What Kind of Identity is Partisan Identity? “Social” versus “Political” Partisanship in Divided Democracies

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Many scholars blame partisan polarization for collapsing politics into social life. But these diagnoses lack any sophisticated theoretical basis for distinguishing “social” from “political” forms of identity. This article offers such a framework, providing better grounding for evaluating polarization. Drawing on work on the politics of difference, I first argue that the harms of polarized partisanship mirror long-standing criticisms of essentialist social identities, including the constriction of agency and reduction of compromise. I then show how a more political form of partisan identity could not only mitigate these concerns but also positively contribute to democracy through the promotion of civic republican ideals of active citizenship. I conceptualize partisan identity between the view of the social-identity literature (partisanship as cultural identity) and an idealizing tendency within some recent normative views (partisanship without identity), offering a novel evaluation of polarization and a conceptual map useful for both empirical and normative scholars.

INTRODUCTION

Few topics loom as large in writing about contemporary democracy as that of partisan polarization. In the United States particularly, though not only there, anxiety over “political tribalism” abounds, as many fear the citizenry is divided between hostile opposing camps (Campbell 2016; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Leikes 2016). Scholars have documented worrying rises in levels of antipathy, distrust, and hatred across party lines, or “affective polarization,” even as, curiously, the average American partisan has not become significantly more extreme in their views (Iyengar, Sood, and Leikes 2012; Mason 2018b). Of particular concern are the ways in which affective polarization increasingly plays an outsized role not only in politics but also in ostensibly nonpolitical spheres, shaping citizen interactions in social life (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2018a; Shafранek 2020). When everything feels political, and politics is polarized, then everything else feels polarized, too.

To account for these trends, a now well-established wave of empirical work holds that much of the problem with affective polarization and its spread tracks a particular view of what partisanship is. Many political scientists and psychologists argue that for most partisans, most of the time, their partisanship is not a vehicle for prior political or moral beliefs but is an enduring identity that can only mitigate these concerns but also positively contribute to democracy through the promotion of civic republican ideals of active citizenship. I conceptualize partisan identity between the view of the social-identity literature (partisanship as cultural identity) and an idealizing tendency within some recent normative views (partisanship without identity), offering a novel evaluation of polarization and a conceptual map useful for both empirical and normative scholars.

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1 Rosenblum (2008) and Muirhead (2014) are notable exceptions, and this article builds on their helpful, though underdeveloped, accounts of partisan identity, along with significant engagement with Ypi (2016), which also displays admirable sensitivity to partisanship’s noncognitive components.
identity underexplored. Moreover, we may doubt whether partisanship will ever conform to the methodological suppositions of these accounts for any significant portion of the citizenry. The properties of partisanship that are idealized away from in some normative accounts actually “arise from normal features of human psychology together with features endemic to politics” such that “there is no reason to believe that they will disappear in [even] an ideal liberal society” (Ancell 2019, 420). Some realism is warranted.

But even as we take seriously partisanship’s identitarian nature, we must also avoid undue capitulation to the status quo, as diagnosed by the often-fatalistic empirical literature. Although the latter views are primarily descriptive, participants in this influential wave of political-psychological analysis are rarely shy in offering prescription: the minimization of partisanship, often, and sometimes even the abandonment of democratic ideals altogether (Achen and Bartels 2016; Brennan 2016). This is too hasty; it overlooks the idea that partisan identity can take different forms and that some might be democracy-promoting, rather than democracy-hindering.

An urgent question, then, is whether there is a normative view of partisan identity available that navigates between the overidealized normative view (partisanship without identity) and that of the social-identity literature (partisanship as cultural identity). Can we take seriously partisanship’s identitarian components without collapsing into polarized tribalism?

