and voting accordingly. Policy voters might even use the party affiliations of the candidates to draw inferences about the candidates' positions and priorities, which means that policy voters may vote with their party frequently and may even change their vote choices in response to partisan information.

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<sup>3</sup> See <[bit.ly/2rSLHog](https://bit.ly/2rSLHog)>.

Surely, policy voting and partisan intoxication are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive explanations. Voters' decisions are likely influenced by many factors, but the relative influence of policy vs. identity is a question of first-order importance. If vote choices are determined entirely by arbitrary psychological attachments, then elections will fail to select high-quality candidates with popular policy ideas or incentivize incumbents to work hard and represent public interests.<sup>4</sup> Whether and how much vote choices are influenced by policy may inform our normative and positive views about democracy, the effects of various institutional reforms, and the nature of electoral accountability and political representation.

What does it mean to say that partisan attachments influence voting behavior? Surely, the meaning depends upon how we think voters form their attachments to parties. If a voter forms their attachment to a party based on their policy preferences and then that attachment influences her voting behavior, is she not a policy voter? In other words, if one concedes that policy preferences influence partisan attachments, then the claim that partisan attachments influence voting is somewhat meaningless and indistinguishable from the claim that policy preferences influence voting. Alternatively, if a voter forms her attachment to a party based on non-policy factors like social identity or her parents' party attachments, as many scholars argue, then the claim that partisan attachments influence voting behavior is a strong one. If we interpret this claim literally, it implies that if we could somehow get a voter to think of herself as a Democrat, even if she agrees with Republicans on all policy questions, she would vote for Democratic candidates for office.

In this article, I review and reassess this evidence for partisan intoxication and explain why it fails to compellingly distinguish between partisan intoxication and policy voting. Table 1 provides a preview of some of the subsequent arguments in the paper. The table lists the evidence that

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<sup>4</sup> However, if there are some policy voters and therefore election results are somewhat responsive to government performance, it's not obvious whether the presence of intoxicated partisans will be normatively good or bad for voters. I briefly return to this topic in the conclusion.

**Table 1. Evidence Purportedly Supporting Partisan Intoxication**

Evidence	Intoxication Interpretation	Policy Voting Interpretation
Party ID predicts vote choice.	Party identification influences vote choices.	Policy preferences influence party identification and vote choices.
Party ID is correlated across generations	People blindly adopt the party of their parents.	Values, economic circumstances, and policy preferences are correlated across generations.
Party ID is stable over time—even more so than issue positions.	People blindly stick with whatever party they initially adopted, even when their policy positions change.	Policy preferences are correlated over time, surveys measure policy positions imperfectly, and party identification reflects a complex weighted average of positions across a range of issues.
Elite cues sometimes influence issue positions.	People don't care about policy and they blindly adopt whatever their party leaders say.	Rational, policy voters should sometimes take cues from elites that share their values and interests.
Most Republicans support President Trump despite his personal shortcomings.	People blindly support leaders from their party, even when it cuts against their personal interests.	Despite Trump's personal shortcomings, many Republicans likely support him because of his policy positions. Furthermore, Republican loyalty to Trump is overstated since people change their party identification in response to their approval of the president.
When the parties changed positions on racial issues, white southerners were slow to change their party identification.	Party identification is sticky and largely unrelated to policy interests.	But they did change their voting behavior. And to the extent that they continued to support Democrats in non-presidential elections, it was only the conservative Democrats who agreed with them on policy.

purportedly supports the partisan intoxication hypothesis and explains how the evidence could be equally consistent with policy voting. In addition to reviewing previous evidence, I also provide several new sources of evidence. I test several implications of policy voting in the southern realignment, and I show that to the extent that southern Democrats in Congress outperformed Democratic presidential candidates, it appears to be attributable to their relatively conservative policy positions. I also analyze survey experiments about hypothetical candidates and find significant evidence of policy voting. I

conclude by discussing the broader literature on elections, which suggests that voters do indeed care about candidates' policy positions, abilities, and performance.

Overall, the evidence discussed and presented in this paper suggests that intoxicated partisans, if they exist, are a small share of the American electorate, and policy voting is more prevalent. To be clear, I do not argue that partisan intoxication or other forms of identity-based voting do not exist; they might. In one exercise, I estimate an upper bound on the share of self-identified partisans who are intoxicated partisans and the number is not zero. The most important result of my analysis is that we do not have enough evidence to claim that a meaningful share of voters are influenced by their psychological attachments rather than their substantive interests. And when we do have opportunities to partly distinguish between intoxication and policy voting, we see clear signs that many voters' decisions are influenced by policy and substance.

### **Cola Identification: An Analogy**

Why do scholars support the partisan intoxication hypothesis? The primary evidence is that people who say they identify as Republicans (Democrats) in surveys also tend to report voting for Republicans (Democrats). Also, a voter's partisan identification is correlated with that of their parents (e.g., Niemi and Jennings 1991), suggesting that partisan identities may be formed for somewhat arbitrary reasons. Furthermore, party identification is relatively consistent over time (e.g., Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), issue positions are inconsistent over time (e.g., Converse 1964), and party identification is a better predictor of vote choice than issue positions (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). Taken together, the evidence seems to suggest that voters don't have strong or stable preferences over policy, and instead, they cast their ballots in line with their arbitrary psychological attachments.

One concern with most of the evidence on partisan intoxication is that it comes from surveys, and survey respondents may not provide truthful answers. In particular, standard surveys appear to

significantly overstate the strength of partisan biases (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior, Sood, and Khanna 2015) and expressions of in-group favoritism more generally (Hersh 2016). While these concerns are important for this literature and survey research in general, I will largely set them aside for the purpose of this paper. Assuming that survey respondents report their truthful attitudes and behaviors, I'll ask whether the evidence for partisan intoxication is compelling and design new tests to better assess its prevalence.

Although the evidence discussed above is consistent with partisan intoxication, could it also be consistent with policy voting? Let's start with the well-documented fact that people tend to vote for the party with which they identify. Although scholars often interpret the correlation between party identification and vote choice as the "impact of partisanship" (e.g., Bartels 2000), this relationship could easily arise from selection or reverse causation. Suppose that psychological identity exerts no effect on behavior, and suppose that vote choices are influenced entirely by policy. We would expect people who align with Republicans (Democrats) on policy to vote for Republican (Democratic) candidates, and we'd also expect those people to be more likely to say that they identify as Republicans (Democrats) in surveys.

My argument here is analogous to that of Krehbiel (1993), who pointed out that just because party predicts roll-call voting in Congress, we cannot conclude that members of Congress are influenced by their party. Members of Congress and voters alike might sort into their parties according to their policy preferences and substantive interests. One such view is that voters keep a "running tally of retrospective evaluations" which influences their beliefs about which party will provide better outcomes in the future, and they update their party identification accordingly (Fiorina 1981, Chapter 5). This means that there will be a correlation between party and votes, regardless of whether party exerts an independent influence. This is not to say that party does not influence the behavior of voters

or members of Congress, but these correlations do not constitute compelling evidence of any such influence.

What about the strong correlation between party identification across generations? Does this suggest that partisanship is largely based on arbitrary factors rather than policy considerations? Again, imagine that each person independently forms their party identification based on their policy preferences. We should expect a strong correlation between a person's party and that of their parents because policy preferences are likely correlated across generations. A person likely inherits preferences and values from their parents, and their demographic and socioeconomic situation is likely similar to that of their parents, so we shouldn't be surprised when they have similar policy preferences and vote for the same party.

Perhaps more persuasive is the evidence that partisanship is more stable over time than issue positions, and party identification is a better predictor of vote choice than issue positions. Again, however, these findings do not necessarily rule out policy voting. Issue positions might appear inconsistent in surveys because there might be more measurement error for questions about issue positions than those about preferred parties. Consistent with this interpretation, the correlation between issue positions and vote choice increases markedly once multiple survey items are averaged together (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Erikson and Tedin 2007).<sup>5</sup> Another interpretation, consistent with the literature on "issue publics" (e.g., Krosnick 1990), is that the typical voter doesn't have strong views on many issues, but they might have strong, stable preferences on one or a few issues, and perhaps those issues determine the vote choices of those individuals. But since the set of important issues is different for each voter, in the aggregate, it looks like voters don't care much about issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Freeder, Lenz, and Turner (forthcoming) contend that observed issue instability is attributable to the lack of stable views among most voters rather than measurement error. However, their results could also be explained by heterogeneity in measurement error across issues.

To think about whether we should find the evidence for partisan intoxication convincing, imagine that researchers asked survey respondents whether they identify with Coca-Cola, Pepsi, or neither. They find a strong correlation between Pepsi (Coke) identification and Pepsi (Coke) consumption. They also find that brand identification is correlated across generations and stable over time. Furthermore, when they ask specific questions about taste like “Do you like the taste of citric acid?”,<sup>6</sup> those responses are inconsistent and only weakly correlated with consumption. The researchers conclude that American soda consumers don’t care about taste. They have arbitrary psychological attachments to specific brands that determine their purchasing decisions. In fact, they continue, if Pepsi and Coke swapped recipes, most consumers would likely to continue to buy the same brand.

