Judging a Book by Its Cover: 
The Effects of Candidate Party Label and Issue Stands on Voting Behavior

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Americans vote party lines; nothing predicts election outcomes as well. People may vote party lines because party candidates have views that accurately reflect the positions of their members, because party identification acts as a convenient cue that eliminates the need for greater information search or cognitive processing, or because party classification biases interpretation of other information people have about the candidates. To investigate these competing hypotheses for party effects on voter decision making, participants were presented with a choice between 2 candidates whose policy positions were more inconsistent than consistent with their party identification (Study 1), or completely inconsistent with their party identification (Study 2). People voted as a function of party label in Study 1, but issue stand emerged as a stronger predictor in Study 2 (although Democrats were more likely to cross party lines than Republicans). These results suggest that party identification influences how other information about the candidate is perceived and processed. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

How does the American public decide which candidates to support in public elections? Do they carefully study individual candidates for their position on the issues of the day, or do they walk in the voting booth and vote the “party line”? Considerable survey evidence suggests that voters are heavily influenced by candidates’ party identification. When measured against variables such as vote intention, position on key political issues, leaning, and any of a number of demographic characteristics, party affiliation consistently emerges as the strongest predictor of voting behavior (e.g., Kennamer, 1987; Oshagan, 1988). In addition, political scientists note that for virtually any collection of states, counties, wards, or precincts, the correlation of the party division of the vote in successive elections is consistently very high (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Key, 1966). Panel studies have found that party

967

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affiliation sets the standard for individual stability over time (Converse, 1964; Converse & Markus, 1979).

However, most voters claim that policy stands are the most important criterion of their voting decisions (Johnston, 1989), and some evidence suggests that party identification can change in response to party stands on issues of the day (Franklin, 1984; Luskin, McIver, & Carmines, 1989; Sears, Hensler, & Speer, 1979).

The political world is inherently complex, and it may be perfectly rational for voters to generate strategies to sort through the hubbub of modern American election strategies that make wide use of patriotic sound bites, negative advertising, and candidate doublespeak. Campaign coverage on the evening news has shrunk to an average of 9.8 s, suggesting that little information about candidates is being made readily available to voters by independent sources (Adatto, 1990). To learn candidates' true policy stands requires a willingness to independently discover, process, and integrate a wide array of not always consistent or relevant information.

In sum, the survey literature presents us with a paradox: Voters claim they are very concerned with voting along issue as compared to party lines, but the vast proportion of evidence suggests that they in fact are most likely to vote as a function of party identification. These findings suggest that party identification may act as a heuristic that guides voter decision making. However, survey evidence is of limited utility to confirm this hypothesis for two reasons: (a) because policy stands and party affiliation are correlated (most people who support conservative views on most issues tend to be Republicans, and those who support liberal views on most issues tend to be Democrats; Eisenman & Sirgo, 1991), it is almost impossible to disentangle their independent effects on natural decisions; and (b) candidates' party affiliation and issue stands are not equally available kinds of information. Party affiliation is very easy information to obtain, but learning a candidate's stand on multiple issues requires considerable motivation and tenacity.

Exit polls and surveys investigating reactions to real-world political figures have the benefit of high external validity and are probably the most important sources of information on these issues. However, because there are inherent methodological limitations for disentangling the relative contributions of party identification and issue stands using these methods, carefully designed experiments that can independently manipulate both variables, as well as control for such factors as the relative availability of different kinds of information, can add to our understanding of the relative role of these variables on voter preferences. Carefully controlled experiments will not have the same external validity as field methods, but they have the virtue of high internal validity and a greater capacity to begin to address process questions. Convergent support
from field and experimental studies will ultimately lead us to the most confident conclusions about the relative roles of these variables on voter decision making. To contribute to this goal, the present paper reports on two experiments that investigated the independent effects of policy stands and party identification on voting behavior.

Psychological Explanations for the Political Party Effect

If disincentives were removed, such as the time and effort to discover and process information about candidates' policy positions, would party affiliation still govern voter choices? While some research indicates that the effects of group membership on person perception erodes as more individuating information, such as policy stands, is made available to the perceiver (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1986), other research indicates that category-based expectancies, such as party label, drive both what people attend to and remember (e.g., Rothbart, Evans, & Fulero, 1979; Synder & Uranowitz, 1978).