In this article, I argue that what goes wrong with partisanship under conditions of polarization is that it fails to be a sufficiently political identity, collapsing instead into a cultural identity. I seek to move beyond the claim that partisanship shares much in common with cultural identities—a claim ubiquitous, yet frustratingly undertheorized, in the polarization literature—by elaborating two dimensions along which political partisanship identity properly differs from cultural partisan identity. The harms of affective polarization I isolate are its constraint of political agency and its transformation of the content of political contestation in dangerous directions. To avoid these problems, political partisanship identity must maintain a degree of contingency in relation to underlying social identities and respect certain minimal democratic norms of engagement with opponents. These criteria are partly instruments of conceptual analysis, but they are also, importantly, normative criteria that constitute a critical diagnosis of the state of contemporary partisan identity. Further, and more controversially, they constitute conditions under which partisan identity qua identity can positively contribute to democracy, contra idealized normative views, by furthering the broadly civic-republican values of active citizenship.

Analyzing partisanship through the lens of identity sheds new light on both the harms and potential benefits of partisan identity as yet unexplored in the new normative literature. Fortunately, theorizing identity need not start from scratch. I draw on work on the politics of difference to show how just as social and cultural identities can be more or less objectionable, so can partisan identity. A secondary goal, then, is to expand our understanding of identity in democracy, which has hitherto focused largely on national identity or on nonpartisan subnational entities (e.g., multiculturalism)—lagging behind the shift from social pluralism to partisan polarization as perhaps the primary challenge to democratic unity and stability today. Finally, the article modestly advances the empirical literature, which, despite widespread usage of concepts such as “social identity” and “political identity,” lacks clarity on what might distinguish the two, and why this matters for evaluating partisanship and affective polarization.

The article begins by discussing the notion of identity and showing how partisanship operates as one. I then argue that the transformation of partisan identity under conditions of polarization leaves it vulnerable to longstanding theoretical worries about the role of identity in politics. Finally, I develop an account of what it would take for partisan identity to become political, showing how this both assuages the previously considered worries and, more strongly, allows partisan identity to promote democratic acculturation and motivation.

A note on scope: I am mostly concerned with the structure of partisan identity in democracies with two-party systems and the majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral systems that support them. Such systems are most likely to nurture deep and enduring forms of partisan connection—and engender polarization (Duverger 1964). I adopt the United States as my running example, given that it satisfies these conditions in particularly dramatic fashion and because its forms of polarization have been extensively studied empirically. It is true that many (especially European) proportional-representational democracies confront similar macro trends and display similar cultural changes to the partisan landscape, but their differing electoral systems tend to refract these challenges differently (viz. fragmentation rather than polarization) and therefore require separate study (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 294–330).

PARTISANSHIP AS AN IDENTITY

I begin by defining the notion of identity—a notoriously tricky concept used variously across empirical social science, philosophy, and political theory (Weiner and Tatum 2020). One conceptual core, though, is a focus on mutual recognition and a shared understanding that some group contains members of the same kind. This sense of “we” is demarcated from others using a label that typically carries meaning both for group members and for how others see them (Appiah 2005, 83–5). The content of this mutual recognition can be filled out in various ways; it can be based around race or disability status (unchosen

2 For an exception, see Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018).
3 Methodologically, my project is most similar to that of Landis (2018), who similarly seeks to expose potential benefits of parties missed by overidealization, specifically within the context of David Hume’s thought.
characteristics), experiences or comprehensive ways of life (cultures), beliefs or principles, or interests. Whatever its basis, identity frequently helps individuals make sense of the underlying content (interest, experience, etc.) that gives rise to it; that is, identity partly conditions interest (Gutmann 2004, 3). This is what distinguishes identity groups from interest groups: people attach not just for the pursuit of [prior] self-interest in an instrumental sense, but based partly on mutual recognition (Gutmann 2004, 9). This is because the mechanism of attachment is not merely cognitive but significantly involves symbolic and relational motivations as well (Ross 2009, 138). In sum, identities are mixtures of cognitive attachments (to do with propositions or beliefs characteristic of the identity group), relational attachments (to do with affiliative concerns such as social solidarity and belonging), and symbolic attachments (to do with the interpretive landscape) to markers of social recognition.