What would you think about these claims? Does the evidence support such strong conclusions? Think about how *you* might respond to these survey questions. If you drink cola and have a preference between Coke and Pepsi, you would probably identify with your preferred brand. You might prefer the taste of Pepsi and therefore report being a Pepsi identifier even if you don’t live your day-to-day life thinking about yourself as a Pepsi person. Then, of course, you would report that you consume Pepsi more often than Coke, although you don’t have much of an opinion on citric acid since you’re not even sure what it tastes like.

Presumably, the fact that identification with a brand is correlated with purchasing tells us nothing about the effects of psychological attachment. Even if consumers have no particular psychological attachment to the Coca-Cola brand, they might like the way their soda tastes, and when asked in a survey, they accordingly report that they identify more with Coca-Cola than Pepsi.<sup>7</sup> But if

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<sup>6</sup> Citric acid is the only ingredient present in Pepsi but not Coke, so our hypothetical team of cola researchers might argue that if consumers select their sodas based on taste, this should be a meaningful predictor of purchasing decisions.

<sup>7</sup> This is more or less the way that the “Columbia School” seems to have interpreted the strong correlation between partisan identification and vote choice. In contrast with the “Michigan School”

Coca-Cola changed its recipe, they could easily switch to another brand or stop drinking cola altogether, as many people did in 1985, forcing Coca-Cola to quickly restore their original recipe. And why is identification with soda brands so stable over time and even across generations? Surely, flavor preferences are stable over time and heritable, and Coke and Pepsi rarely change their formulas, so again, this tells us nothing about the importance of psychological attachment. Notice that the evidence in favor of cola intoxication is equivalent to that in favor of partisan intoxication. Therefore, if you don't find the argument about psychological attachment to soda brands compelling, you shouldn't find the partisan intoxication hypothesis compelling either.

Some readers have objected to this analogy on the grounds that Coke and Pepsi taste so similar that the only explanation for consumers' allegiance to a particular product is advertising and branding, not taste. Others raise a mutually exclusive objection that Pepsi, on average, outperforms Coke in blind taste tests, so the only explanation for Coke's greater market share is their superior advertising and branding. Of course, these accounts cannot explain why New Coke failed—especially given the marketing power behind it. Furthermore, people tend to prefer sweeter drinks when they have just a sip rather than an entire serving (Salmon 2009), which could explain why the sweeter Pepsi wins in blind taste tests but not in the market of avid soda consumers (Yglesias 2013). Regardless of the validity of these objections, they miss the point of the analogy: in both the case of cola consumption and voting, we do not have enough evidence to conclude that choices are determined by psychological attachments rather than substantive preferences and interests.

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of Campbell et al., these scholars often discuss partisan predispositions and vote choice interchangeably (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948, pp. 25-27).

## **Attempts at Better Identification**

One strategy for disentangling the effect of policy positions versus partisan attachments on vote choice is to estimate simultaneous equations models. Studies attempting to do this include Jackson (1975), and Page and Jones (1979), and Markus and Converse (1979). Given our modern understanding of instrumental variables, it would be hard to argue that the necessary assumptions—particularly exogeneity and exclusion—hold for the instruments used in this literature. To offer just one example, several of these studies utilize the party identification of one’s parents as an instrument for party identity. Surely, parental party affiliation is not as-if randomly assigned, and we could easily imagine ways in which parental party affiliation could be correlated with vote choice but not through the effect of party identity on vote choice. I offered one such story in the previous section. Suppose parents base their party affiliations and vote choices on their own policy positions, policy positions are correlated across generations, and children base their party affiliations and vote choices on their policy positions. Parental party affiliation would be a predictor of a person’s party affiliation and vote choice, but it would tell us nothing about the effect of party affiliation.

One way to ensure that the exogeneity assumption holds is to use an instrument that was randomly assigned. This is the strategy taken by Gerber, Huber, and Washington (2010). The authors focused on registered voters in Connecticut who were not registered with a political party, did not report identifying with a major party in a survey, but did indicate that they leaned toward a particular party. Partnering with the Connecticut Secretary of State, they sent letters to a randomly selected subset of these individuals informing them that they had to register with a party in order to vote in an upcoming primary election. Then, utilizing a follow-up survey, they show that this experimental intervention made subjects more likely to identify with the party toward which they had originally leaned and more likely to intend to vote for that party in an upcoming election. Using the experimental treatment as an instrument for party identification, they report that identifying with a party exhibits a

huge effect on vote intentions. In fact, some of their instrumental variables estimates exceed those of a naïve OLS regression, suggesting that perhaps all of the correlation between party identification and vote choice is attributable to the psychological effects of party attachment.

Despite the creativity of their design, there are several reasons to be skeptical of Gerber, Huber, and Washington's estimates. First, as the authors acknowledge, the effect of their instrument on party identification is weak, and therefore, their subsequent estimates are highly imprecise. Second, although the exogeneity assumption is guaranteed by randomization, the exclusion restriction could still be violated. One such concern is that when someone registers with a party, campaigns will be more likely to contact her, and those campaign activities might influence her vote for reasons unrelated to psychological attachments. Furthermore, rather than simply utilizing vote intention as their primary outcome variable, the authors create a scale that sums many different survey responses, including vote intentions, evaluations of the parties, issue positions, and even recollections of previous vote choices. Table A4 of their Online Appendix shows that their reduced form estimates are not statistically significant at the .05 level for any of their individual outcomes, and they oddly obtain one of their stronger reduced form estimates when examining recollections of previous voting. When focusing specifically on future vote intentions, presumably the outcome of greatest interest, the 5 percentage-point estimate is highly imprecise. And if we take the reduced-form and first-stage estimates at face value, this implies that partisan identity increases partisan voting by 63 percentage points ( $\frac{.051}{.081} \approx .63$ ). But the proportion of partisan leaners in the control group who vote for their latent party is .63, meaning that the largest theoretically feasible effect is only .37 ( $1 - .63 = .37$ ). In other words, their estimate is notably larger than the theoretical upper bound of the effect size, suggesting that either the assumptions are violated or that statistical imprecision has produced an unreliable estimate. Either way, the evidence from Gerber, Huber, and Washington is inconclusive regarding the importance of party attachments for vote choices.

## **Do Issue Positions Affect Vote Choices or Vice Versa?**

Contributing further, albeit indirectly, to the partisan intoxication hypothesis are studies suggesting that issues are not important to American voters. In particular, there is a large body of research suggesting that the issue positions of partisans blindly follow the policy positions of partisan elites (e.g., Bartels 2002; Cohen 2003; Jacoby 1988; Zaller 1992). In an exemplary study within this literature, Lenz (2009) revisits the documented phenomenon that the correlation between issue positions and vote choice tends to increase after voters have been exposed to television ads, a political debate, or extensive news coverage of that issue (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Lenz discusses three potential explanations for this phenomenon: (1) priming, whereby voters put more weight on that issue when forming their vote choice, (2) learning, whereby voters learn where the candidates stand on that issue and change their votes accordingly, and (3) learning and opinion change, whereby voters learn where the candidates stand and adjust their issue positions to line up with those of their preferred candidate. If one of the first two explanations is right, it means that voters change their vote choices according to their issue positions. But if the third explanation is right, it means that voters change their issue positions according to their prior vote choices.

To distinguish between these explanations, Lenz examines panel data around several historical periods where a particular issue gained prominence. Across the cases examined, the author finds little evidence of priming or learning but strong evidence of learning and opinion change (although see Matthews 2017 for evidence of priming using the same data). In other words, when an issue gains prominence, voters appear to shift their issue positions to fit their prior vote choices rather than the other way around. The partisan intoxication hypothesis is not discussed explicitly, but one potential implication is that voters select their preferred party and candidates for arbitrary reasons and then adopt their policy positions, creating an illusion that issues matter.

Although these findings are interesting, we still can't conclude that voters don't care about policy. Even if vote choices are entirely determined by policy, we would expect the effect of one narrow issue to be substantively small. For example, one of the issues studied by Lenz is the debate over Social Security privatization during the 2000 presidential election. Before 2000, this hadn't been a major political issue, and no major party advocated for privatization, so of course, American voters wouldn't have thought much about the issue, and any views they had wouldn't factor into their vote choices. Once George W. Bush advocated for privatization, this became a relevant issue, and the first presidential debate of the general election campaign brought it further to the forefront. But even if voters care exclusively about policy, how many voters care enough about Social Security privatization that this single issue would sway their vote? Should we expect a voter who favors privatization but otherwise agrees with Al Gore on tax policy, minimum wage, social welfare programs, environmental policy, and gun control to change their vote toward Bush when they learn about the candidates' views on Social Security privatization? So even if voters care exclusively about policy, we wouldn't expect to see much evidence of priming or learning effects unless we focused on issues that were particularly important to voters.

Consistent with this interpretation, Tesler (2015), using methods similar to Lenz, finds evidence of votes changing rather than opinions changing for issues more important to voters like gay rights. Using experimental methods, Hart and Middleton (2014) find strong evidence of priming but no evidence of learning and opinion change for environmental and educational policy. Carsey and Layman (2006) find that issue positions influence partisanship when the issue is important to the voter, and the opposite is true when the issue is unimportant. Similarly, Fowler and Margolis (2014) find that previously uninformed voters change their evaluations of the major parties after they are randomly informed about the parties' positions on major policies like minimum wage and unemployment insurance. There appear to be some issues where voters have strong preferences and their vote choices

can change accordingly, and there are other issues where voters have weaker preferences and their issue positions can be influenced by elites. Presumably, this is exactly what we'd expect in an electorate with policy voters.

