The Social Group Dynamics of Partisan Evaluations

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There is much research that reveals an important influence of social groups on political attitudes and behaviour. Little attention, however, has been devoted to investigating the role of social groups in structuring partisan and candidate evaluations. Proposed in this paper is a reference group theory of partisan evaluations that explains change in party and electoral coalitions. According to the theory, social groups are perceived to be connected, with varying degrees of intensity, to different political parties, and individuals' evaluations of those groups influence their orientations toward the political parties and candidates.

Analyses using surveys of the American electorate reveal that social groups provide important cues that influence both how citizens think about politics and the electoral choices they make. Moreover, the research suggests that public perceptions of the connections between parties and groups and the relative saliency of those connections reflect the behaviour of political leaders. The emphasis political leaders place on groups appears to affect both the structure of party-group connections and the degree to which the evaluations of groups impact on partisan and candidate preferences.

The dynamics of partisan coalitions have frequently been studied from the perspective of shifting party loyalties among social groups. Axelrod (1970; 1986), for example, has estimated over the years the contribution that a variety of groups make to the electoral coalition for each party by combining data on turnout and loyalty to the party at the polls. More recently, Stanley *et al.*, (1986) presented a critique of previous efforts to describe the changing coalitional composition of support for the political parties from election to election. They argue that the use of overlapping groups in earlier work, such as Axelrod's,

makes it impossible to determine which group characteristics, for example, race or class membership, are the more important to the coalitional structure of the parties.

The problems with earlier approaches employing the group concept is that they use only demographic categories for classifying coalition members, thereby treating all members of a group alike. Considerable social psychological research has demonstrated that there is substantial variation among group members in terms of their psychological attachment to the group, as well as their perception of how their group relates to other entities in the political world (Lewin, 1951; Cartwright and Zander, 1968; Campbell *et al.*, 1960). In short, not all members of a group think of themselves in terms of the group or necessarily connect the group with the world of politics in the same manner. It is important, therefore, to distinguish the treatment of groups as social psychological categories from the use of groups as demographic descriptors. Individuals are, demographically speaking, members of numerous groups. Psychologically, however, they may be aware of, or consider themselves members of, only a subset of all those groups. Moreover, what might be equally important for coalitional politics is what groups one uses as reference cues rather than the categories one is a member of by virtue of some objective criterion. We are concerned here with groups as psychological reference categories not demographic aggregates.

Previous research using a group approach also is essentially descriptive, failing to incorporate an explicit theoretical explanation for why certain groups support a party and others do not. Implicit in the use of the categories presumably is the assumption that location in demographic groupings holds significant political, social or psychological consequences, but this is never made explicit or tested empirically. In lacking a theoretically-based body of evidence, the earlier studies cannot (and do not) explain why a group's support for the political parties has varied or might vary over time. That work does describe very adequately the long-term changes in the contributions that particular demographic groups have made to the parties' coalitions. For example, the increased importance of blacks and the declining contribution of southern whites and Catholics to the Democratic coalition are clearly indicated in some of the research (Stanley *et al.*, 1986). But even that study does not help us understand why the changes occurred.

Proposed in this paper is a theoretical argument, employing concepts from social cognition, that explains change in partisan coalitions across time. After presenting the theoretical argument, we examine the underlying group structure of partisan coalitions, addressing the shifting patterns of alignment. Next, we consider the impact of reference groups on the evaluations of parties and candidates. Finally, we turn to an analysis of data that suggests how candidates and organizations can influence the impact of reference groups on party and candidate evaluations in general.

Recent Research on Social Groups

The theoretical treatment of social groups in recent research differs substantially from that which appeared in the literature of the sixties. The early treatment of reference groups placed a great deal of emphasis on face-to-face interactions and group cohesion (see Lau, 1985 for an excellent review of the relevant literature). More recent work focuses on information processing and treats social groups as

categories that provide a source of identification for members or act as an information cue for non-members (see, among others, Tajfel, 1972, 1978, 1981; Fiske and Taylor, 1984; Lau and Sears, 1986). Within this newer theoretical framework there is no longer the need for the very restrictive assumption of face-to-face interaction for the group to influence individual behaviour. Merely the perception that one is or is not part of a group is sufficient to differentiate how people will act towards ingroup and outgroup members (Brewer, 1979; Jackson and Sullivan, 1987; Tajfel, et al., 1971; Miller, et al., 1981; Wagner, et al., 1986; Lau, 1989).

