

# Group Identity and Political Cohesion

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## Abstract

This entry examines the conditions under which group identities become politicized, the psychology underlying this process, and the consequences of political identities for political cohesion and engagement. The political consequences of membership in various demographic and religious groups played a central role in the earliest voting studies and these findings have been theoretically and empirically enriched by an active research focus on social identities within social psychology. Foundational research has identified the underpinnings of cohesive group political behavior in the existence of chronic strong group identities, an established link between the group and politics, and the emergence of group norms fostering a distinct political outlook and political action. Recent research has focused on dynamic aspects of group political cohesion, including threats to the group's status, the convergence of distinct identities, and factors that arouse strong emotions likely to foster collective action. Numerous questions remain unanswered about the conditions under which group political cohesion emerges. One set of questions concerns the origins of chronically strong identities in personality factors such as agreeableness and extraversion. Another set of questions touches on the origins of group identity in situational contexts that promote uncertainty. Finally, the degree to which group leaders can elicit cohesion and conformity, and the situational elements that promote such influence, is a very promising avenue for future research.

## INTRODUCTION: THE COLLECTIVE FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Democratic politics is a group exercise, involving organized political parties, interest groups, grassroots activists, and ethnic, racial, and religion-based voting blocs. The political cohesion evinced by members of similar demographic and political groups is more than the combined beliefs and actions of similar individuals; it involves collective factors such as conformity, group defense, and shared norms. The existence of subjective group identity is central to the development of political cohesion. Understanding the strength of group identities, their stability, the conditions under which they change, and the factors that heighten their salience can shed light on a range of political behavior including the powerful emotions felt by strong Democrats and

Republicans, concerted political action by members of underrepresented ethnic groups, and the avid defense of a nation under external attack.

Past political behavior research has been dominated by a view of citizens as atomized individuals with unique preferences, values, and interests (Huddy, 2013). From this perspective, grounded in economic rationality, citizens vote for a candidate who protects their material economic interests or endorses their cherished beliefs and values (Chong, 2013). In contrast, a group perspective on political behavior elevates collective factors such as the protection of shared economic interests and the defense of group status as a basis for candidate support. Groups factors such as the defense of group status can unleash forces of group loyalty, generate powerful emotions such as anger, and lead to biased reasoning that do not fit neatly within the economic rationality model, even among politically knowledgeable group members.

The psychology of group identities is well understood thanks to a prolific research agenda that has been pursued for decades under the auspices of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The application of this research grounded in social identity theory to political behavior is a more recent and ongoing endeavor. The emergence of collective action is especially dependent on the existence of strong identities among group members (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013). In the extreme, a strong group identity is central to activist behavior.

However, the link between a group and politics is not automatic. The Democratic and Republican parties are inherently political and partisan identities obviously influence political beliefs and action. Likewise, the political cohesion of certain racial, ethnic, and religious groups within specific polities such as African-Americans in the United States or religious Jews in Israel is chronically salient. But most social groups do not cohere politically, or do not do so to any great degree. The conditions under which group identities become politicized, the psychology underlying this process, and the consequences of political identities for political cohesion and engagement are the subject of this entry.

#### FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES

In the earliest American voting studies, an internalized sense of group membership was far more central than objective membership to the emergence of political group cohesion. Even weak subjective group identities had a more powerful influence on political behavior than objective group membership such as being black, female, or Catholic. Within contemporary American politics, African-Americans are politically cohesive, in part, because black Americans have especially strong subjective racial identities. Blacks who identify strongly with their race are more likely than other blacks to support

the Democratic Party, and adopt a pro-group, liberal position on a variety of racial and social welfare issues. The greater political power of subjective identity than objective membership extends to other groups as well.

#### SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE MINIMAL INTERGROUP SITUATION

The political consequences of group membership played a central role in the earliest academic political surveys (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). But interest in the group-based origins of political behavior has waxed and waned in the intervening decades. As political behavior research drifted toward a focus on individual preferences and interests, social psychologists in Europe and more recently the United States developed a rich set of findings and evidence on social identities that held immediate implications for political behavior. Social psychologist Henri Tajfel developed what he viewed as a uniquely European and collective approach to social behavior. Tajfel combined his early research on cognitive categories with research on motivational factors such as the protection of group status to craft social identity theory. The earliest versions of the theory placed key emphasis on the need among group members to positively differentiate their own groups from others (Turner *et al.*, 1987, p. 42).