The idea that political partisanship could be a form of identity may seem counterintuitive. The commonsense understanding of parties is as bundlers of policy positions into coherent ideological narratives among which citizens choose based on their considered beliefs. However, this “instrumentalist” view of parties has been eclipsed in the empirical literature by a “socialization” view, which locates party membership in “a subjective sense of belonging” to the types of people one associates with one’s party (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy and Bankert 2017, 5; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Partisan identity is motivated by relational and symbolic motivations “intertwined” with cognitive ones to do with the substance of policy considerations (Jost, Ledgerwood, and Hardin 2008). The relationship of partisan to party is thus not so much about rational evaluation of a party’s congruence with one’s interests or moral goals; it is, instead, a process of “social identification” enabled by the fact that “partisan group images are coherent, widespread, and influential” (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, 9). This approach better explains certain observable features of partisanship such as its powerful influence on vote choice independent of issue preference, its seeming immunity to most short-term economic and political fluctuations, and its origins as, if not quite heritable, then often acquired early in life and almost never a matter of straightforward choice (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002, 9). Overall, “parties are not simply vehicles through which political actors pursue their policy goals. For many individuals, party support is a goal in its own right, motivating political involvement [and] shaping policy preferences” (Layman et al. 2010, 344).

Empirical scholars frequently analogize partisan identity to social identities like religion. This is occasionally accompanied by editorializing on the normative implications of different forms of partisan identity, but these forays lack any sophisticated grounding. Fortunately, there is a rich tradition in normative theory of the study of identity, which enjoyed widespread attention in the 1990s and early 2000s as part of investigations into multiculturalism and the politics of difference. Many theorists have argued that there are benefits to treating citizens as bearers of certain politically relevant identities rather than as undifferentiated citizens. But these trends also generated significant worries about identity as a basis of political mobilization. The result is a nuanced inheritance of thought on the conditions under which various identities can advance, or thwart, various individual and political goods. In the next section, I consider two such challenges as a way of thinking about the harms of “social” partisan identity under conditions of polarization.

SOCIAL PARTISAN IDENTITY AND ITS DANGERS

Social Identity and Agency

Much theoretical writing on identity concerns its ambivalent effects on agency—how identity is sometimes constraining of, and sometimes conducive to (or even required for), an individual’s capacity to lead a self-directed life. The first problem with social partisan identity vindicates concerns that identity, particularly when essentialist and comprehensive, impinges on agency. Many theorists have criticized what they take to be social or cultural identity’s tendency toward essentialism. Conceiving of identity as monolithic, incapable of being challenged or reinterpreted, is thought to be unfaithful to the experience of most people, empirically, and detrimental to the ideal of agency (or self-authorship, or autonomy), normatively. Markell, for instance, writes (2003, 4) that the politics of difference risks reifying a “bound” conception of the self, transforming it into “an antecedently given set of facts about who we are.” We are wrong to assume “that identity precedes action”—a view that does not allow individuals to creatively chart their own way (Markell 2003; see also Phillips 2007). Essentialist identities constrain agency by blocking individuals in frozen interpretations of the identity marker by those not in that group and, also, as Appiah argues (2005, 110), due to internal group pressures to conform. These eminently liberal concerns are echoed, in their own way, by a strand of “post-identity” feminist theory, whose proponents fear identity politics’ isolation of a shared experience misrepresents the process of identity creation (Butler 1990) and subordinates minorities within minority groups (Crenshaw 1991).³

³ The preceding critiques of essentialist notions of identity occasionally prompt the opposite worry: that disambiguating differential experiences of oppression will eviscerate the foundations for political action and prevent broader solidarity. There seems a perhaps inevitable tension between the necessity of some degree of essentialism for political organizing and the imperative to recognize more fine-grained diversity.
A closely related worry is the degree of comprehensiveness of an identity—the extent to which it dictates concerns in other areas of life. Though it is undisputed that identities demarcate characteristics or experiences with political relevance, there is a fear that identities frequently constrict agency by encouraging only one mode of interaction between members of the identity group and others. Benhabib (2002, 123) warns against ascribing a “comprehensive worldview” to identity groups, lest we overlook the inevitable diversity within identity groups. “In the contemporary United States,” she notes, “there are gay males who are Republican; there are conservative libertarian lesbians,” and so on (17–8). Benhabib does not consider it inappropriate for members of identity groups to participate in line with the majority of their members’ understanding of its political implications, but she insists that the automatic translation of social experience into political allegiance disrupts agency (149).