Research more directly related to political science also has begun to demonstrate that a substantial proportion of citizens organize their thinking about politics in terms of groups rather than issues or candidates (Lau, 1986; Hamill, Lodge and Blake, 1985). This group orientation to politics makes a good deal of sense because social groups are very visible actors in the political arena. Indeed, some research suggests that groups have played an increasingly important and visible role in politics since the start of the seventies. Walker (1983), for example, has documented a dramatic rise in public interest groups during recent years. Likewise, changes in election laws regulating campaign financing have contributed to an explosion in the number of organized interest groups, and made PAC's a household word in the process (Sabato, 1985; Schlozman and Tierney, 1986). Also, there is growing evidence that evaluations and cognitions involving social groups influence a variety of political attitudes including political ideology and policy preferences (Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Sears, et al., 1980; Sears, 1986), evaluations of government economic performance (Conover, 1987) and beliefs about the distribution of power and equity in America (Sears, et al., 1986; Dennis, 1987). In general, all of this research reveals an important influence of social groups on political attitudes and behaviour in the United States. Little attention, however, has been devoted to investigating the role of social groups in structuring partisan and candidate evaluations.

A Theory of Party–Group Connections

In an attempt to redress that imbalance, we propose that a reference group theory explains changes in party and electoral coalitions. In brief, the major components of the theory can be summarized as follows. The world of politics is one of complexity that must be simplified and organized if it is to have relevance and meaning. In dealing with this complexity and everyday flow of information individuals sort objects, people and events into broad categories that are then used as short-cuts for efficient processing of subsequent information in a coherent rather than a piecemeal fashion. Social groups regularly serve as important and relevant categories that influence one's self concept, as well as one's understanding of social and political relations (Gurin, et al., 1980). Social groups are not only visible actors in the political arena, but power struggles between competing groups in society are salient.

Some groups are more visibly involved in and salient to politics than others. Over time citizens forget about the specific details of political interactions between various groups, but they develop a general sense of those groups they share common concerns with and those that are less similar to their own political orientation. Generally people are more positive in their evaluations of groups with which they share common concerns and relatively more negative towards those with which they have less in common. Groups are perceived to be connected, with varying degrees of intensity, to different political parties (Miller, Wlezien and

Hildreth, 1991). Theoretically, if people like certain groups and they perceive those groups as aligned with a particular candidate or party, they should evaluate the politician and party more positively. Similarly, if they dislike the group, it should have a negative impact on their judgement of the party and candidate.

Change in partisan strength and alignment, according to the theory, occurs in three possible ways. The groups connected with each party could change, either through the rise of new groups or because of shifts in the salience of already existing groups. Public evaluations of the groups connected with each party could change, assessments of some groups could become more positive while others become more negative. Finally, the number of people who identify with a group could change, either increasing or decreasing, thus changing the party's fortunes despite stability in the perceived connection of the group to the parties or evaluations of the group.

The Structure of Party–Group Connections

The public does associate certain clusters of social groups with political parties, although the particular group associations are not stable over time. Factor analyses of the group thermometers for 1972 and 1984 indicate that the structure of party-group connections changed over that period, particularly for the groups the public associated with the Democratic party (see Table 1).[1] In the early seventies, Democrats were defined in terms of the poor, blacks, unions, the middle class, Catholics and liberals. By 1984, however, the set of groups the public associated with the Democratic party had narrowed and included such 'fringe' groups as black militants, the women's movement, people on welfare, gays and lesbians. These activist groups displaced, at least in the public's perception, certain more moderate groups of the traditional Democratic coalition, such as Catholics and the middle class.

The groups that were perceived to be newly associated with the Democratic party were less positively evaluated by the public than the more traditional groups (on average, by 20 degrees on feeling thermometers). Moreover, because feelings toward these social groups were significantly correlated with party and candidate evaluations (see Table 2), a decline in group ratings could contribute to undermining assessments of the Democratic party and its presidential candidates. Indeed, given that the new groups were more negatively evaluated than the groups of the traditional Democratic coalition and that the influence of group evaluations was more important in 1984 than in 1972, helps explain the decline of the Democratic party, and the electoral failure of its presidential candidates, in recent years. The continued association in the public's cognitions between the Democratic party and very negatively evaluated groups, over a sustained period of time, poses important implications for the party's long-term competetiveness.