Theoretical rationales for why party identification is such a strong determinant of voting behavior are readily available in the social psychology literature. For example, people may use party identification as an important cognitive cue or heuristic to guide decision making. Feldman and Conover (1983) suggested that political decisions and judgments are like other cognitive tasks: People are motivated to make these decisions as efficiently as they can, given that they have limited capacities to assimilate information (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Simon, 1957). The Republican and Democratic parties have over time been associated with specific stands on a number of domestic issues, such as social welfare, government control of big business, and military spending (e.g., Page, 1978; Pomper & Lederman, 1980). Once voters classify a given candidate as either a Republican or a Democrat, further judgments are likely to be based on cognitions about the party category itself, rather than more specific information available in the environment (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986). Consistent with this notion, people have been found to be more likely to infer candidates' policy and ideological stands on the basis of their party affiliation than on the candidates' explicit issue statements (Feldman & Conover, 1983).

The goal of the present research was to experimentally explore the extent to which party identification acts as a heuristic that drives voter decision making. We examined whether party identification was still a primary determinant of voter preference when (a) candidates' issue stands were as readily available as candidates' party identification; and (b) the candidates' party identification was either more inconsistent than consistent with the candidates' stand on the issues (Study 1) or completely inconsistent with the candidates' stand on the issues (Study 2). Specifically, when presented with a choice between a Republican
candidate who supports more liberal than conservative policy stands, and a Democrat who supports more conservative than liberal policy stands, do people vote for the candidate with the best match with their own position on the same issues, or the candidate that matches their party identification? To the extent that candidate party identification is being used by voters as a cognitive shortcut to ease the difficulty of processing vote-relevant information, people will vote for their own party's candidate, even if the other candidate's policy stands are more consistent with their own. Study 1 investigated this hypothesis with candidate pairs whose policy stands were more inconsistent (four policy stands) than consistent (two policy stands) with their party label. Subjects were asked to rate their support for two candidates: a Republican candidate who supported four liberal and two conservative causes versus a Democratic candidate who supported four conservative and two liberal causes.

Moreover, to provide a stronger test of the power of party identification in determining voter preferences, these candidates were constructed so that their party inconsistent policy stands were policy positions shared by their opponent. Feature matching theory predicts that preference judgments are determined by noncommon features between choice alternatives (e.g., Houston & Sherman, 1995; Houston, Sherman, & Baker, 1991; Tversky, 1972). Features shared by two choice options cancel out during choice comparisons, because regardless of what the individual chooses, he or she will accrue the shared features of the choice objects. Choice is therefore determined by the unique features of paired items.

To further explore the effects of party identification on voter preferences, Study 2 investigated voter choices with candidate pairs whose policy positions were completely inconsistent with their party label.

Three hypotheses can be tested using this kind of experimental approach.

**The Party Line Hypothesis**

To the extent that party identification acts as a heuristic, subjects will pay little attention to policy positions, much less noncommon policy positions, and will simply vote the party line in both Study 1 and Study 2.

**The Voting the Issues Hypothesis**

If voters in fact prefer candidates who share their position on the issues, they will attend to the noncommon policy positions and be more likely to vote for the candidate of the "other" party in Study 1, as well as in Study 2 when candidates' positions on the issues are completely inconsistent with their party label.
The Discounting Hypothesis

A final possibility is that party identification biases information processing rather than constrains it. Party identification may act as a cue that biases processing of policy positions in general, and inconsistent policy positions in particular. The notion here is that inconsistent information is attended to and remembered (as proposed in Hypothesis 2), but that people will consider it to be less diagnostic than information consistent with their initial classification or judgment of the candidate as a Republican or Democrat.

Category-inconsistent information is more likely to be discounted when information is either complex or ambiguous (Echabe & Rovira, 1989; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Therefore, the discounting hypothesis predicts that subjects will vote as a function of party line in Study 1, when they are presented with candidates whose policy positions are predominantly but not completely inconsistent with their party label. However in Study 2, when discounting is made nearly impossible because candidates' policy positions are completely inconsistent with their party label, subjects are predicted to cross party lines to vote for the candidate who best shares their stand on the issues.²

Study 1

Method

Subjects. Three hundred forty-three students participated in the study as partial fulfillment of class requirements for an introductory psychology class.