So the critique is that essentialist and comprehensive identities are both forms of dogmatism that render it difficult to reflect on and adapt one’s identities, thereby negatively affecting individual agency. Here, I want to show how contemporary (especially American) partisan identities have come to look increasingly essentialist and comprehensive, thereby making worries about impingement on agency increasingly apt. To see how, consider the recent changes to the American landscape of political contestation. Today, the Republican and Democratic parties each consist, internally, of members who share much more in terms of their social identities than they did in the mid-to-late twentieth century. This social and political “sorting” consists in the increasing alignment of partisan identity with other identities, especially racial, religious attachment, and educational attainment (Mason 2018a), but also radiating into social life to include choices less commonly connected to politics such as where one shops for groceries, what kind of neighborhood one prefers to live in, who one cultivates friendships with (Pew Research Center 2017), and who one deems datable (Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018). There is an increasing correlation both among these social identities and lifestyle choices and between them and partisan identity such that “a diminishing portion of our personal identities is free from partisan influence” (Mason 2018a, 62). Now, “the sense of partisan identification is all-encompassing and affects behavior in both political and nonpolitical contexts” (Iyengar and Westwood 2015, 705). Polarized partisanship has become a kind of “mega identity” (Mason 2018b) in which the contingency of the specific alignment of all component identities is minimized.

Political scientists usually decry this identity alignment for its deleterious effects on general political or social stability and intergroup relations. But that does not exhaust the dangers of polarized partisanship; I want to isolate an additional, distinctively moral harm here: cultural partisan identity’s restriction of political agency. This constraining effect mirrors the constraining effect of essentialist and comprehensive social identities on personal agency. Political agency is a special kind of personal agency and requires “that citizens perceive themselves as being able to act and implement decisions” (Wolkenstein 2019, 338).

This capacity is threatened when partisan identity converges with many other social identities, increasing “the degree to which [partisan] groups share similar members or attributes” (Huddy 2013, 746). When partisanship converges with so many other identities and becomes a proxy for one’s other commitments, it raises the stakes involved in every partisan conflict, “hardening” partisan identity in a way that makes it more dogmatic and difficult to reinterpret or reflect on because doing so requires reflecting on so many aspects of the self (Brewer and Roccas 2002). In effect, partisan identity has become increasingly comprehensive, instantiating in even more dramatic fashion Benhabib’s (2002) worry that hewing too closely to one of our various social identities runs the risk of boxing us into a prescribed political allegiance. If what it means to be an authentic or true member of one’s multiple identity groups—a good Southern, a good farmer, a good Protestant Christian—all magnify one another and point in the same direction when it comes to politics (Republican partisan identity), then that exerts a powerful influence on political involvement. Social partisan identity crowds out the role of individual judgment, reducing political agency.

Identity convergence in effect increases the strength of the relational and symbolic components to partisan identity at the expense of the cognitive component. When identities magnify one another, affiliative pressures—such as desires to maintain harmony within valued groups—become more salient, as do their symbolic cues. A citizen satisfying many of the core constituency identities of the Republican Party, as above, will find the people surrounding them—those they see at church, at work, while socializing—to be overwhelmingly Republican, and given the increasing politicization of these diverse spheres, their Republicanness increasingly matters to their associations outside of politics. Cultural partisan identity, then, raises the cost of nonconformism, vulnerable to the same social pressures warned of by Appiah, Markell, Benhabib, and others. Challenging one’s partisan identity in such polarized contexts is still possible, of course—but in practice happens only at the margins. Under conditions of polarization, it is the brave or stubborn partisan who risks social isolation to realize their political agency when it is idiosyncratic in their social contexts or stems from concerns defecting from one of their other identities.