What explains opinion change if voters care about policy? It's easy to see why a rational voter who cares about policy might change her position after an issue increases in prominence. Suppose the voter selects her preferred party based on issues of importance to her like tax policy, health care, and women's rights. Then, a new issue arises like Social Security privatization. She hasn't thought about it before or formed an opinion. In a survey, she might just flip a proverbial coin when answering that question. Then, after she watches the Bush-Gore debate, she learns where the candidates stand and thinks about the issue for the first time. At this point, she might be inclined to agree with whichever candidate she already liked. This is completely sensible since Social Security privatization is not such an important issue that it's likely to change her vote and since preferences are correlated across issues. If the voter knows she agrees with Gore on the issues important to her, she can probably trust his position on this new issue. And even if she is inspired by the debate to investigate the issue more closely and develop an informed opinion, she's still more likely than not to agree with the candidate she already liked because, again, preferences are correlated across issues. We would expect learning and opinion change even in a world where voters care exclusively about policy. Consistent with the idea that voters might rationally use elite cues to update their beliefs in light of imperfect information, Broockman and Butler (2017) find evidence that elected officials influence voter attitudes regardless of party affiliations and in the absence of partisan cues.

Related to claims that partisanship influences issue positions, some scholars claim that partisanship biases voters' perceptions of candidates' positions. For example, Achen and Bartels (2016) claim that voters generally perceive their own party to be closer to them ideologically than they really are. In their chapter entitled "It Feels Like We're Thinking," they analyze survey data in which

respondents place themselves and the parties on a 7-point scale on spending and services. Comparing respondents who placed themselves at the same place on the scale, Republicans are more likely to place the Republican Party close to themselves, and vice versa. For example, a Democrat who says she's a 4 might place the Democratic Party at 3 and the Republican Party at 6 (Achen and Bartels coded the scale so that higher numbers correspond with less spending and services). But a Republican who says she's a 4 might place the Democratic Party at 2 and the Republican Party at 5. Of course, the scale means different things to different respondents, so most likely, Democrats and Republicans who place themselves in the same place on the scale probably have a different sense of what their ratings means. Furthermore, we might worry that the small subset of partisans who place themselves at the unexpected end of the scale are unusual for one reason or another. For example, the vast majority of Democrats place themselves on the high-spending end of the scale and correctly report that the Democratic Party is closer to them, but the few Democrats who place themselves on the low-spending end of the scale think the parties are equally far from them, and the inverse is true for Republicans (see Figure 10.1 of Achen and Bartels). Therefore, much of this result can likely be explained by a small subset of respondents who are uninformed or simply provide noisy survey responses.

Analyzing a similar 7-point spending-services scale, Sniderman and Stiglitz (2012) find that partisans are more likely to say that the candidate from their party represents their position, even controlling for which candidate is closest to the respondent on the scale. Again, this analysis tells us little about partisan bias. There is ambiguity in the meaning of each place on the scale, there's no reason to think that respondents' utility functions are single-peaked *and* symmetric, and there is information in party labels. If I'm a policy voter who typically agrees with Democrats, I place myself as a 3 on the scale, and I later learn that the Democratic and Republican candidates place themselves at 2 and 3.5, respectively (to remain consistent with the discussion above, lower numbers mean more

spending and services), I might shift my sense of what the scale means and infer that the Democrat better represents my position, even though the Republican gave a number closer to mine. To their credit, Sniderman and Stiglitz do not jump to conclusions and interpret their results as evidence of partisan bias. They go on to show the partisan effect is greater for more informed partisans who know that the Democrats are generally to the left of the Republicans on this scale, and it's also greater when the candidate positions conform to expectations, with the Democratic candidate to the left of the Republican. In my view, these results suggest that respondents are trying to make inferences about candidate positions and the meaning of the 7-point scale, and party labels help to inform those inferences.

### **The 2016 Presidential Election**

For many, the election of President Donald Trump in 2016 was a reaffirmation of partisan intoxication. Trump was an unusual candidate in many ways. To the extent that his policy positions could be pinned down during the campaign, he was perhaps a moderate on social policy, a traditional conservative on economic policy, and an extremist on immigration and racial policy. His candidacy was also marred by gaffes and personal shortcomings, including an infamous audio recording. Surely, many observers thought, if American voters were ever willing to abandon their typical partisan leanings, it would be the Republicans in 2016. But alas, Trump won 48.9 percent of the two-party vote and the Electoral College, consistent with the conjecture that Republicans would blindly support their candidate regardless of any shortcomings.<sup>8</sup> Interpreting the election result, Hetherington writes, “Whether a person thinks of himself or herself as a Republican or a Democrat—wears and red or blue

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<sup>8</sup> For political scientists who are appalled that voters would support Trump despite his personal shortcomings, we should remind ourselves that some praised voters for sticking by Bill Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal and valuing political substance over personal traits (Zaller 1998).

uniform—has never been more central to presidential voting decisions since perhaps the 1870s” (2018, p. 76).

A closer look at the data, however, suggests that the Trump victory is not so easily attributable to partisan intoxication. Exit polls<sup>9</sup> found that 7 percent of self-identified Republicans voted for the Democratic candidate, up from 3 percent in 2012, so some partisans did indeed deviate away from Trump. Furthermore, 9 percent of self-identified Democrats voted for the Republican candidate, up from 5 percent in 2012, suggesting that some of Trump’s success came from pulling in Democrats.<sup>10</sup> And how did Trump manage to attract voters from the opposite party? Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2017) find that those voters who flipped from supporting Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 had particularly conservative views on immigration. In fact, Hillary Clinton retained almost all Obama supporters with liberal views on immigration, but she lost about a third of white Obama voters with conservative immigration views.<sup>11</sup> Trump’s shortcomings likely cost him some of the voters that would normally support a Republican candidate, but he seems to have made up for this by appealing to white Democrats with conservative views on immigration.

If anything, Trump’s electoral success may be a sign of the extent to which policy affects vote choices and the ease with which some voters will support a candidate from another party. Trump lost the popular vote and lost many conventional Republican supporters, but his strong positions on immigration allowed him to win over new voters who would normally align with the Democratic

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<sup>9</sup> See <nyti.ms/2vwgoMA>.

<sup>10</sup> These figures likely understate the true rate of partisan defection since, for example, voters who typically align with the Republican Party but did not support Trump may have been less likely to identify as Republican in the exit poll. In fact, despite the well-documented stickiness of partisan identification, Doherty, Kiley, and Johnson (2017) find that about 1 in 9 Republicans switched to identifying or leaning toward the Democratic Party between December 2015 and March 2017. This was particularly pronounced among young people, with about 1 in 4 Republicans under 30 making this switch.

<sup>11</sup> Taking advantage of panel data, Sides, Vavreck, and Tesler utilize a measure of immigration views from 2011, so this analysis is not subject to concerns that Trump support influenced immigration views.

candidate. Although “the overwhelming majority of Republicans voted for the Republican candidate, undeterred by the qualms of party leaders and conservative intellectuals” (Bartels 2016), the vast majority of these voters likely preferred Trump over Clinton on policy grounds. Philosopher Niko Kolodny (2017) provides a clear retort to claims that Trump’s victory is a sign of partisan intoxication: “Maybe some voters thought that Trump would advance a white supremacist ideology. Maybe some voters held protectionist and anti-immigration views long muted by the leadership of the mainstream parties. . . . Maybe some voters thought that a candidate who promised to reverse the decline of employment in manufacturing or coal mining might be able to deliver, or at least be particularly solicitous of the interests of those hardest hit by that decline. . . . Bad reasons, to be sure, but reasons based on preferences for political outcomes all the same.”

In the first years of the Trump presidency, scholars and commentators have continued to point to supposed signs of partisan intoxication. Despite apparent dysfunction in the White House and several legislative and policy blunders, more than 80 percent of Republican identifiers continue to say they approve of the way Trump is handling his job as president, and some have argued that this forces Republican leaders in Congress to stick with Trump (Dropp and Nyhan 2017; Wilkinson 2017). Senator Bob Corker confirmed as much in an interview about why Congressional Republicans haven’t pushed back against Trump’s attacks on special counsel Robert Mueller: “The president is, as you know—you’ve seen his numbers among the Republican base—it’s very strong. It’s more than strong, it’s tribal in nature” (Drucker 2018).

Despite the apparent tribalism of Republicans supporting Trump, Montagnes, Peskowitz, and McCrain (forthcoming) show that many voters alter their famously sticky party identification in response to current events. In particular, identification with the president’s party can swing as much as 10 percentage points based on the general popularity of the president. Therefore, much of the apparent loyalty of partisans toward presidents is an illusion driven by the fact that many people who

originally identified with the president's party will switch parties when they disapprove of his job performance. Rather than blindly following their party when evaluating the president, it appears that many voters revise their partisan identification in response to the performance of the president. And for those who continue to stick with their party and approve of the president, we have little reason to think they do so because of arbitrary psychological attachments. Presumably, they still agree with their party and the president on policy grounds.