Stimulus materials. Hypothetical candidates were designed to have political platforms that were more inconsistent than consistent with their party identification. Liberal and conservative position statements were taken from Costantini and Craik's (1980) Political Issue scale. The "Democratic"³ candidate supported four typically conservative issue stands (less government regulation of business, a crackdown on welfare recipients, reducing the size of the government, and less lenient treatment of criminals) and two liberal issue stands (federal health insurance for all citizens, and less military spending). In contrast, the "Republican" candidate supported four typically liberal issue stands.

²Assimilation effects are highly unlikely in the context of this study, given that policy statements were selected on the basis that they were unambiguously either liberal or conservative (i.e., to be outside the latitude of acceptance).

³Quotation marks are being used to designate candidates' party identification label, because their positions on the issues were inconsistent with their party affiliation, and also because they clarify when we are referring the candidates' (quotation marks) versus the subjects' (no quotation marks) party affiliation.
(federal health insurance for all persons, a guaranteed minimum annual income, a tax shift so the burden falls more heavily on corporations and individuals with large incomes, and less military spending) and two typically conservative issue stands (less government regulation of business, and a crackdown on welfare recipients). All issue stands were pretested to ensure that subjects saw conservative issues as more conservative than liberal issues. Two hundred forty-six subjects rated all issues on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). All pairwise comparisons between liberal and conservative issues were significantly different at $p < .0001$ in the expected directions.

To control for primacy and recency effects, subjects were presented with candidates whose position statements varied in one of three different orders: (a) 2 inconsistent, 2 consistent, 2 inconsistent (ICI) policy statements; (b) consistent-inconsistent-inconsistent (CII); or (c) inconsistent-inconsistent-consistent (IIC).

Procedure. Each subject was presented with two candidates running for the U.S. Senate (each candidate was described on a separate page). Order of presentation ("Republican" vs. "Democrat") was completely counterbalanced. Subjects indicated the degree of support they would give each candidate on separate 7-point scales ranging from 1 (no support at all) to 7 (complete support) and then were asked to vote for the candidate of their choice.

As a completely separate part of the testing session and embedded in a larger questionnaire, subjects rated their own position on the same political issues, how important each issue was to them, and their party self-identification on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Democrat) through 4 (Moderate) to 7 (Republican). The sample was divided into three categories of party affiliation. Subjects scoring 1 through 3 were called Democrats ($N = 146$), subjects who scored 4 were called Moderates ($N = 129$), and subjects who scored themselves between 5 and 7 were called Republicans ($N = 68$). To create a reliable measure of subjects' liberal versus conservative positions on the issues, a single score of subjects' position on the issues was created by taking the average of their positions on the conservative issues and the reverse score of their positions on the liberal issues, weighted by the relative importance of each of these issues to each subject. High scores on this measure therefore reflected a stronger conservative position on the issues, whereas low scores reflected a stronger liberal position on the issues.

Results

What determines political support? Analysis of the four-way interaction of the between subject variables of order of candidate presentation ("Republican"
Table 1

Average Support for Candidates as a Function of Subjects' Party Affiliation When Policy Positions Are More Inconsistent Than Consistent With Candidates' Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects’ party affiliation</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Democrat”</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Republican”</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>5.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The higher the score, the higher the support for the candidate.*

first or “Democrat” first), order of issue presentation (IIC, ICI, CII), and subject party identification (Democrat, Moderate, or Republican) with respect to rated support for each candidate (i.e., the “Republican” vs. “Democratic” candidate) revealed a significant main effect for candidate, $F(1, 324) = 7.62$, $p < .01$, and a subject party by candidate party interaction, $F(2, 324) = 17.55$, $p < .01$.

The “Republican” candidate received more overall support ($M = 4.63$) than did the “Democratic” candidate ($M = 4.47$). Of more interest was the subject party affiliation by candidate party affiliation interaction. Did subjects vote against party label and support the candidate who espoused positions on the issues closer to their own, or did they support the candidate with the “correct” party label? Analysis revealed that subjects supported candidates more as a function of party affiliation than position on the issues (Table 1).