Here one might question the claim that essentialist and comprehensive identities necessarily constrain agency. One might argue that, indeed, political agency is only possible given a degree of homogeneity. This argument corresponds with a more corporatist ontology of social groups and has frequently been made in the context of historically marginalized identities (Cudd 2006; Lepoutré 2020; Young 1990). White and Laird (2020), for instance, argue that the achievement of meaningful political power for Black Americans has
required their support to be consolidated within one party (the Democrats), which has in turn required forms of “racialized social constraint” to discourage defection of Black citizens whose preferences might otherwise lean Republican. In this view, polarization’s disciplining effects on partisan identity might not be such a problem for political agency after all.

I do not deny that the link between social constraint and agency is more complicated in the context of marginalized identities, sometimes justifying sacrifice of individuals’ near-term preferences in service of group representation and, ideally, greater individual agency in the long term. But we cannot tell a similar story about partisan identity. For one thing, there is no corresponding social reality or common group interest uniting copartisans just in virtue of their partisanship that could similarly justify norms of social sanctioning. This is especially true given identity convergence; it is implausible that there could be one phenomenological experience uniting these various identities such that their agency could only be supported by concentrating plural concerns into support of one party. The manifold identities individuals possess each constitute chances for intersectional concerns to weaken the link between individual agency and group representation, decreasing the probability that the contingent identity alignments present within either major partisan mega identity track an individual’s set of identity-based concerns. Social partisan identity thus in effect raises the costs of constraint to individual agency in line with a misguided application of social group representation to the partisan group.

Social Identity, Recognition, and Conflict

The second large problem with polarized partisan identity is its promotion of an expressive and zero-sum form of political conflict that reduces space for compromise. I suggest that the dangers this transformation poses track, mutatis mutandis, similar charges theorists have levied against identity politics. Cultural partisan identity mistakenly seeks recognition in a way that dangerously places authenticity at the heart of political conflict.

It is a common refrain that “identity is harder to compromise than interest” (Gutmann 2004, 17; see also Jones 1999, 76). But why, precisely? One thought locates identity politics’ contentiousness in the subjective importance of identities. Because identities often comprise core components of peoples’ self-conceptions, their politicization engenders a more divisive politics than the politicization of their non-identity-comprising beliefs does, generating reactions including self-defense and fear or loathing of opponents (Benhabib 2002, 129–30). More generally, when citizens feel that their very sense of self is the substance of political debate, it is not clear that one even could compromise. At the extreme, this transforms the content of political debate from tractable beliefs and claims about the world, which generate preferences one can scale back in the face of opposing pressure, to a clash of “mere characteristics of persons” (Jones 1999, 83).

A prominent site of these dynamics is in the politics of recognition. Many have argued that due recognition is a requirement of social justice, grounding duties of acknowledgment of the particularism of social identity in the importance proper recognition plays to human dignity (Honneth 1996; Taylor 1994). Modern social life is full of claims that “people have the right to be acknowledged publicly as what they already really are” (Appiah 2005, 105). These sorts of arguments qualitatively change the nature of political conflict. Given the quite reasonable assumption that the lived experience of a social identity is the best (or only) source of relevant knowledge (e.g., a shared experience of oppression), demands for recognition require that the sole arbiters of the adequacy and authenticity of recognition be members of the concerned group themselves (Kruks 2001; Young 1990). Thus, even when demands for recognition of our particularist, authentic selves are justified—as they surely often are—they often bring an element of uncompromisingness into political discourse and sometimes prevent broader solidarities (e.g., class politics; Fraser 1997; Kumar et al. 2018).