### **Southern Realignment**

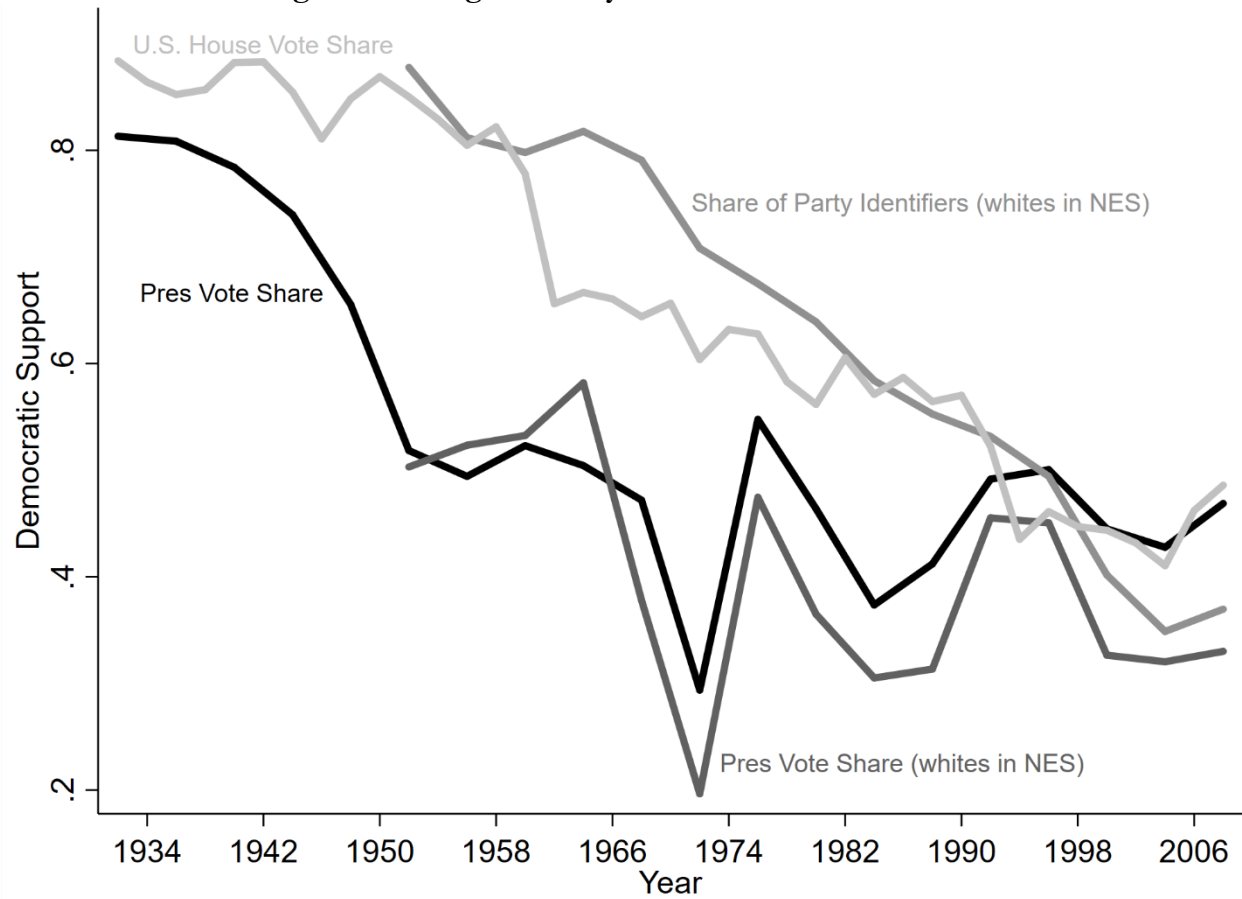
Distinguishing between partisan intoxication and policy voting is difficult because the positions of voters and parties on important issues change infrequently. We expect party attachments to predict votes and remain stable over time even if votes are entirely determined by policy positions. However, a rare situation that might allow us to better distinguish between these two explanations would be a party realignment in which the platforms of the major parties changed dramatically over a short period of time. Would voters blindly follow the same party with which they previously aligned, or would they change their voting behavior according to their views on important issues? Major party realignments are rare in American history, although one potentially informative episode is the southern realignment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much has been written about the southern realignment, and I do not intend to provide an exhaustive review here. For more discussion of policy voting during the southern realignment, see Carmines and Stimson (1989).

Historically, residents of the South have been more conservative than their northern counterparts, especially on racial issues. At various points in time, for example, southerners were more supportive of slavery and segregation and less supportive of anti-lynching bills and affirmative action. In the early 20th century, the Democratic Party was more likely than the Republican Party to share these conservative views, although there was sometimes disagreement between southern and northern

Democrats. Accordingly, the U.S. South was more supportive of Democratic candidates than their northern counterparts. Starting in the 1940s with the efforts of President Truman and culminating with the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in the 1960s, the Democratic Party had clearly shifted its national platform on questions pertaining to race and civil rights. Implementing their “southern strategy,” the Republican Party accordingly shifted to the right on racial issues in an effort to convert those potentially disappointed southerners who didn’t agree with the new direction of their historical party.

How did the voters react to this change in party platforms? Under the partisan intoxication hypothesis, we might expect partisan voting patterns to continue unchanged, and combining partisan intoxication with opinion leadership, we might expect the South, previously the most Democratic region, to now become the most progressive region on racial issues. Alternatively, if vote choices are based on policy and if racial issues are particularly important to southern voters, we would expect the South to shift their voting toward Republican candidates. Figure 1 shows trends in voting behavior and party identification for the southern states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Specifically, the figure shows the two-party Democratic vote share across these states from 1932 to 2008. Also, using data from the American National Election Study from 1952 to 2008, the figure shows the two-party Democratic vote share and the share of Democratic Party identifiers among white southerners. Consistent with policy voting and inconsistent with partisan intoxication, white southerners shifted their presidential voting dramatically over a short period of time, despite the fact that their party identifications were much slower to change. In 1932, the Democratic share of the two-party vote exceeded 80 percent, but by 1964, white southerners were solidly supporting Republicans in presidential elections.

**Figure 1. Voting and Party Identification in the South**



*The figure shows trends in partisan voting in presidential elections, U.S. House elections, and party identification in the South over time. The Democratic two-party vote share in presidential elections in the South is shown in black. The Democratic two-party vote share among white Southerners in the American National Election Study is shown in dark gray. The Democratic share of party identifiers among white southerners in the American National Election Study is shown in medium gray. And the Democratic two-party vote share in U.S. House elections is shown in light gray.*

Although presidential voting changed dramatically, Southern voters took longer to swing toward Republican candidates in non-presidential elections. Figure 1 also shows the South's Democratic vote share in U.S. House elections over this period, and it tracks party identification more closely than presidential voting does. One possible interpretation is that party identification matters more and policy matters less in U.S. House elections than in presidential elections. Alternatively, this pattern could be explained by the fact that Democratic members of Congress from the South were typically more conservative than Democratic presidential candidates. Perhaps senior southern

Democratic members of Congress who had been elected prior to the realignment were more conservative than the rest of their party, and southern voters continued to support those more conservative candidates. But as soon as those members retired and were replaced by new Democratic candidates who were more in line with the national party, the voters shifted their support toward Republican candidates.

If the account above is correct, there are several testable predictions which would allow us to further adjudicate between partisan intoxication and policy voting. A party typically loses vote share when an incumbent retires (e.g., Ansolabehere and Snyder 2004), a phenomenon often referred to as *retirement slump*. In the account above, the retirement slump should be particularly pronounced for southern Democrats. And to the extent that we do see a greater retirement slump for southern Democrats, it should be explained by the more conservative policy positions of these retiring incumbents.

Table 2 tests these predictions using data from U.S. House elections between 1948 and 1994. For every case in which a Democratic incumbent retired, I calculate the retirement slump—the two-party vote share of the new Democratic candidate replacing the retiring incumbent minus the last vote share of the retiring incumbent from the previous election. In Column 1 of Table 2, I test whether the retirement slump was greater in southern states during this period than in non-southern states. The average retirement slump for non-southern Democrats during this period was 8.2 percentage points, the average for southern Democrats was 14.2 percentage points, and this 6.0 percentage point difference is highly statistically significant ( $p = .001$ ).