A factor analysis of the available 1988 NES group thermometers, however, reveals certain departures from the patterns evident in 1984. The most important difference is that gays and lesbians apparently no longer were associated with the Democratic party, rather they formed a separate dimension altogether (see Table 3). But, it is difficult to accept this result as conclusive since the set of social groups assessed using the feeling thermometers in the NES is not the same in 1984 as in 1988. Some groups, such as the middle class and black militants, were excluded from the 1988 study. In addition, the designation of some groups was changed; the

TABLE 1. Factor analysis of common group
thermometers 1972 and 1984

1972 Group thermometer	Factor loadings		
	1	2	3
Democrats	.71		
Poor people	.53		.
Middle class	.52	.46	
Blacks	.52		.45
Catholics	.47		
Labour unions	.44		
Liberals	.41		
Republicans		.78	
Conservatives		.67	
Military		.53	
Big business		.43	
Civil rights leaders			.70
Black militants			.64
Women's liberation			.38

Generalized least squares; percent variance
explained = 40.5%

1984 Group thermometers	Factor loadings		
	1	2	3
Democrats	.63		
Black militants	.62		
Liberals	.62		
Women's liberation	.59		
Civil rights leaders	.56		
Labour unions	.56		
Middle class		.79	
Blacks		.63	
Poor people		.62	
Catholics		.43	
Republicans			.67
Big business			.65
Conservatives			.55
The military			.44

Generalized least squares; percent variance
explained = 46.4%

Source: NES

'women's liberation movement' was replaced by 'feminists'. This latter group, feminists, was strongly associated with the Democratic party in 1988, but it is difficult to say whether the results would have been the same with the 'women's movement' as the stimulus. In short, the NES data are not comparable for the two years, making it impossible to conclude definitively that the 1988 structure is different from that found in 1984.

An election survey conducted by the Iowa Social Science Institute (ISSI) included the full battery of group thermometers asked in the 1984 NES. The ISSI study consists of telephone interviews with 1768 respondents, conducted from 4 October

TABLE 2. Multivariate analysis of factors influencing
relative party and candidate evaluations

| Predictors | Party evaluations | | | |
	1972		1984	
Best party	19.58**	(.26)	34.38**	(.33)
Dem groups	.30**	(.14)	.63**	(.25)
Rep groups	-.33**	(.19)	-.45**	(.19)
Party ID	-11.24**	(.32)	-15.84**	(.33)
R^2	.40		.60	
N	899		1614	

| Predictors | Candidate evaluations | | | |
	1972		1984	
Best party	34.41**	(.27)	42.12**	(.33)
Dem groups	.72**	(.20)	.82**	(.26)
Rep groups	-.79**	(.28)	-.66**	(.22)
Party ID	-14.94**	(.25)	-17.72**	(.30)
R^2	.44		.61	
N	903		1624	

**$p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients;
the standardized coefficients appear, unsigned, in paren-
theses. The dependent variables are: (1) the feeling
thermometer for the Democratic Party minus the feeling
thermometer for the Republican Party; and (2) the feeling
thermometer for the Democratic presidential candidate
minus the thermometer for the Republican candidate. Dem
groups is the mean of all the groups loading with the
Democrats in the factor analysis (corresponding to the
particular year) reported in Table 1. Rep groups is the
mean for those that load with the Republicans. Best party
is a dummy variable created from respondent's report of
which party would do the best job addressing what they
identified as the most important problem facing the
government.
Note: Race, gender, education and income variables were
included in the models, but the estimated coefficients are
not reported here.
Source: NES.

to 8 November 1988 in seven midwestern states (Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri,
Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin). Although the ISSI survey is only of citizens
in the Midwest, the *structure* of their evaluations of social groups did not differ
markedly from that found for the country as a whole—despite the limitations of
the 1988 NES data, the results of factor analysis of the ISSI data are quite similar to
what was obtained with the national data.