The theoretical lenses of recognition and identity-based conflict help illuminate the contentiousness of polarized partisan politics. For there is no doubt that partisan politics has grown more contentious along many measures of social distance including reported feelings toward opponents, negative stereotypes, aversion to interpartisan marriage, and prejudiced behavior (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Appetite for compromise with the opposing party has declined (Wolf, Strachan, and Shea 2012). This is the case despite the fact that the ideological differences between average partisans have not significantly widened in recent years—and anyway most partisans remain fairly ignorant of parties’ platforms (Fiorina and Abrams 2009). It would be hard to explain the combination of the relative stability of the issue landscape and the meteoric rise in toxicity with reference only to the cognitive component of partisan identity—the part dealing with issue positions and political and moral commitments. Consequently, scholars have increasingly turned to social identity theory, an approach to intergroup relations that emphasizes the tendency for people to internalize certain salient identity characteristics into their self-concepts and to protect the status of their in-group and demonize those of out-groups (Tajfel 1981). “Partisanship for many Americans today takes the form of a visceral, even subconscious attachment to a party group. Our party becomes a part of our self-concept in deep and meaningful ways” (Theodoridis 2016).

The character and intensity of interpartisan conflict mirrors theoretical concerns with conflict among politicized social identities. Polarization has made the expressive dimension of conflict increasingly dominant. As partisan identity becomes a synecdoche of self-esteem, electoral competition is reformulated as a kind of struggle for recognition of the
particularism of the partisan group, its distinctness from opposing partisans. What has been said of cultures—that they are “the lenses through which the causes of conflict and mobilization are refracted” (Ross 2009, 136)—is true of polarized parties. Each policy question boils down to a chance for winning or losing—for asserting the superiority of one’s partisan in-group. Cultural partisan identity itself becomes the central plane of contestation, displacing, for many partisans, the things for which parties positively stand (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018). As in the realm of social and cultural identity, the struggle to preserve authenticity seeks to avoid opposing viewpoints and construes counterargument as offensive, encouraging a protective rather than engagement mindset toward politics. This is the sense in which partisanship has become an aesthetic, a plane of realization (or frustration) of a deep-seated sense of sincerity and meaning the modern self has been conditioned at least since the Romantic age to uncover and preserve (Larmore 1996, 7–31).

When politics becomes a fight over the integrity of identity rather than more tractable interests, compromise becomes untenable. Partisan identity’s assertion of self-dignity is connected to an almost existential approach to political life in which, as one commentator puts it, “politics becomes your idol” (Brooks 2017), mirroring the stakes of social recognition as a “vital human need” (Taylor 1994, 26). Challenges to cultural partisan identity are interpreted as challenges to the dignity of the citizen and the validity of their inclusion in the political process. Affective polarization is partly the result, then, of both parties’ partisans misperceiving, and feeling misperceived by, their opponents, in their joint but counterposed pursuit of confirmation of status.6

One might argue that this is not the same form of misrecognition as that which occurs in the realm of social identity. Surely perpetuating stereotypes about disabled people in virtue of their disability, say, is different, and worse, than perpetuating stereotypes about Democrats in virtue of their Democratic identity. It does not make sense to say that partisan identity is vulnerable, as social identities are vulnerable, to the potential for “nonrecognition or misrecognition” to trap one in a “false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Taylor 1994, 25).

I agree, and appreciating this distinction is important to understanding why grafting the pursuit of recognition from the social sphere onto partisan politics is dangerous. The lack of compromise regarding recognition of social identity is justified, when it is, because of its link to human dignity. Members of identity groups demand respect based on their (authentic) understanding of their identity—as disabled, as gay, etc.—because doing so is essential to living a flourishing life in which prejudice is minimized. But no parallel argument can plausibly be made regarding partisan identity; partisans cannot legitimately demand positive recognition just based on their partisan identities in a similar way—that is, as grounded in an appeal to human dignity and/or redressing oppression.

Now, clarifying the reason for approving of particularized recognition claims in the realm of social identity and disapproving of them in the realm of partisan identity is not as straightforward as it might first appear. The difference cannot be that recognition only legitimately applies to identities that are subjectively important because, as we have seen, many partisans rate their partisanship as highly important. An appeal to the differential roles these identities play in maintaining basic dignity gets us part of the way there because, as suggested, proper recognition of partisanship seems only dubiously connected to dignity. But this answer also looks dismaying stipulative and is vulnerable to the counterargument that no one can really say which forms of misrecognition are most damaging.