To the extent that southern Democrats experienced a bigger retirement slump than non-southern Democrats, how much can we attribute to their policy conservatism? To measure policy conservatism, I utilize the Conservative Vote Probability (CVP) method of Fowler and Hall (2013), I adjust the scores to be comparable over time using the method of Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder

**Table 2. Retirement Slump for Democrats in the U.S. House, 1948-1994**

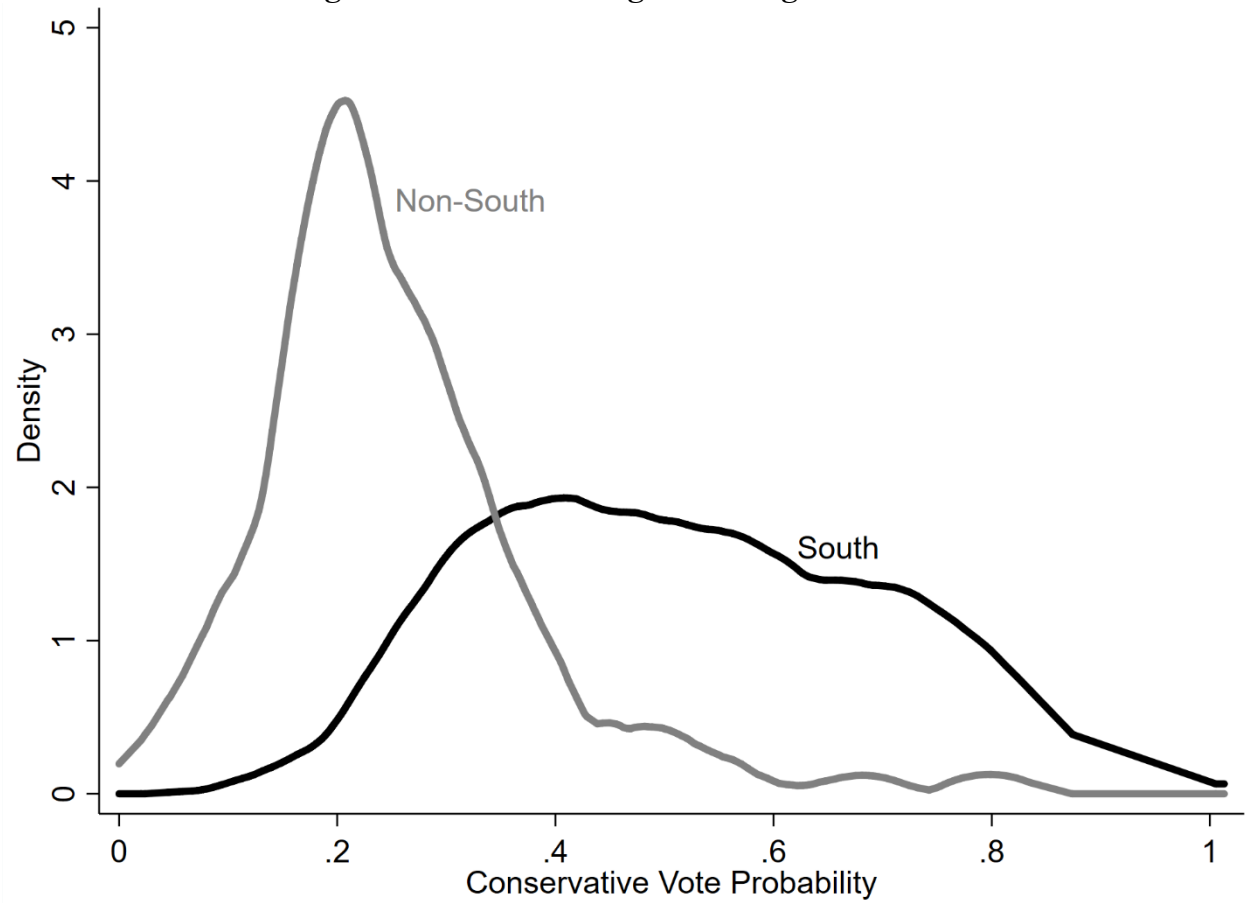
	DV = Retirement Slump			Predicted Slump
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
South	-.061 (.018)		.018 (.045)	-.060 (.003)
CVP		-.225 (.048)	-.194 (.079)	
South*CVP			-.052 (.107)	
Constant	-.082 (.008)	-.025 (.016)	-.033 (.022)	-.082 (.002)
N	488	488	488	488

*Robust standard errors in parentheses. The table shows that southern Democrats experienced a greater retirement slump than non-southern Democrats, but virtually all of that difference is explained by the conservatism of southern Democrats relative to non-southern Democrats. The unit of observation is a Democratic member of the House that retired between 1948 and 1994. In the first three columns, the dependent variable is the two-party vote share of the new Democratic candidate minus the last vote share of the retiring incumbent. In the fourth column, the dependent variable is the predicted values from the regression in Column 2.*

(1999), and I rescale them so that score of the most liberal retiring Democrat during this period was 0. Therefore, the scores can be interpreted as the proportion of conservative votes cast by each member relative to the most liberal retiring Democrat during this period. Figure 2 shows the distribution of these CVP scores across all retiring southern and non-southern Democrats in their final term in office. As expected, retiring southern Democrats were notably more conservative, on average, than retiring non-southern Democrats, and there is also more variance in the policy positions of southern Democrats.

Although we can't necessarily observe the policy positions of the other relevant candidates, we would expect that, all else equal, the Democrats will experience a bigger slump when their retiring incumbent is more conservative. Presumably, the typical Democratic candidate is to the left of the median voter in her district, so more conservative candidates will likely be closer to the median. Indeed, previous work has confirmed that relatively more conservative Democrats tend to perform better electorally (e.g., Hall 2015). To test this hypothesis, in Column 2 of Table 2, I regress retirement

Figure 2. Roll-Call Voting of Retiring Democrats



slump on the CVP score of the retiring Democrat in her last term. The constant term suggests that the retirement slump is only 2.5 percentage points for the most liberal retiring Democrats, and it's not statistically distinguishable from zero. But the retirement slump increases by 22.5 percentage points, on average, as we go from the most liberal to the most conservative retiring Democrats, and this estimated coefficient is highly statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

To test whether policy conservatism largely explains the differential retirement slump of southern Democrats, in Column 3 of Table 2, I regress the retirement slump on an indicator for southern Democrats, CVP, and the interaction of the two. As before, the estimated coefficient associated with CVP is substantively large and statistically significant, but the southern coefficient and

the interactive coefficient are not statistically distinguishable from zero. This suggests that most if not all of the differential retirement slump of southerners is attributable to their policy conservatism—rather than any non-policy attachments southern voters had to their Democratic incumbents. To further illustrate this result, Column 4 takes the predicted values from the regression in Column 2 and regresses them against an indicator for southern Democrats. The resulting coefficient is nearly identical to that in Column 1. In other words, southern Democrats experienced a larger retirement slump than non-southern Democrats during this period, and virtually all of that phenomenon is explained by the following two facts: (1) retiring southern Democrats were more conservative, and (2) more conservative Democrats experienced greater retirement slumps.

It would be difficult to explain the details of the southern realignment in a world in which voters don't care about policy and instead vote primarily based on their psychological attachments to parties. For example, what could explain the southern success of Strom Thurmond and George Wallace in the 1948 and 1968 presidential elections? Both candidates ran under new party labels to which voters had no prior attachment, but they appealed to the policy preferences of white southerners. And more generally, why would white southerners so quickly turn against their long-preferred party in presidential elections if not because of their policy preferences?

There are, of course, alternative explanations for why southern voters swung toward the Republican Party. One potential explanation, consistent with opinion leadership, is that perhaps the voters were simply following elites. Many prominent southern leaders switched from the Democratic to the Republican Party, and perhaps that explains why the voters switched as well. This account, however, would be equally inconsistent with the partisan intoxication hypothesis. It suggests that voters' loyalties lie not with their party but rather with a small set of elites. In any case, Schickler (2016) finds that public opinion had already shifted and crystallized by the mid-1940s, with a strong correlation between economic liberalism and support for civil rights, casting doubt on any elite-driven

account. And if Schickler's account of national elites responding to changes in public opinion is correct, that would be further evidence of the importance of the public's policy preferences.

Few works are more associated with the importance of party identification than *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), which devotes an entire chapter to the southern realignment. The authors document several interesting patterns. First, as we see in Figure 1, the partisan identifications of southerners changed slowly over time. Although southerners quickly became more Republican than non-southerners in terms of presidential voting, their partisan identifications remained more Democratic until the 1990s. If anything, this pattern undermines the partisan intoxication hypothesis because although southern voters retained their psychological attachments to the Democratic Party, they regularly voted against those attachments in favor of their policy interests. Second, the authors show that about half the change in southern party identification from the 1950s to the 1990s is attributable to cohort replacement rather than individuals shifting their attachments. This too undermines a tenet of partisan intoxication. Systematic shifts in party attachments across cohorts suggest that voters do not blindly adopt the party of their parents. Although their parents were Democrats, southerners coming of age in the South were increasingly likely to identify as Republicans, perhaps because they more closely aligned with the Republican Party on policy.