Simple comparisons indicated that Republican subjects supported the “Republican” candidate more than the “Democratic” candidate, $F(1, 324) = 32.46$, $p < .01$. Democratic subjects supported the “Democratic” candidate more than the “Republican” candidate, $F(1, 324) = 6.95$, $p < .01$. Moderates did not significantly differ in their support for the “Republican” and “Democratic” candidates, $F(1, 324) = 4.10$, ns.

*Vote. Other results investigating vote outcome replicated the pattern of results observed with the support data. Correspondence between the subjects’ and candidates’ positions on the issues mattered less than correspondence between the subjects’ and candidates’ party affiliation.*
Table 2

Percentage of Votes for Candidates as a Function of Subjects' Party Affiliation When Policy Positions Are More Inconsistent Than Consistent With Candidates' Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects' party affiliation</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Democrat&quot;</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Republican&quot;</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One hundred forty-four subjects voted for the "Democratic" candidate, and 183 subjects voted for the "Republican" candidate. A chi-square analysis indicated that vote varied as a function of subjects' party identification, \( \chi^2(2, N = 358) = 19.83, p < .01 \). As can be seen in Table 2, Democrats were more likely to vote for the "Democratic" candidate, whereas Republicans and Moderates were more likely to vote for the "Republican" candidate. Republicans (70.1%) voted the "party line" more consistently than did Democrats (57.6%).

Discriminant analysis compared subjects' positions on the issues and party affiliation (measured continuously) as predictors of vote (0 = a vote for the "Democratic" candidate, 1 = a vote for the "Republican" candidate), yielding a significant discriminant function, Wilks's \( \Lambda = 0.89, \chi^2(2, N = 358) = 35.89, p < .01 \). Examination of the pooled within-group correlations between the discriminating variables and the canonical discriminant function indicated that subjects' party affiliation explained over twice as much variance in vote (\( r = .75 \)) as did subjects' position on the issues (\( r = -.37 \)). Recall that high scores on both party affiliation and issue support reflected greater conservatism, which on first glance would suggest that these correlations should both be in the same direction. However, these results indicate that at least some subjects did vote as a function of their position on the issues rather than party affiliation. Subjects who had stronger ideological stands on the issues were more likely to vote for the "other" party's candidate, who better matched their own position on the issues.

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4 Five subjects did not vote.
Discussion

The results of Study 1 found that the majority of subjects voted as a function of party label, even when candidates' positions on the issues were not very consistent with their own. These results replicated surveys of voting behavior, but also extended this previous research in several important ways. In the present study, we were able to disentangle the confounding effects of party identification on policy position to provide a stronger test of the strength of the tendency to vote the party line. In the real world, party identification and policy stands are correlated. In the present study, we presented subjects with candidates with very uncorrelated party identification and policy stands, and still subjects overwhelmingly voted the party line. Moreover, unlike the real world the present study was designed to load voter behavior toward voting as a function of candidates' positions on the issues to the extent that subjects in fact are as motivated to do so by (a) making issue stands as easily available as the candidates' party identification, and (b) making candidates' unique policy stands inconsistent with their party identification. Despite the fact that candidates' policy stands were both more inconsistent than consistent with their own party identification, as well as with the subjects' positions on the issues, subjects in the present study voted the party line.

At least two explanations for the power of party identification over issue stands can be generated: voter mindlessness and apathy versus voter discounting of party-inconsistent policy positions. The major distinction between these two explanations is in the degree of thought people are proposed to give to the candidates’ policy positions. The apathy hypothesis predicts that people engage in very shallow processing of the candidates’ stands on the issues, make note of only the candidates’ party identifications, and automatically and mindlessly vote the party line. In contrast, a discounting hypothesis predicts active processing of the candidates’ policy positions, and then even more cognitive effort directed to actively discount or “explain away” party inconsistent policy positions.