A better basis for objecting to cultural partisan recognition (and a better diagnosis for what is wrong with polarized partisanship) stems, rather, from the different forms of authenticity at the heart of these different forms of recognition. In place of the authenticity of a particular lived experience, the relevant form of authenticity that partisans substitute is competing views of national identity. When polarized partisans compete on the terrain of identity integrity, they assert rival claims to exclusive interpretation of what is properly the object of all members of the polity. Such exclusivist assertions, again, are frequently legitimate when it comes to social identities like race and gender, as their sole possession of certain characteristics lends at least pro tanto exclusive ownership over their elaboration. But at the level of democracy, this form of politics encourages a destabilizing battle of which subset best represents the “true” citizenry and construes rival interpretations as status threats. The partisan “battle for the meaning of America” (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018) is thus, through the roping of partisan fortunes to personal fortunes, a battle for the soul of the partisan. Further, unlike social identities, partisan identities are necessarily competitive, turning recognition into a positional good the satisfaction of which depends on opposing partisans losing. Insofar as successful recognition of personhood depends on the elusive pursuit of positive regard for their partisan identity’s uniqueness by members of other groups (parties) conceived to only be possible without compromise, cultural partisan identity mistakenly demands of competitive politics something it cannot provide.

One important root of today’s dysfunctional partisan politics, then, is the transformation of partisan identity into a vessel for seeking the sources of human dignity citizens might otherwise fulfill through recognition of their social identities, inviting a populist form of conflict that renders compromise anathema.

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6 Although comprehensive analysis of the broader economic and cultural roots of these changes is beyond my scope, it is worth noting that, as Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart point out (2019, 444–5, 451–3), similar us-vs.-them logic has arisen in many democracies, but it rarely aligns with preexisting partisan–identitarian divisions as it now does in the United States.
POLITICAL PARTISAN IDENTITY AND ITS VIRTUES

The Autonomy of the Political

Given the significant problems with polarized partisan identities, how might we move forward? The intuition I seek to substantiate in the remainder of the article is that the dangers resulting from the collapse of partisanship into a quasi-cultural form of political attachment call for a more political form of partisan identity.

The idea that polarized partisanship is in some sense nonpolitical finds repeated expression across the relevant empirical literatures, with a distinction between “the context of politics” and “nonpolitical domains” operative in many studies (e.g., Shafranek 2019). A good deal of the intuitive force of empirical diagnoses of affective polarization trades on the image of politics and social life collapsing together. I share the intuition, but caution that, without more theoretical explication, the rather crude distinction between the two obscures more than it illuminates and also risks imposing a thick wall between the social and the political.

My view of what ought to distinguish political from cultural partisan identity is motivated by broadly civic-republican ideals. Civic republicans seek to preserve the autonomy of the political to advance the values of active citizenship, including political agency, motivation, and participation (Arendt 1998; Sandel 1998; Viroli 1995). In what follows, I set out two normative criteria that distinguish political from cultural partisan identity. Conforming to these criteria will, I argue, help mitigate the dangers of affective polarization diagnosed above, while, more positively, enabling partisan identity to promote civic-republican values.

I draw on civic republicanism because the particular democracy-promoting consequences I argue this form of partisanship carries—promotion of agency and transformation of conflict—have long been core concentrations of civic republicans. Moreover, it is hoped that some rhetorical purchase will accrue to my effort to defend partisanship in a participation-valorizing tradition, given the still widespread tendency to assume that partisanship—especially partisanism as an identity—is antithetical to good citizenship. Nevertheless, one need not be a card-carrying civic republican to endorse my account. A liberal view of the political, which might defend the neutrality of politics vis-à-vis the comprehensive moral doctrines of private life, might be equally critical of overly social partisanship. Still, the civic republican approach provides a more natural lens for viewing the positive relationship between identity and the democratic goods of active citizenship that political partisan identity promotes.