The factor loadings from the varimax solution (see Table 3) demonstrate that the
newly-added groups (gays and lesbians, women's liberation movement and militant
blacks) form a separate factor that is largely independent of the Democratic party.
Only the 'women's movement' overlaps (a loading of .47) with the Democratic set
of groups, thus corresponding to the NES association between 'feminists' and the

TABLE 3. Factor analysis of group thermome-
ters, 1988 NES and ISSI data

NES	Factor loadings		
Group thermometer	1	2	3
Democrats	.70		
Civil rights leaders	.72		
Unions	.66		
Feminists	.65		
Liberals	.65		
Blacks	.59		
Republicans		.59	
Conservatives		.73	
Big business		.71	
Military		.69	
Gays and lesbians			.85

ISSI	Factor loadings		
Group thermometer	1	2	3
Democrats	.78		
Labour unions	.61		
Blacks	.49		
Middle class	.56	.51	
Republicans		.83	
Military		.64	
Big business		.63	
Gays and lesbians			.76
Women's liberation	.49		.49
Militant blacks			.41

Note: Kaiser's criterion; generalized least
squares; varimax rotation.
Source: University of Michigan NES and
University of Iowa, ISSI Heartland Poll.

Democratic party. The groups most strongly associated with the Democratic party in 1988 were once again the more traditional groups such as unions and the middle class, although the middle class also overlaps with the Republican dimension.

The data in Tables 1 and 3 suggest that the 1984 association between the fringe groups and the Democratic party was an ephemeral feature of that particular electoral contest rather than a more enduring shift in the groups that the public connects with the parties. If this were true we would expect assessments of the fringe groups to have little or no impact on either candidate or party support in the 1988 election. Yet, this hypothesis is disconfirmed by a multivariate analysis predicting differential support for the candidates and the parties. Even after controlling for a number of demographic variables, party identification and performance on the most important problems facing the country, evaluations of the fringe groups were still significantly related to candidate and partisan preference (see Table 4).

How can the seeming contradiction between the results in Table 4 and the earlier two tables (Tables 1 and 3) be reconciled? One possibility is that the fringe groups are important to the political cognitions of some citizens but not all citizens. Thus in regression analysis the fringe groups would still have some, albeit a reduced,

TABLE 4. Multivariate analysis of factors influencing relative
party and candidate evaluations, 1988

Predictors	Party evaluations		Candidate evaluations	
Race	25.50**	(.14)	.99	(.00)
Gender	2.00	(.02)	-.44	(.00)
Education	-1.55**	(.09)	-.82*	(.04)
Income	-.15	(.01)	-.22	(.01)
Best candidate	8.04**	(.31)	13.96**	(.49)
Dem groups	.22**	(.10)	.06*	(.03)
Rep groups	-.33**	(.16)	-.24**	(.11)
Fringe groups	.17**	(.09)	.24**	(.11)
Party ID	-23.55**	(.45)	-18.26**	(.32)
R^2	.69		.65	

*p < .05; **p < .01 (two-tailed).
Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; the standardized coefficients appear, unsigned in parentheses. The dependent variable is the feeling thermometer for the Democratic Party (Dukakis) minus the feeling thermometer for the Republican Party (Bush). Dem groups is the mean rating of the groups loading with the Democrats in the factor analysis using the ISSI data reported in Table 3. Rep groups is the mean rating of those groups that load with the Republicans. Fringe groups is the mean rating of Gays and lesbians, Women's liberation movement, and Militant blacks. Best candidate is the three-point (1-3-5) variable created from the respondent's report of which candidate would do the best job addressing what they identified as the most important problem facing the government. Source: ISSI Heartland Poll.

impact on the predictions for the total sample, but the varimax rotation in the factor solution would minimize that impact.

If the factor solution is contingent on selecting a particular subset of the population, however, that could readily be determined by analysing properly specified subgroups. But what subgroups should we expect to influence the structure of the perceived association between groups and political parties? Clearly, party identification itself is a prime theoretical candidate for influencing those perceptions and thus for dividing the population into relevant subgroups. In this sense, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Democrats conceived of their own coalition somewhat differently than did Republicans and Independents.

A re-analysis of the group thermometers for the three partisan subgroups taken individually appears to confirm partisan differences in perception (see Table 5). Briefly stated, the results suggest that in 1988 Democrats, Independents and Republicans had different cognitions of which social groups were associated with each party. Whereas Democrats did not connect the fringe groups with their party, Independents and Republicans clearly thought of those groups as part of the Democratic coalition in 1988 just as they had four years earlier.