One way to differentiate between these two competing explanations is to ask subjects to evaluate candidates whose policy positions are completely inconsistent with their party label. If people are neglecting to evaluate the candidates’ policy stands, we would expect to replicate Study 1. If, on the other hand, people are processing the policy information, discounting is only plausible if there is at least some category-confirming evidence. The discounting hypothesis predicts that when candidates’ policy positions are completely (rather than just more) inconsistent with their party label, we will reverse the findings of Study 1; discounting becomes an almost impossible cognitive strategy without some category-confirming evidence. Therefore, if subjects were discounting
party-inconsistent policy stands in Study 1, we would expect that when faced with candidates whose policy positions are completely inconsistent with their party label, subjects will not be able to explain away this discrepancy and will vote more as a function of a match between the candidates’ and their own policy positions than as a function of a match between the candidates’ and their own party identification.

Study 2

Method

Subjects. Two hundred forty-six students participated in the study as partial fulfillment of class requirements for an introductory psychology class, none of whom had participated in Study 1. Based on the same classification scheme used in Study 1, 111 subjects were classified as Democrats, 59 as Moderates, and 76 as Republicans.

Stimulus materials. In Study 2, candidates supported only issues that were inconsistent with their party label. Specifically, the “Democratic” candidate supported only conservative policies (less government regulation of business, a crackdown on welfare recipients, reducing the size of the government, and less lenient treatment of criminals), and the “Republican” candidate supported only liberal policies (federal health insurance for all persons, a guaranteed minimum annual income, a tax shift so the burden falls more heavily on corporations and individuals with large incomes, and less military spending). In short, candidate position stands were completely inconsistent with their party identification.

Procedure. The procedure replicated Study 1 in all respects except that policy stands were not varied in order as a function of consistency (since this was not a factor in the present design), and candidates had no shared policy positions. Three different orders of stands on the issues were still used to control for any possible order effects.

Results

What determines political support for candidates whose policy stands are completely inconsistent with their party label? Analysis of the four-way interaction of the between-subject variables of order of candidate presentation (“Republican” first or “Democrat” first), subject party affiliation (Democrat, Moderate, or Republican) and support ratings for the “Republican” versus “Democratic” candidate revealed only a significant subject party by candidate party interaction, $F(2, 240) = 3.59, p < .05$. 
Table 3

Average Support for Candidates as a Function of Subjects' Party Affiliation When Policy Positions Are Completely Inconsistent With Candidates' Party Identification

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Subjects' party affiliation</th>
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<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Democrat&quot;</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Republican&quot;</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The higher the score, the higher the support for the candidate.

Simple comparison analysis indicated that Republican and Moderate subjects were no more likely to support the "Democratic" or "Republican" candidates, $F(1, 240) = 2.29, ns$, and $F(1, 240) = 0.27, ns$, respectively, whereas Democratic subjects supported the "Republican" candidate more than the "Democrat" candidate, $F(1, 240) = 5.04, p < .01$ (see Table 3 for more detail). In short, when candidate positions were completely inconsistent with their party identification, Democrats supported the candidate who shared their policy positions more than the candidate who shared their party identity, while Republicans and Moderates were clearly more split between supporting the party line versus candidates' positions on the issues.

Vote. Other analysis investigated vote outcomes as a function of candidate and target party identification. One hundred four subjects voted for the "Democratic" candidate, and 141 subjects voted for the "Republican" candidate. A chi-square analysis revealed that the majority of Democrats (66.4%) were willing to cross party lines to vote for a Republican who held liberal stands on the issues, but only 51.3% of Republicans were likely to cross party lines to vote for a Democrat who had conservative stands on the issues, a pattern of results that significantly differed from chance expectancies, $\chi^2(2, N = 245) = 6.55, p < .05$. Consistent with the results from support ratings, Democrats were more likely to vote consistently with their positions on the issues than were Republicans (Table 4).

5One subject did not vote.
Table 4

Percentage of Votes for Candidates as a Function of Subjects' Party Affiliation When Policy Positions Are Completely Inconsistent With Candidates' Party Identification

<table>
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<td>Candidate</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Democrat&quot;</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Republican&quot;</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discriminant analysis compared subjects' positions on the issues and party affiliation (measured continuously) as predictors of vote (0 = a vote for the "Democrat" candidate, and 1 = a vote for the "Republican" candidate), yielding a significant function, Wilks's $\Lambda = 0.84$, $\chi^2(2, N = 245) = 40.15$, $p < .01$. Examination of the pooled within-group correlations between the discriminating variables and the canonical discriminant function indicated that subjects' issue stands explained by far the most variance in vote ($r = .99$), with subject party identification explaining very little variance ($r = .14$) in vote.