Tajfel documented the astonishing effects of simple social categorization, which are quite well known by now. Blue eyes, a preference for the painter Kadinsky over Klee, calling some people dot over estimators and others underestimators, were sufficient to produce a preference for fellow group members and elicit discrimination against outsiders (for a summary, see Brewer, 1979). The experimental situation popularized by Tajfel and his followers in which groups were designated by nothing other than a common label became known as the *minimal intergroup situation*. In these studies, subjects allocated rewards to group members by choosing how much to give ingroup and outgroup members from a prearranged matrix with options that varied the degree to which the ingroup was rewarded over the outgroup, and the outgroup was punished at the ingroup's expense. In this setting, group members typically allocated somewhat more to ingroup than outgroup members.

Tajfel's insight that group members are driven to positively distinguish their group from others holds important political consequences. It means, for instance, that group identity and ingroup bias emerge readily among members of high-status groups such as the middle class, white males, and those descended from European stock because membership confers positive distinctiveness on a group's members (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001). In contrast, the development of group identity is less certain among members of low-status groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities,

who need to additionally develop an identity around alternative, positively valued group attributes (social creativity) or fight to change the group's negative image (social change) before membership can enhance their status (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

#### CHRONIC GRADATIONS IN IDENTITY STRENGTH

Social identity was not enough, however, to reveal the full political power of groups. In the minimal intergroup situation, group membership is effectively treated as an objective assignment rather than a subjective identification (Huddy, 2001). But feeling subjectively attached to a group is critical to the development of group-based political behavior and this sense of identity varies dramatically in strength among members of the same group, something that went unmeasured in the minimal intergroup situation. Additional research has demonstrated the greater political power of strong than weak group identities in diverse groups including the nation, political parties, and ethnicities (Huddy, 2013).

Research on American partisanship (Democratic or Republican) and ideological (liberal or conservative) proclivities provides especially good evidence of the political power of strong identities. In survey data, strong partisans are more likely than weak partisans to exhibit bias in their evaluations of a president and current economic and social conditions (Bartels, 2002). When leaders of the major political parties differ in their support of a specific policy, strong well-informed partisans are the most likely to be exposed to these disagreements and fall in step with party leaders (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). These findings of political bias and conformity are most pronounced among those with the strongest group identities.

Political action is also more common among strong than weak group identifiers. Strong partisans are more likely than weak partisans to have given money or volunteered their time to work for a political candidate or political party, voted, or engaged in other political activities (Fowler & Kam, 2008; Huddy, Mason, & Aaroe, 2015). Strong identities also fuel collective action and related forms of group-based political activity (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). In general, the link between identity strength and political action is larger for explicitly political identities such as feminist, conservative, and pro-environment than for nonpolitical identities.

#### LEADERSHIP AND GROUP NORMS

In general, group leaders play a powerful role in forging political cohesion. When George W. Bush identified Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda as the

enemy after 9/11, he went out of his way to make clear that Muslims and Muslim Americans were not the target of US military action. His position was generally adopted by Americans and serves as a marked contrast to the vilification and internment of Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Schildkraut, 2002). Leaders can also directly mobilize members by manufacturing and shaping group grievances (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2013).

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH: POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN ACTION

Foundational research on political identities among ethnic, racial, and partisan groups has emphasized the origins of political cohesion in stable factors such as chronically strong group identities and the stable link between the group and politics. But these are relatively static factors that help to explain the stability of American politics but do less to account for political change. Social identity theorists have always taken a dynamic approach to group behavior and find that identities fuel cohesion when they are salient, something that varies dramatically across social contexts. It has taken time, however, for political research to more fully investigate a dynamic view of political behavior. Recent research has begun to rectify this imbalance by examining factors such as an external threat, especially threats to status which increase political cohesion, and emotions which provide the substrate for cohesive action among group members.

#### STATUS THREAT

Threats to group status can be challenging at a very basic level. In an innovative study, Scheepers and Ellemers (2005) measured blood pressure among participants assigned to a group with low or high status who were then told that their status could change in a second round of the study. As expected, those assigned to a low-status group experienced an increase in blood pressure, indicative of increased stress, after learning of their low status, whereas blood pressure declined among those in the high-status group. When subjects were told that their group status could change, blood pressure increased among the high-status group and declined among the low. A possible decline in high status was just as stressful in this study as being assigned a low status. Strong group identifiers react even more powerfully than those with weaker identities to status threat (Voci, 2006; Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cirns, & Christ, 2007). Moreover, such reactions may be beneficial. Haslam and Reicher (2006) find suggestive evidence that a strong group identity reduces stress as measured by cortisol levels in response to a threat to group status.