Replicating the regression analysis of Table 4 for the partisan subgroups indicates further that Democrat's political evaluations in 1988 did not generally reflect the assessments of the fringe groups (see Tables 6 and 7). In contrast to the Democrats, ratings of fringe groups were important influences among Independents and

TABLE 5. Factor analysis of group thermometers for Democrats, Independents and Republicans

Group thermometer	Democrats			Independents		Republicans	
	F1	F2	F3	F1	F2	F1	F2
Democrats	.68			.62		.53	
Labour unions	.64			.40		.53	
Middle class	.55				.64		.53
Blacks	.45		.50	.54		.74	
Republicans		.99			.67		.74
Military	.50				.75		.64
Big business					.64		.50
Gays and lesbians			.77	.69		.55	
Women's liberation			.51	.61		.66	
Militant blacks				.51		.42	

Source: ISSI Heartland Poll, 1988.

TABLE 6. Multivariate analysis of factors influencing relative party evaluations, by partisan identification

Predictors	Democrats		1984 Independents		Republicans	
Best party	10.12**	(.41)	9.68**	(.33)	7.81**	(.32)
Dem groups	.43**	(.24)	.13	(.08)	.04	(.02)
Rep groups	-.22**	(.12)	-.28**	(.17)	-.38**	(.21)
Fringe groups	.01	(.00)	.27**	(.16)	.48**	(.30)
R²	.31		.38		.30	
N	596		558		447	

Predictors	Democrats		1988 Independents		Republicans	
Best party⁴	6.55**	(.27)	5.54**	(.36)	4.13**	(.17)
Dem groups	.45**	(.28)	.16**	(.13)	.26**	(.17)
Rep groups	-.11**	(.07)	-.31**	(.27)	-.46**	(.29)
Fringe groups	-.08	(.02)	.14**	(.13)	.12**	(.09)
R²	.18		.33		.15	
N (weighted)	3031		3009		3001	

**p < .01 (two-tailed)

Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; the standardized coefficients appear, unsigned, in parentheses. The dependent variable is the feeling thermometer for the Democratic party minus the feeling thermometer for the Republican party. Dem groups is the mean thermometer rating of the groups loading with the Democrats in the factor analysis using the ISSI data reported in Table 5. Rep groups is the mean rating of those groups that load with the Republicans. Fringe groups is the mean rating of Gays and lesbians, Women's liberation movement, and Militant blacks. Best party is the three-point (1-3-5) variable created from the respondent's report of which party would do the best job addressing what they identified as the most important problem facing the government.

⁴ Measured using the respondent's report of which candidate would do the best job of addressing what they identified as the most important problem facing the government.

Note: The demographic variables used in Table 4 were also included in the models, but the estimated coefficients are not reported here.

Source: NES 1984, ISSI Heartland Poll, 1988.

TABLE 7. Multivariate analysis of factors influencing relative candidate evaluations

Predictors	Democrats		1984 Independents		Republicans	
Best candidate	10.03**	(.36)	11.62**	(.42)	8.04**	(.31)
Dem groups	.44**	(.22)	.19*	(.09)	.10	(.06)
Rep groups	-.45**	(.22)	-.36**	(.17)	-.44**	(.22)
Fringe groups	.28**	(.14)	.46**	(.22)	.45**	(.26)
R²	.34		.43		.33	
N	596		558		447	

Predictors	Democrats		1988 Independents		Republicans	
Best candidate	13.74**	(.47)	14.80**	(.60)	11.86**	(.44)
Dem groups	.35**	(.18	.07*	(.03)	.21**	(.12)
Rep groups	-.36**	(.19)	-.26**	(.14)	-.48**	(.07)
Fringe groups	.06	(.03)	.26**	(.15)	.26**	(.16)
R²	.32		.49		.37	
N (weighted)	3031		3009		3007	

*p < .05; **p < .01 (two-tailed)

Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; the standardized coefficients appear, unsigned, in parenthesis. The dependent variable is the feeling thermometer for the Democratic presidential candidate minus the feeling thermometer for the Republican candidate. Dem groups is the mean rating of the groups leading with the Democrats in the factor analysis using the ISSI data reported in Table 3. Rep groups is the mean rating of those groups that lead with the Republicans. Fringe groups is the mean rating of Gays and lesbians, Women's liberation movement, and Militant blacks. Best candidate is the three-point (1-3-5) variable created from the respondent's report of which candidate would do the best job addressing what they identified as the most important problem facing the government.
Note: The demographic variables used in Table 4 were also included in the models, but the estimated coefficients are not reported here.
Source: NES, 1984; ISSI Heartland Poll, 1988.