In summary, the results of Study 2 indicated that when candidates' positions on the issues were entirely inconsistent with their party identification, Republicans and Moderates became equivocal—that is, equally likely to vote as a function of party identification as of issue stands, whereas Democrats were significantly more willing to cross party lines to vote on the basis of a match between the candidate and their own position on the issues.

General Discussion

To better understand the relative roles that party identification and candidate policy positions play in voter decision making, subjects rated candidates whose policy stands were either predominantly inconsistent with their party label (by a 2:1 ratio—Study 1), or completely inconsistent with their party label (Study 2). Results indicated that when presented with candidates who supported ideologically ambiguous platforms that were more inconsistent than consistent with their party identification, subjects chose to vote along party
lines. However, when subjects were presented with candidates whose policy positions were completely inconsistent with their party label, subjects were more likely to cross party lines to vote as a function of a match with the candidates’ positions on the issues rather than a match of their own and the candidates’ party identification.

Overall, these results indicate that the predictive strength of party identification found in survey research is not due only to the real-world difficulty of determining candidates’ positions on the issues. Even when candidates’ policy stands were readily available, people showed a strong tendency to vote more as a function of a party identification match than a policy position match. People were willing to jump party lines to vote as a function of the issues only when candidates’ positions were completely inconsistent with their party identification (Democrats much more so than Republicans). In contrast to Feldman and Conover’s (1983) interpretation of party label effects as a decision-making heuristic, these results indicate that party identification does not preclude more extensive information processing about candidates, but are suggestive instead that party labels bias how people process issue-stand information.

An interesting practical point to note is the strength of the party effects when candidates were described as supporting an ambiguous set of policy positions (Study 1). Despite the fact that the candidate descriptions were set up in parallel form to yield (by cancellation of common features) candidates who held completely party-inconsistent unique positions, subjects’ judgment processes were obviously colored by party label categories to such an extent that they still voted as a function of party identification. From a practical point of view, this result suggests that a political strategy of a mixed platform is likely to be advantageous for candidates. Party members are likely to discount party inconsistent policy stands and to vote the party line, so there is little risk of losing party members’ votes. However, having a mixed platform may increase the possibility of gaining votes from Moderates and perhaps even a few voters who in fact vote as a function of issue stands. An interesting implication of the present results, especially given the current political milieu (a shift to Republican majorities in both the House and Senate, and a generally more conservative political environment), is that it may be more advantageous for Republicans to support some liberal positions than it is for Democrats to support conservative positions. At least in this sample, Democrats were more likely to cross party lines to vote as a function of the issues than were Republicans, a result consistent with considerable research that indicates liberals’ behavior is more contextually dependent than that of conservatives (e.g., Skitka & Tetlock, 1993).

While the results of the two studies reported here have less external validity than the survey research that motivated them, they also illustrate the value of a multimethod approach to the study of political reasoning (see also Tetlock,
1983, 1986). Surveys of reactions to actual political figures yield useful descriptive information about the relationships between issue stands, party identification, and voter choice. However, surveys cannot as readily unconfound candidates’ stands on the issues and their party identification, and shed little light on the psychological processes that underlie voter behavior. By directly manipulating candidates’ policy stands and party identification and experimentally controlling the relative availability of candidates’ stands on the issues, it was possible to more strongly test the hypothesis that party identification acts as a dominating variable to determine voter choice, and to shed light on the psychological processes that govern voter behavior.

These results strongly suggest that a mindless or apathetic view of the party-line vote is an inaccurate portrayal of voter behavior. People do in fact access and process available information about political candidates besides their party label. Rather than shortcutting cognitive processing, these results indicate that party identification biases voters’ information-processing strategies in such a way as to confirm and support their initial understanding of the candidate as a Republican or Democrat.

References