Green, Palmquist, and Schickler maintain that shifts in partisan attachments come about when those attachments are "disrupted by new conceptions of the partisan groups and the social coalitions that they comprise," (p. 140) leaving little room for policy positions to influence partisanship. For example, they argue that many white southerners shifted parties when they saw newly enfranchised Black voters identifying as Democrats, changing their conception of what it means to be a Democrat. This doesn't explain why southern Black voters would identify as Democrats, especially given the social coalitions associated with the party in that place and time. And of course, the problem of

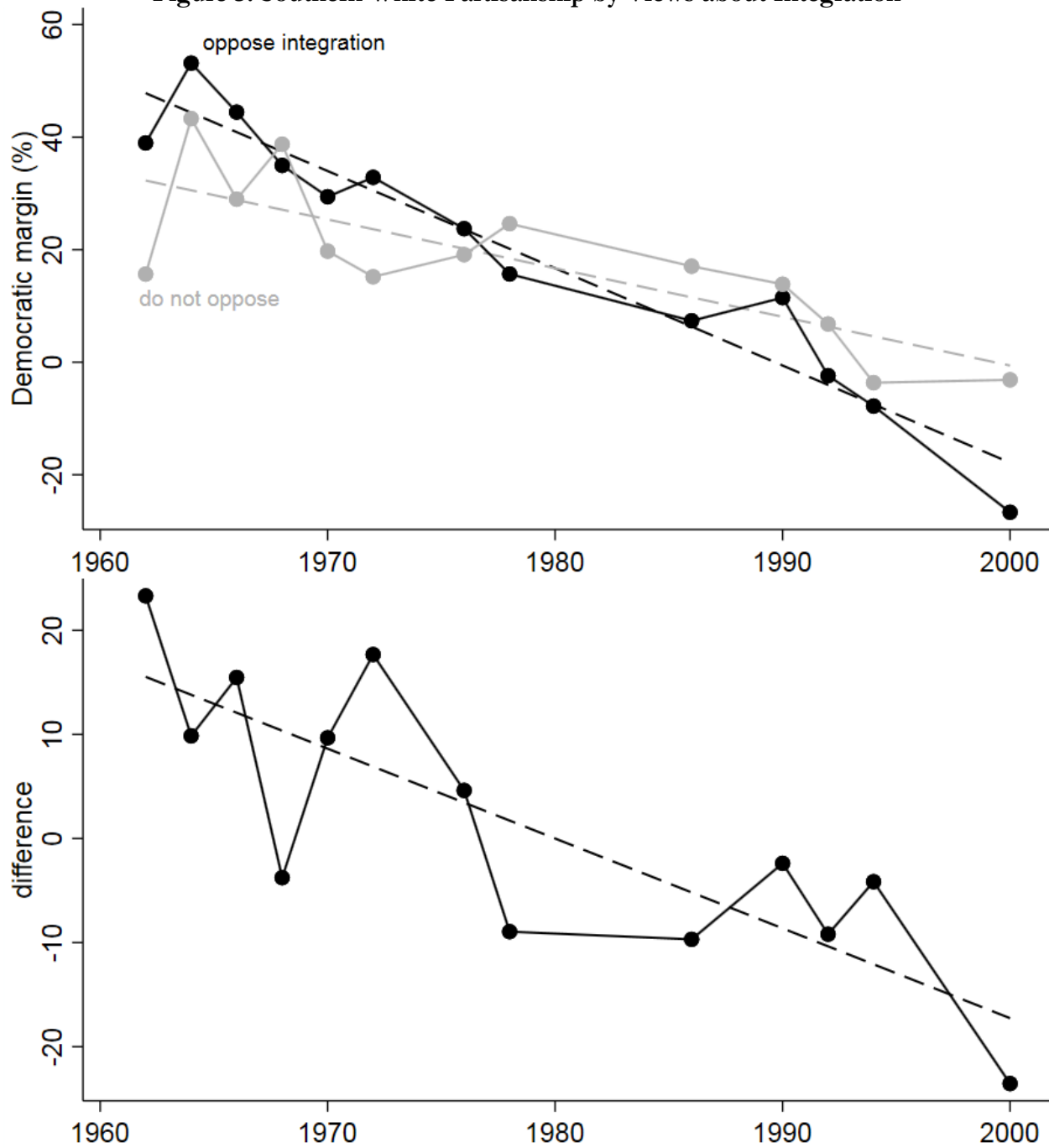
observational equivalence returns. Because members of social groups often have similar policy preferences, it would be difficult to distinguish accounts whereby vote choices and partisan attachments are determined by social groups versus policy preferences.

In their cleverly titled chapter, “Partisan Hearts and Spleens,” Achen and Bartels (2016) discuss the southern realignment and conclude that “voters’ social identities mattered as much or more than the parties’ policy differences in triggering and reinforcing the process of partisan realignment” (p. 246). Perhaps their strongest evidence for this conclusion is a figure suggesting that the levels and trends of partisanship from 1962 to 2000 among white southerners are comparable for those who oppose integration and those who favor integration or express no opinion (p. 251). If policy preferences explain the realignment, we would have expected those who oppose integration to convert to the Republican Party more quickly than those who do not. The authors conclude that the South became Republican because white southerners gradually shifted their social identities, regardless of their particular views on policy.

One limitation of Achen and Bartels’ analysis is that their outcome of interest is party identification rather than vote choice. We have already seen that southern vote choices shifted more quickly than partisan affiliations, and for the purpose of understanding the democratic process, we might care more about the candidate for whom someone votes rather than the party with which they identify. Unfortunately, we cannot fully replicate their analysis using presidential vote choice as an outcome because the American National Election Study did not ask the question about integration in several presidential election years. Nonetheless, even reexamining their evidence on party identification, preferences over integration appear to have played a large role in the shift of white southerners toward the Republican Party.

The top panel of Figure 3 presents a replication of Achen and Bartels’s figure using the same data from the American National Election Study. My figure does not perfectly match theirs, although

Figure 3. Southern White Partisanship by Views about Integration



the differences are negligible. The graph shows the Democratic margin in party identification for white southerners who say they oppose integration and those who say they favor integration or have no opinion. I have also added linear fits to the graph (dashed lines) to show average trends. The estimates for any given year are noisy—in some years, there are less than 100 white southerners in each category,

and there is likely significant measurement error when asking about attitudes toward integration (e.g., Achen 1975), which would further attenuate any differences. Nonetheless, the trends in partisanship for those who oppose integration are quite different from those who do not. Between 1962 and 2000, the Democratic margin went from about 48 to -18 percent for white southerners who oppose integration—a 66 point drop. During the same time, the Democratic margin went from about 32 to -1 percent for those who do not oppose integration—a 33 point drop.

The differences in these trends are substantively large, with those who do not explicitly oppose integration moving away from the Democratic Party at only half the rate as those who do, and we detect this large difference using only one noisy measure of policy preferences. To further highlight these differences, the bottom panel plots the differences in the Democratic margin between those who do and do not oppose integration. Achen and Bartels' own analysis suggests that much of the South's defection from the Democratic Party is attributable to racial policy preferences. Conducting a similar but more thorough analysis that utilizes richer public opinion data, Kuziemko and Washington (2016) conclude that racial conservatism explains virtually all of the decline in white southern Democratic identification between 1958 and 1980.<sup>12</sup>

The southern realignment provides a rare test case for the partisan intoxication hypothesis, and the hypothesis largely fails. The national platforms of the major parties flipped and diverged over just a few decades on issues over which white southerners had strong preferences. If vote choices are largely determined by psychological attachments to parties, white southerners would have continued supporting Democrats, but instead, they swung toward Republican candidates who better represented their policy preferences. When they did stick with Democratic candidates—as they did with some

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<sup>12</sup> Setting aside the convincingness of the data, Kolodny (2017) provides a conceptual rebuttal to the argument that the decline of white southern party identification had little to do with ideology: “If white southerners viewed the sort of party that a white southerner votes for as the party of white supremacy, as Achen and Bartels grant, then were they not affiliating with a party on the basis of an ‘ideology’?”

congressional representatives, it appears to be the result of those candidates' relatively conservative policy positions. The quantitative and qualitative evidence from this period suggests that although partisan identification may be sticky, vote choices can change quickly when the policy interests of voters no longer align with their preexisting identification.

### **Randomizing Candidate Characteristics in Hypothetical Elections**

Survey experiments provide a promising, albeit artificial, opportunity to partially distinguish between partisan intoxication and policy voting. We could show a hypothetical pair of competing candidates to a voter and ask which candidate she would likely support in an election. We could randomly vary the attributes of those candidates to try to infer whether voters care more about the policy or party. Unfortunately, this task is not as straightforward as it might sound initially. Suppose we find that voters are much more likely to support a candidate from their party. This doesn't tell us that voters care about party per se. Even if a voter cares only about policy, she will reasonably infer that a Democratic candidate is more likely to support liberal policies than a Republican candidate. Therefore, to the extent that party labels influence vote choices, we wouldn't know how much of this effect is explained by partisan intoxication or inferences about policy positions.

Because respondents will make inferences about many other things in response to a given piece of information, survey experiments may never allow us to definitively demonstrate or rule out partisan intoxication. For instance, even if we told voters about candidates' positions on 100 issues, party labels might still inform a voter about the priorities of the candidates, how they would handle new issues that arise, which other politicians they would work with collectively, etc. Nonetheless, survey experiments could allow us to partially assess policy voting vs. partisan intoxication in the following way. If voters are intoxicated partisans, then the rate of partisan voting should be relatively insensitive to the amount and nature of other information the voter has about the candidates. An

intoxicated partisan will automatically vote in line with their party regardless of anything else. Alternatively, if voters care about other factors, then partisan voting should decline as voters receive additional information about the candidates. For instance, if voters care primarily about policy, then partisan voting may never disappear entirely, but it will shrink as voters are also informed about the policy positions of the candidates, particularly if they learn that that these policy positions do not align with their expectations.