Republicans, particularly with respect to candidate evaluations. Even among Independents and Republicans, however, the influence of ratings of the fringe groups on both partisan and candidate evaluations dropped in 1988, suggesting a general decline in the extent to which the public associated those groups and the Democratic party since 1984. Among Republicans, in particular, political evaluations in 1988 were much more a reflection of response to the traditional groups of the Democratic coalition. How non-Democratic identifiers feel about the Democratic fringe groups continues to structure their political orientations and influence the presidential candidates they prefer, though to a lesser degree than was evident in previous years.

The Dynamics of Party–Group Connections

How do we explain the shifts in the structure of perceptions relating social groups and partisan preferences that occurred between 1984 and 1988? More specifically, why did the structure change for Democrats but not for Republicans and Independents? Two alternative hypotheses appear as preliminary explanations:

1. The Democrats, but not Republicans or Independents, experienced a marked shift in their attitudes toward the 'fringe' groups between 1984 and 1988. Perhaps Democrats on the whole were more sympathetic towards these groups in 1984 but then cooled towards them in 1988, thus excluding them from what they perceived as the party coalition.

While plausible, this hypothesis is not supported by the data (see Table 8). The mean rating of the Women's Movement and Gays and Lesbians dropped slightly for Democrats between 1984 and 1988, but the tendency is more general, evident in the average ratings among both Independents and Republicans.

TABLE 8. Evaluations of Democratic subgroups by partisan identification, 1984-88

	1984	1988 (NES)	1988 (ISSI)
Democrats			
Labour	62.1	63.5	66.4
Blacks	66.1	66.7	64.3
Women's movement	63.4	58.2	54.0
Black militants	36.5	–	35.2
Gays and lesbians	32.9	29.7	33.9
Independents			
Labour	53.2	53.6	52.2
Blacks	65.0	59.7	64.3
Women's movement	57.8	51.6	54.0
Black militants	32.3	–	28.8
Gays and lesbians	30.9	30.0	31.0
Republicans			
Labour	46.5	47.3	46.1
Blacks	61.1	58.4	64.7
Women's movement	51.3	47.4	47.7
Black militants	27.3	–	29.4
Gays and lesbians	25.5	25.4	25.3

Table entries are mean thermometer ratings of subgroups.
Source: NES, 1984; 1988; ISSI Heartland Poll, 1988.

2. The groups were less salient in 1988, that is, the public made fewer candidate-group connections in 1988 compared with 1984. Some empirical support for this hypothesis derives from the NES open-ended candidate likes/dislikes questions. The open-ended nature of these questions provides for a good indication of how salient groups are to the electorate when evaluating the candidates. However, it should be noted that these questions do not specifically ask about groups, so the comments with a group focus are only a subset of all responses and come only from respondents who volunteer some statement with a group connection.

Previous research employing the likes/dislikes questions reveals that group connections have traditionally played a salient and significant role in presidential election outcomes (see Stokes, 1966; Niemi and Weisberg, 1984, p. 91). The data in Table 9, however, suggest a major difference in group saliency for the 1984 and

1988 elections. The percentage of all comments with some group reference was noticeably lower in 1988. Only the percent of comments with a group connection that were positive about the Republican candidates in the two election years (Reagan and Bush) remained stable at a very low 2 per cent of all comments. But, negative mentions with a group focus regarding the Republican candidates, as well as both likes and dislikes comments about the Democratic candidates declined significantly between 1984 and 1988 (see Table 9). Furthermore, negative group-related comments about the Democratic candidate declined slightly more among Democrats than among Independents and Republicans. In both years Independents were more likely than Republicans or Democrats to make negative group-related comments about the Democratic candidate, but an even larger percentage of such comments were directed at the Republican candidate. These data certainly cannot explain partisan differences in candidate preference, but then again the responses are indicative of only those individuals for whom groups were most salient. Nevertheless, the responses demonstrate a marked decline in group saliency between 1984 and 1988, especially among Democrats.