## EMOTION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Emotions play an important role in conveying and amplifying the political effects of strong group identities. Positive emotions linked to group success increase group commitment, whereas negative emotions associated with group threat have divergent effects: Anger motivates an active response to group threat, whereas anxiety leads to the avoidance of action and may dampen group commitment. Intergroup emotions theory (IET; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) lends insight into the conditions most likely to generate anger and anxiety. From an IET perspective, threat is most likely to produce anger among strongly identified group members who view their group as likely to prevail over a threatening outgroup. In contrast, members of a weaker group feel anxiety in response to a threat from a stronger outgroup.

There is growing support for the predictions of IET. Strongly identified group members react more angrily to group threat (Rydell *et al.*, 2008). Research findings support a second prediction from IET—that anger will be more pronounced among members of a group seen as strong in the face of threat. Mackie *et al.* (2000) sorted subjects into those for and against gay rights and then manipulated the group position by exposing members to a mix of news headlines that largely supported (strong) or opposed (weak) the group position. In the “strong” group condition, group members felt angrier at outgroup members than those in the “weak” condition and were more action-oriented, wanting to engage in an argument with an outgroup member.

There is also considerable support for IET’s prediction that group-based anger increases a commitment to action, whereas anxiety decreases it. Consider reactions to terrorism. Americans who felt angry toward Saddam Hussein and anti-American terrorists were more supportive of war in Iraq before the war’s onset and less inclined to see it as risky. In contrast, terrorism-related anxiety led Americans to view war in Afghanistan and Iraq as risky and decreased war support overall (Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007). Self-reported fear and anxiety after the 2004 Madrid terrorist bombings increased avoidant behaviors such as staying at home, avoiding air travel, and avoiding contact with Muslims among Spanish respondents (Conejero & Etxebarria, 2007). Similar findings have been observed in research that experimentally arouses anger or anxiety (Lambert *et al.*, 2010; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003).

## CONVERGENT IDENTITIES

Political cohesion may be especially likely when multiple identities, one of which contains strong political content, converge. Roccas and Brewer

(2002) develop the concept of identity overlap, measuring it as the degree to which groups share similar members or attributes, and expect it to generate stronger and less complex identities. Partisan and ideological identities have converged in this way in American politics in recent years, producing stronger partisan identities. Mason (2015) has examined this process and finds that convergent partisan and ideological identities lead to greater political activism and more cohesive political attitudes. Moreover, threat can enhance identity convergence. For example, threat reduced social identity complexity in Northern Ireland, leading to increased overlap between an identity as Catholic and Irish, and Protestant and British (Schmid, Tausch, Hewstone, Hughes, & Cairns, 2008).

#### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: PERSONALITY, CONTEXT, AND THE LIMITS TO ELITE INFLUENCE

One intriguing set of questions yet to be addressed sufficiently within political behavior research concerns an ongoing interest in the origins of strong group identities. A second important line of research inquiry is needed on the conditions under which group members follow or ignore the influence of group leaders.

#### THE ORIGINS OF STRONG GROUP IDENTITIES

One of the crucial ingredients in the development of political cohesion is the existence of a strong, internalized subjective group identity which raises an important but as yet unanswered question: What drives an individual's decision to chronically identify as a group member? Possible candidates from social psychological research include high group status, the inability to leave a group with impermeable boundaries, and smaller group size (Huddy, 2013). But there are still many remaining questions about the situational and dispositional characteristics that incline some but not others to join groups and identify strongly as a group member.

*Personality and Stable Individual Differences.* Are there certain kinds of people who develop a sense of group identification more readily and hang on to this identity more firmly than others, and to what extent do genetic and biological factors underlie this process? There is nascent evidence from political behavior research that partisan identity strength is a stable individual difference grounded in genetic differences and personality traits (Dawes & Fowler, 2009; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). But search research is in its infancy and there is ample room for further investigation.

There is also growing evidence that stable personality traits such as extraversion and agreeableness may strengthen group identification. Gerber *et al.* (2012) analyze data from the 2007–2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project which included measures of the five personality factors (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) in the Big Five Factor Model. They examine the origins of partisan identity strength and find that highly agreeable individuals exhibit the strongest partisan identities, attesting to its social and emotional motivational basis. They also find stronger partisanship among extraverts. Gerber *et al.* (2012) also report higher levels of partisanship among individuals low in openness to experience, suggesting that strong partisanship may provide greater cognitive certainty and coherence.