To test this prediction, we could present respondents with two hypothetical candidates and randomly vary both the characteristics of the candidates and also the number of those characteristics that we reveal to respondents. We could measure partisan voting and test whether it decreases as we increase the number of additional characteristics revealed. Peterson (2017) has conducted such an experiment, and the results are exactly what we would expect under policy voting. Additional, randomly-assigned information about candidates reduces the extent of partisan voting, particularly when that additional information were about the candidates' policy positions on abortion or government spending—the only policy issues that Peterson included in the study.

To see if Peterson's results replicate with independent data and a different set of information, and to conduct some additional analyses not previously conducted, I analyze data collected by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2015). The authors' primary goal was to develop new methods for designing and analyzing survey experiments where multiple pieces of information are randomly varied at the same time, but they have kindly shared their data to be analyzed for this purpose. Using this data, I conduct empirical tests that allow us to partly adjudicate between partisan intoxication and policy voting and place bounds on the prevalence of partisan intoxication versus policy voting.

Experimental data was collected online through Survey Sampling International in May 2015. Respondents were presented with a pair of hypothetical candidates and asked which one they would likely support in a U.S. presidential election. The parties of the candidates were randomly assigned and

I focus only on cases in which a respondent was asked to cast a vote between a Democrat and a Republican (ignoring cases in which both candidates were from the same party). Each candidate would also be assigned an educational status indicating either high school or college completion. In addition to party and education, each respondent would see 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, or 18 additional pieces of information. The number and set of items were randomized across each respondent. For example, the additional pieces of information that could have been shown included age; income; gender; marital status; military service; religion; prior elected office; and issues positions on abortion, gay marriage, or health care. For each of those items, one of several options was drawn randomly and independently for each candidate. For example, in the case of health care, each candidate could be listed as thinking that the government should do either more or less in providing health care. Each respondent was asked to cast votes in 30 different hypothetical elections. To avoid confusion, the number and set of items presented to each respondent remained constant across all 30 contests. Because I drop cases in which the parties were the same and where a respondent chose not to cast a vote, I have data on about 20 hypothetical elections per respondent.

In total, 1,103 respondents identified as either a Democrat or Republican. And across more than 22,000 hypothetical votes cast, 74 percent were cast in line with the respondent's party. In other words, respondents are more likely than not to vote in line with their party, but more than one-quarter of the time they are willing to deviate from their partisanship based on other information. Fewer than 1 in 5 respondents cast a partisan vote in all hypothetical contests they considered, and fewer than 1 in 3 cast a partisan vote more than 90 percent of the time. The presence of additional, randomly assigned information about candidates is enough to induce most respondents to deviate from their party some of the time. Even among the set of respondents who identify with a major party, the majority of them do not appear to behave as intoxicated partisans.

**Table 3. Effect of Additional Information on Partisan Voting**

		DV = Partisan Voting			
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<u>Surprising policy items</u>					
	1			-.147 (.013)	-.151 (.013)
	2			-.260 (.023)	-.267 (.022)
	3			-.306 (.059)	-.298 (.061)
<u>Policy items</u>					
	1		-.065 (.016)	-.024 (.016)	
	2		-.090 (.022)	-.009 (.022)	
	3		-.084 (.032)	.032 (.033)	
<u>Total items</u>					
	3	-.034 (.025)	-.019 (.024)	-.019 (.024)	
	4	-.029 (.026)	-.009 (.026)	-.008 (.025)	
	5	-.032 (.024)	-.009 (.024)	-.013 (.024)	
	6	-.058 (.025)	-.024 (.026)	-.024 (.026)	
	8	-.081 (.025)	-.037 (.026)	-.043 (.026)	
	13	-.092 (.025)	-.029 (.030)	-.033 (.030)	
	18	-.119 (.025)	-.056 (.039)	-.058 (.039)	
Constant		.791 (.018)	.811 (.019)	.812 (.019)	
Respondent Fixed Effects					X
Observations		22,065	22,065	22,065	22,065

*Respondent-clustered standard errors in parentheses. For the number of total items, the omitted category is 2. For policy items and surprising policy items, the omitted category is 0.*

The amount of information shared was randomized across respondents, meaning that simple regressions or differences in means can provide unbiased tests of whether partisan voting decreases with additional information. In Column 1 of Table 3, I regress partisan voting on indicators for the number of additional pieces of information shared with respondents beyond party and education. The

case with only 2 additional pieces of information is the omitted category, so each coefficient can be compared to that baseline. The constant term tells us that respondents who only received 2 items voted with their party 79.1 percent of the time. The other coefficients indicate that the rate of partisan voting decreased monotonically with the number of additional items. The largest contrast reveals that respondents receiving all 18 items were, on average, 11.9 percentage points less likely to vote with their party than those who only received 2 items, and this difference is highly statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Inconsistent with a stark model of partisan intoxication, partisan voting decreases dramatically when respondents receive more information about the candidates.

If voters care about policy, we would expect the informational items about policy to be especially important. Only three of the information items pertained directly to policy—the candidates’ positions on abortion, gay marriage, and health care. Therefore, in Column 2 of Table 3, I add indicators for the number of policy items about which a voter received information. The case with no policy items is the omitted category. Because the specific items were randomized across respondents, whether a respondent received information about one item relative to another from the pool is random once we condition on the number of total items. Consistent with the prediction of policy voting, informing a respondent about the candidates’ policy positions significantly reduces the rate of voting with one’s party. Receiving at least one piece of policy information reduces partisan voting by more than 6 percentage points. Also in Column 2, we see that the total number of items has less of an effect once we control for the policy items. This suggests that respondents care about these policy areas and incorporate this information into their vote choices, but the non-policy information, including the ages, genders, professions, and religions of the candidates, is less important.

The regression in Column 2 also rules out a concern that some readers may have had with that in Column 1. One might worry that respondents pay less attention when there are too many items, and the reduction in partisan voting in Column 1 arises from increased measurement error. However,

the regressions in Column 2 and onward control for the total number of items and show that policy items particularly reduce partisan voting. These regressions account for the possibility that measurement error is related to the number of total items, and if anything, measurement error or inattentive respondents will attenuate my estimates of policy voting. The fact that policy information vs. non-policy information significantly reduces partisan voting suggests that many respondents are paying attention and incorporate that policy information into their vote choices.

The estimated effect of policy information in Column 2 is particularly remarkable because the positions of each candidate were randomized. In many cases, the respondent would have seen that the candidates' positions align with their party's platforms, or they might have seen that the candidates have the same position on that issue, and in those cases, policy information is less likely to alter votes. If voters care about policy, we would expect policy information to reduce partisan voting especially when the policy information diverges from expectation, i.e., the Democrat's position is more conservative than that of the Republican, and when the voter agrees more with the out-party candidate on that policy. Unfortunately, Hainmueller et al. did not collect information on respondent's policy preferences, so I cannot incorporate that information into my analysis, but I can test the prediction that surprising policy information will particularly reduce partisan voting.

In Column 3 of Table 3, I include indicators for the number of surprising policy information items that a respondent received, and again, the omitted category is 0. Each candidate could hold one of three possible positions on abortion (pro-life, neutral, or pro-choice), and they could hold one of two possible positions on gay marriage and health care (e.g., opposes gay marriage or supports gay marriage). I classify policy information as surprising if the Republican candidate holds a different and more liberal view than the Democratic candidate. The coefficient associated with 1 surprising policy item tells us that when a respondent receives 1 piece of surprising policy information relative to 1 piece of unsurprising policy information, she is 14.7 percentage points less likely to vote with her

party.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, 2 surprising policy items reduce partisan voting by 26.0 percentage points relative to 2 unsurprising policy items, and 3 surprising policy items reduce it by 30.6 percentage points relative to 3 unsurprising policy items. Consistent with policy voting, policy information greatly reduces policy voting, particularly when this information diverges from voters' expectations based on party. Also in Column 3, we see that policy items do not reduce partisan voting when they are unsurprising.

To lend further credibility to these results, Column 4 repeats the analysis in Column 3 but with fixed effects for each individual respondent. These fixed effects subsume the coefficients associated with the number of total items and policy items because those factors were held constant for each respondent. However, whether a piece of policy information was surprising or not varied across each hypothetical contest, allowing us to estimate the effect of surprising policy information while holding the preferences of each respondent constant. The coefficients in Column 4 are nearly identical to those in Column 3, suggesting that any chance differences between respondents in each treatment category have little implication for our results.

To illustrate the same patterns in a simple and transparent way, Table 4 shows the rate of partisan voting across the number of policy items revealed and the number of surprising policy items. Again, we see that surprising policy information strongly decreases the rate of partisan voting. Voters receiving no policy information support their party 79.9 percent of the time. If they receive three pieces of policy information that conform to expectation, partisan voting is similar, 76.3 percent. More dramatically, however, if they receive three pieces of policy information that diverge from expectation, partisan voting drops to 48.8 percent. In other words, when a voter learns that the Republican candidate is more liberal than the Democrat on abortion, health care, and gay marriage, they are more likely than not to vote *against* their party. This low rate of partisan voting is especially remarkable since

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<sup>13</sup> To estimate the effect of one surprising piece of policy information relative to an additional piece of non-policy information, we would add the coefficients associated with 1 surprising policy item (-.147) and 1 policy item (-.024).