TABLE 9. Candidate likes/dislikes comments focused on group connections by partisanship, 1984 and 1988

| | 1984 | | 1988 | |
Total	Reagan	Mondale	Bush	Dukakis
Likes	2.2	17.4	2.0	13.0
Dislikes	17.1	6.2	9.3	3.1
Democrats				
Likes	2.2	19.1	2.1	14.4
Dislikes	20.2	5.7	12.2	2.5
Republicans				
Likes	1.7	11.0	1.6	10.0
Dislikes	9.4	4.6	4.5	2.8
Independents				
Likes	2.2	14.4	2.0	11.9
Dislikes	17.1	6.3	8.1	3.9

Table entries are the percent of all responses to the open-ended likes/dislikes questions having a 'group-related' focus.
Source: NES.

The reduced saliency of social groups may reflect the participation of the groups themselves. In this sense, it may be that the groups demanded less political attention—participated less openly and actively in 1988—such that voters in general, particularly Democrats, were less inclined to structure their political evaluations in terms of groups. Alternatively, the diminished role of groups may be the result of the actions of political leaders, particularly the presidential candidates. Indeed, it may be that Dukakis did not actively seek the support of groups that Mondale openly courted, such as unions, feminists, and activist black organizations, deliberately deemphasizing those connections instead.[2]

While data on candidate and group activities are not readily available, a content

analysis of the news during the campaign periods of 1984 and 1988 provides some indication of their behaviour. The content analysis employed for this study measured the frequency of group-related stories in the television news for all three networks and the *New York Times* during the four months prior to each election.[5] Table 10 presents the frequency of group references in the news when the source of those references is the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate and then again for the total news regardless of source.

According to the analysis, the total number of presidential campaign-related television news stories with an obvious group reference declined between 1984 and 1988 (dropping from 192 to 165), supporting the relatively lower group salience in the 1988 NES data. The *New York Times* coverage, however, showed an increase in group references for 1988 (210 compared with 194 in 1984), contradicting the television trend. But, when the types of groups mentioned in the coverage are considered, both television and newspaper news reporting reveal similar trends. In general, the data demonstrate a decline in news about religious, women's and certain cultural groups between 1984 and 1988, but a sharp increase in reference to regional groups (see the Appendix for a catalogue of the specific types of groups included in each broad category). Furthermore, while there was no overall

TABLE 10. Frequency of group references in television and newspaper coverage of the presidential election campaigns, 1984 and 1988 (%)

| Television | 1984 | | | 1988 | | |
| | Source | | | Source | | |
Type of group	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Total	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Total
Economic	16.4	11.6	9.4	16.1	30.8	9.7
Regional	3.6	2.3	5.2	19.4	20.0	21.9
Religious	9.1	25.6	16.2	0.0	5.0	5.5
Union	18.2	7.0	16.2	12.9	10.0	17.0
Women	20.0	4.6	13.5	9.7	10.0	12.1
Civil rights	1.8	0.0	1.0	4.2	0.0	4.8
Political	21.8	32.5	19.8	19.3	10.0	14.5
Cultural	9.1	16.4	18.7	18.4	15.0	14.5
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(55)	(43)	(192)	(32)	(20)	(165)

| Newspaper | 1984 | | | 1988 | | |
| | Source | | | Source | | |
Type of group	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Total	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Total
Economic	11.5	12.5	13.4	13.1	19.0	14.8
Regional	5.7	6.3	5.7	21.7	14.3	15.2
Religious	9.6	16.7	16.7	2.2	7.1	5.7
Union	11.5	14.6	9.8	6.5	14.3	11.0
Women	15.4	4.2	9.8	4.3	2.4	3.9
Civil rights	3.8	0.0	3.1	4.3	0.0	4.3
Political	25.0	33.3	22.1	30.5	28.6	29.1
Cultural	17.5	12.4	21.7	17.4	14.3	15.9
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(52)	(48)	(194)	(46)	(42)	(210)

decline in references to unions, the percentage of references that Democratic candidates made to those groups did decline.

In short, the content analysis confirms what was found with the likes/dislikes responses. Between 1984 and 1988 a significant decline in mass media references to politically relevant social groups occurred. The decline, moreover, is largely attributable to the political candidates themselves. The Democratic presidential candidate shifted his emphasis from unions, women's groups and gays to regional and ethnic groups; the Republican candidate shifted his focus from religious and conservative political groups to economic and regional groups.[4] These data suggest an important role for political leaders in the connections the public perceives between the political parties and groups in society. Indeed, both the structure of party-group connections and the degree to which the evaluations of groups impact on partisan and candidate preferences closely follow the behaviour of the political candidates.