These studies raise important questions about the existence of a general tendency for individuals to affiliate strongly with groups. To date, there is little research examining identity strength across multiple groups but it may be a promising avenue for future survey research. Of course, belonging to a group is not just an individual choice but depends on context and opportunity. To conduct this kind of research, it may be necessary to place a person in context before asking about specific groups and identities. For example, different individuals will have an opportunity to identify with a work organization, religious group, race, ethnicity, fraternal organization, or sports team. A survey that included measures of personality traits, the strength of several relevant nonpolitical, and one or two political identities, such as ideology and partisanship, would go a long way to assessing the existence of a chronic group affiliation tendency. Experimental research would complement such efforts by providing an opportunity to individuals with different personality traits to identify with a novel political group. In such laboratory studies, the nature of political groups could be systematically varied to assess the degree to which social interaction, group member similarity, and internal discord appeal or repel individuals with differing personality traits such as extraversion and agreeableness.

#### SITUATIONAL FACTORS

In social psychological research, the situational factors that influence identity strength have received greater attention than personality traits, especially situational factors that increase identity salience. According to Oakes (in Turner *et al.*, 1987) salience is heightened by any factor that increases the “separateness” and “clarity” of a category, and one of the factors most likely to increase a category’s clarity is minority status, when a group’s members are outnumbered by members of an outgroup. Abrams (1994) found, for example, that support for a minority political party in the United Kingdom



(e.g., the Liberals or Greens) is more central to young people's identity than support for one of the two major parties (Labor or Tory). This is in line with expectations that minor parties are more salient and provide their supporters with a more distinctive social identity than do large political parties.

But not all salient identities, such as ethnic minority status, necessarily lead to a chronically strong identity. Hogg argues that group members' "need to feel certain that their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors are correct" pushes them to identify with a group and levels of uncertainty can vary across situations (Grieve & Hogg, 1999, p. 927; see also Hogg, 2007). In a politically relevant example, Hohman, Hogg, and Bligh (2010) manipulate certain or uncertain feelings by assigning research participants to read and mark sections in a speech on the environment by President George W. Bush. Some participants were randomly assigned to mark passages that made them feel certain about their place in the world and others were assigned to mark sections that made them feel uncertain. Both Democrats and Republicans reported stronger partisanship in the uncertain than in the certain condition.

Far more could be done, however, to understand the role played by different situational factors in shaping identity strength. External threat from a known outgroup may be an important factor in this process because it typically enhances ingroup solidarity and tightens ingroup boundaries in direct proportion to the degree of threat. The rise in American patriotism after the 9/11 terror attacks provides a compelling example of this process at work. Existential threats to the self can also intensify group attachment and identity (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). For example, Greenberg *et al.* (1990) found that Christians who were asked to form an impression of a Jewish and Christian individual evaluated the Christian more positively and the Jew more negatively when their mortality had been made salient. In other studies, mortality salience heightens ingroup identification (Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, & Seron, 2002).

#### LEADER INFLUENCE

Another promising area for future research concerns the role of political leaders in forging a collective viewpoint and fostering political cohesion among group members. There is ample evidence that political leaders shape and influence public opinion (Zaller, 1992). By doing so, they bring about group political cohesion within the nation or their specific political party. Such conformity around prototypical group members is well established in social psychology (Hogg & Reid, 2006). But there is also growing evidence that group leaders do not always succeed in shaping opinion or bringing about conformity among their followers (Bullock, 2011; Chong & Druckman, 2007). This research raises a number of pressing questions: When are citizens able to

scrutinize messages emanating from their leaders and see through what may be a naked attempt at influence? Under what conditions is information more powerful than political party (or group cues)? When will group members simply ignore the entreatments of their leaders and adopt viewpoints and positions that potentially undermine group cohesion?

Some answers have emerged from recent research. One key influence on partisan cue-taking in research by Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook (2014) is the existence of internal party discord. In their experiment conducted with roughly 1600 online respondents, they varied partisan support for provisions of the 2007 Energy Independence and Security Act. They find lowered support for the Act when party support is not unanimous. The existence of internal party discord appears to drastically reduce partisan defensiveness and leads to a more accurate evaluation of the Act's provisions. The implications for group life are clear. Murky, unclear, or divided signals from a group's leaders weaken their political influence. This may seem trite at one level, but it points clearly to the negative effects of internal group divisions on leader influence and group cohesion.

The experimental designs employed by Bullock and Bolsen *et al.* are ideal settings in which to vary factors likely to enhance or mitigate leader influence and such designs can be readily executed within internet surveys. In a basic experiment, respondents are given a group cue in support of a specific policy or not, and provided with weak or strong arguments in favor of the policy. Additional factors can then be added to the design to test the limits of leader influence. These might include a high or low stakes setting, the presence or absence of a task that inhibits careful processing of information, the existence or absence of group threat, policy support from a typical or atypical group leader, and the existence of internal conflict among group leaders. Studies along these lines should ideally be conducted in tandem with research on real-world groups, especially those engaged in collective action, to determine the degree to which similar factors predict group cohesion outside the laboratory.

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