**Table 4. Partisan Voting across Policy Information**

		Surprising Policy Items			
		0	1	2	3
Policy Items	0	.799			
	1	.777	.599		
	2	.775	.631	.485	
	3	.763	.669	.545	.488

*The table shows rates of partisan voting in surveys about hypothetical elections across different levels of policy information.*

respondents only learn about the candidates' positions on three issues, none of which reflect the primary economic dimension that voters are thought to care about most (e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006). These 49 percent of voters are not necessarily intoxicated partisans. Remember that few respondents supported their party every time. Many voters likely continue to support their party because they're making inferences about other policy areas about which they have received no information. Presumably, for example, a Republican candidate who is liberal on abortion, gay marriage, and health care is conservative on other issues like taxation, redistribution, and immigration. Why else would they call themselves a Republican? So a Republican voter who cares primarily about tax policy will still vote with their party in this situation.

These survey experimental results allow us to place bounds on the share of respondents who are intoxicated partisans and policy voters. Suppose, for a moment, that there are only three kinds of respondents in our surveys: intoxicated partisans who always vote for their party; policy voters who agree with their party's platform on abortion, gay marriage, and health care and care only about these three issues when casting votes; and random voters who thoughtlessly select candidates in the survey or who care more about educational background or idiosyncratic factors other than party or policy. Let's refer to the proportion of each of these groups in the population as  $i$ ,  $p$ , and  $r$ , respectively. In this abstract and unrealistic world, let's think about what experimental results we would have obtained in Table 4. In the experimental condition with no policy information, the proportion of voters

supporting their party would be  $i + p + \frac{r}{2}$ . All intoxicated partisans would vote for their party. All policy voters would also vote for their party because in the absence of any policy information, they would assume that their party's candidate better aligns with their policy positions. And half the random voters would vote with their party by chance. Alternatively, in the experimental condition with three pieces of surprising policy information, the proportion of voters supporting their party would be  $i + \frac{r}{2}$ . Again, all the intoxicated partisans and half the random voters would support their party, but now, none of the policy voters would support their party because they have learned that the out-party candidate happens to better align with their policy preferences.

Combining this abstract model with the results in Table 4, we have a system of 3 equations with 3 unknowns:

$$(1) \quad i + p + \frac{r}{2} = .799,$$

$$(2) \quad i + \frac{r}{2} = .488, \text{ and}$$

$$(3) \quad i + p + r = 1.$$

Solving the system of equations, we obtain the following results:  $i = .287$ ,  $p = .311$ , and  $r = .402$ . In other words, if we crudely assume that all survey respondents are one of these three types, we can conclude that 29 percent are intoxicated partisans and 31 percent are policy voters. The high number of random voters, 40 percent, may reflect the fact that many survey respondents answer carelessly, or it may suggest that vote choices are often influenced by other idiosyncratic information, like the educational backgrounds which were present in all experimental conditions.

Of course, the model analyzed above is highly unrealistic. Not all policy voters will vote against their party in the experimental condition with three surprising pieces of policy information. This is because policy voters care about issues other than abortion, gay marriage, and health care, and in some cases, policy voters may not agree with their party on all of these issues. In a more realistic model,

Equation 2 above would be  $i + pX + \frac{r}{2} = .488$ , where  $X$  is some number between 0 and 1 reflecting the share of policy voters that nonetheless vote with their party even in light of three pieces of surprising policy information. And in that more realistic model, the solution for  $i$  will decrease, and the solution for  $p$  will increase. In that sense, 29 percent is an upper bound on the share of intoxicated partisans in our sample, and 31 percent is a lower bound on the share of policy voters. At most, fewer than 1 in 3 people who identify with a major party are actually intoxicated partisans. And presumably, this estimated upper bound would shrink further with more policy information since there are likely many policy voters who do not care enough about abortion, gay marriage, and health care for those issues alone to swing their votes.

The survey experimental results suggest that many voters care about policy positions and incorporate that information into their voting decisions. They support their party's candidate, on average, because party labels are an informative signal about policy positions. However, they quickly deviate from their party if they learn that the Republican is actually more liberal than the Democrat on a particular issue. A theoretical bounding exercise suggests that the share of those who identify with a party that are intoxicated partisans is at most 29 percent while the comparable share of policy voters is at least 31 percent.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Despite some of the strong claims about the importance of partisanship among political behavior scholars, nobody can seriously defend the starkest version of the partisan intoxication hypothesis. For starters, about 1 in 3 Americans do not identify with either major party, so they can't be intoxicated partisans. Next, even among those who do identify with a party and turn out to vote in

a U.S. House election, about 1 in 6 cast a ballot for the party opposite their identification.<sup>14</sup> Put differently, only about half of those who turn out in a typical House race identify with a major party and support the candidate from that party. More importantly, we have lots of quantitative evidence that vote choices are meaningfully influenced by factors other than party.

One sign that many voters are not intoxicated partisans is that candidates' ideologies and policy positions exert a significant effect on election results. All else equal, extremist candidates appear to perform notably worse than moderate candidates from the same party (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hall 2015). Furthermore, if voters were intoxicated partisans, it would be difficult to explain the large incumbency advantage across virtually all elected offices in the U.S. (e.g., Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002; Fowler and Hall 2014). And although candidate ability is difficult to measure, there are indirect signs that many voters try to support the higher quality candidate regardless of party. Consistent with positive selection, second-term governors appear to produce more economic growth than first-termers (Alt, Bueno de Mesquita, and Rose 2011). A meaningful portion of incumbent success in elections is attributable to fixed characteristics of candidates other than party and incumbency (Fowler 2016; Hirano and Snyder 2009). And voters respond strongly to government performance (e.g., Kramer 1971; Lenz 2012) and macro-level policy changes (e.g., Wlezien 2017), suggesting that many are willing to set aside partisan considerations in hopes of economic growth or other desirable outcomes.

Clearly, not all American voters are intoxicated partisans, and even Campbell et al.'s assertion that most Americans have psychological attachments to a party that exert great influence on their political behavior seems unlikely. Despite the popularity and long intellectual history of partisan intoxication, the evidence for this hypothesis is thin. Many American voters appear to be intoxicated

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<sup>14</sup> To compute these figures, I averaged across the American National Election Studies from 1952 to 2008.

partisans because they regularly vote for their affiliated party in elections, and they give inconsistent survey responses on many policy questions. But to conclude that these voters do not care about policy and vote according to psychological attachments would be comparable to concluding that cola consumers do not care about taste simply because they regularly purchase the same brand and they do not express consistent preferences over citric acid in surveys. When we do have a rare opportunity to distinguish between partisan intoxication and policy voting, the weight of the evidence seems to favor policy voting.

Although this article has focused on the effects of partisan identity, the arguments apply to other kinds of identity voting for which there are also common claims in the literature. Voters are more likely to support candidates of the same race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status, leading scholars to claim that many votes are cast according to these forms of identity. But policy preferences are surely correlated with these other forms of identity as well, so just because, for example, women are more likely to vote for female candidates, this doesn't mean that gender identity *per se* influences vote choices. Perhaps women support female candidates at higher rates because female candidates are more likely to share their policy positions. Policy voting and identity-based voting are often observationally equivalent, and we need stronger evidence before concluding that voters are naively influenced by their group attachments rather than their policy preferences.

As mentioned in the introduction, the arguments in this paper also apply to many claims of partisanship influencing behaviors other than vote choice. For example, partisanship is thought to drive people to dislike members of the other party (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2018) because partisans often report disliking members of the other party. First, we might wonder if these are genuine feelings that are relevant outside the context of expressive survey responses (see Hersh 2016). But to the extent that partisans do dislike members of the other party, we don't know if that's the effect of identity versus other confounding factors. What if people simply dislike people who don't

share their values and disagree with them on important policy matters and partisan identity is incidental? That's precisely what Orr and Huber (2018) find when they conduct vignette experiments and randomly vary both the partisanship and the policy positions of hypothetical people. Much like my own analyses that show that policy positions appear to explain vote choice more than party, policy positions also appear to explain the animosity of partisans.

Another interesting topic for investigation—largely outside the scope of this paper—is the normative implications of intoxicated voting. Even if—despite the evidence—the majority of voters are intoxicated partisans, it doesn't necessarily follow that democratic accountability fails. There are clearly enough policy voters to generate variation in partisan vote shares and electoral outcomes, and that may be enough for the selection and incentive effects of elections to produce desirable outcomes. Many formal models analyze elections with a single voter that rationally maximizes utility. This kind of abstract model may seem unrealistic, but the results of those models would be identical if, for example, there were 1,000 intoxicated Democrats, 1,000 intoxicated Republicans, and a single policy voter. In other words, even if most voters are intoxicated, democratic accountability can still work well so long as there are enough substantive voters to tip the results of elections. There could even be situations where an incumbent works harder or better represents her constituents on policy because of the way intoxicated voters alter her electoral incentives. Just as with irrational or uninformed voters (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2014), the effect of intoxicated voters on political outcomes is normatively ambiguous.

Let's give the voters some benefit of the doubt. For any observed empirical pattern, we should ask ourselves if this phenomenon could be explained by reasonable behavior. As we might expect in a healthy democracy, we have lots of evidence that voters care about policy and candidate competence. Voters are surely imperfect relative to some first-best, unrealistic model of democracy, but there's little evidence that they blindly follow arbitrary partisan attachments.

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