Conclusion

Social groups provide important cues that influence both how citizens think about politics and the electoral choices they make, though the saliency of connections between groups and both political parties and candidates varies over time. Group connections were heightened in 1984 over previous years, but diminished somewhat in 1988. While groups were clearly less salient in the public's thinking about the candidates in 1988 than in 1984, they still played a significant role in candidate choice. In general, the electoral behaviour of Democrats in 1988 reflected a shift towards traditional elements of the Democratic coalition rather than towards the newer activist groups. Republicans and Independents apparently responded more schematically as the fringe groups influenced their election choice more strongly. Perhaps they were reacting to visible group cues such as Jesse Jackson's campaign or simply acting on the basis of the social group framework evident in 1984.

Most importantly, the research suggests that public perceptions of the connections between parties and groups and the relative saliency of those connections reflect the behaviour of political leaders. The emphasis political leaders place on groups appears to affect both the structure of party-group connections and the degree to which the evaluations of groups impact on partisan and candidate preferences.

Appendix

Content Analysis Group Reference Codes

Economic Status
001   Poor
002   Middle class
003   Rich
004   People on welfare
005   Homeless
048   Spokesperson
049   All others

Geographic Location
050   East

051   South
052   Midwest
053   Southwest
054   Northwest
055   Southern Democrats
058   Spokesperson
059   All others

Religious Groups
100   Catholic; Church representative
101   Protestant; Church rep.
102   Jewish; Syngogue rep.
103   Muslim; Church rep.
104   Fundamentalist; Church rep.
105   Moral Majority
198   Spokesperson
199   All others

Union Groups
300   Labour
301   AFL-CIO
302   United Auto Workers
303   Teamsters
398   Spokesperson
399   All others

Women's Groups
100   National Organization of Women
101   Women's Liberation
102   Single mothers
103   Pro-Life
104   Operation Rescue
105   Pro-Choice
198   Spokesperson
199   All others

Lobby Organizations
500   General
501   American Medical Association
502   American Association of Retired Persons
503   National Rifle Association
504   American Bar Association
505   Political Action Committees
598   Spokesperson
599   All others

Civil Rights Groups
601   American Civil Liberties Union
602   National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
603   Black Militants (Aggressive, Separatist)
604   White Supremacist (KKK, Skinheads)

605 Urban League
698 Spokesperson
699 All others

Political Organizations
801 Republican Party Officials; campaign
802 Republican Voters
803 Republican National Committee
804 Conservatives
805 Democratic Party Officials; campaign
806 Democratic Voters
807 Democratic National Committee
808 Liberals
809 League of Women Voters
898 Spokesperson
899 All others

Ethnic/Cultural Groups
901 Blacks
902 Hispanics
903 Oriental
904 Greek
905 Native American
906 Latino
907 Rainbow Coalition: Jesse Jackson
908 Gays and lesbians
998 Spokesperson
999 All others

Notes

1 The factor analyses reported in Table 1 (and also in Table 3) were derived using principal components, with Kaiser's criterion and a varimax rotation. Subsequent replication of the factor analysis using multiple r squares for initial estimates and oblique rotations confirmed the initial results.

2 In one sense, the ability of candidates to eschew obvious connections to social groups depends on the absence of demands for such attention on the part of the groups.

3 The evening television newscasts for all three networks on each week-day (Monday-Friday) were content coded from the Vanderbilt Television News Abstracts for the periods of July through October of 1984 and 1988. The front page and campaign section of the *New York Times* for every-other-day during those periods were also content analysed using the same coding scheme employed for the television news. Any campaign-related or political story that contained a reference to one of the several types of groups indicated in the Appendix was coded. The story was the unit of analysis. In addition to coding the type of group referenced, the source of comments made about the group also was coded. Inter-coder reliability of coding the particular group referenced by a story was .92, indicating that 92 percent of the time another coder would have coded exactly the same group and source in a particular story. Five students were employed in the coding.

4 Note that while the percentage of newscast references by Dukakis to cultural groups in 1988 is almost double the percentage for 1984, the actual number is the same and the composition differs, reflecting an increase in ethnic references and a decrease in the mention of fringe cultural groups.

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