To address one criticism of this move in advance, I acknowledge that when attempts to specify the political amount to shielding unjust social practices from political inquiry or promoting elitist views of participation, they are rightly criticized. We cannot dictate a priori what concerns may legitimately be raised in public discussion.7 I follow Walzer (1983) here, for whom the boundaries among spheres are permeable and shifting, even as they retain an identifiable social and moral logic according to which they are differentiable. Consequently, my analysis proceeds at a level above, analyzing general patterns of identity formation and connection rather than passing substantive judgment on the merits of any particular one.

Political Identity, Agency, and Civic Culture

I argued earlier that polarization’s effects on partisan identity match worries that identity entails comprehensiveness and dogmatism and thereby constrains agency. In this subsection, I show how this need not be the case. I articulate a different understanding of partisan identity that is supportive of political agency, as that has been understood in the participative tradition of civic republicanism. More specifically, my view affords a deeper role for noncognitive (identity-based, affiliative) motives in the formation and enactment of cognitive political beliefs, although still a role tempered by a certain kind of reflection. As long as partisan identity displays a degree of contingency, or flexibility, in relation to underlying social identities—something that, in practice, requires crosscutting identities—then it supports a valuable form of political agency important for the development of a participative civic culture.

There are different ways of understanding the relationship between identity and agency. At one end of the spectrum, identity simply dictates agency. That is, citizens’ political beliefs flow directly from their party allegiance, which itself tends to flow directly from their social-political positioning. This extreme entails the kind of “tribal” agency so common today, as diagnosed above, with no room for independent reflection. We might here call this a purely noncognitivist view, as it denotes a mode of political agency wholly derivative of identity’s affiliative and symbolic elements.

The unattractiveness of such a view motivates support for the other end of the spectrum, a purely cognitivist position that construes agency as adherence to one’s principles and beliefs given maximal reflection. In this view, the noncognitivist influences of identity are straightforwardly obstructive to agency, with the affiliative and symbolic elements construed as sources of distortion to one’s agency understood as following one’s (prior) principled beliefs.

A major innovation of the recent partisanship literature has been acknowledgment of the moral-psychological implausibility as well as normative undesirability of such a purely cognitivist view. One way of understanding this turn, then, is as the search for a middle way between “identity-based” modes of political agency—those that afford some role for noncognitivist (especially affiliative) elements—and principled, cognitivist ones. My view of partisan identity’s promotion of political agency also resides in this vicinity, seeking to navigate between the two poles just identified. But my account specifies a different relationship between identity and agency than

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7 This is, of course, a classic feminist argument; see, e.g., Elshtain (1981).
others have specified on three dimensions: the formation of political beliefs, the form of reflection required, and the most desirable broader social-structural arrangements. I develop these differences in the remainder of this subsection in conversation with the accounts of Ypi (2016) and Muirhead (2014).

Ypi commends parties for providing “associative practices” among a group of political “friends” necessary for “sustaining and nurturing” political commitment (2016, 601–2). This is done via both “motivational” and “epistemic” mechanisms: partisan friends provide motivation to continue political projects despite costs (607), and partisans benefit from “epistemic reliance,” insofar as copartisans help enhance one’s core commitments (608). Muirhead likewise styles partisanship a form of “friendship” involving “loyalty” that “goes beyond strategic self-interest” to sustain political projects in the long term (2014, 115).

So, here are sophisticated accounts in which partisanship supports agency—and does so in virtue of elements that roughly track what I have been calling “affiliative,” noncognitive components of partisan identity. I allow an even stronger role for partisan identity to inform agency, though, via the influence of its affiliative components on the formation of our most basic political beliefs and judgments. Both Ypi and Muirhead construe the noncognitive role of partisan “friends” (e.g., motivational and epistemic support) in a way that unduly restricts the educative potential of parties in forming participative citizens. By their accounts, partisan identity’s noncognitive elements are tolerable insofar as they support one’s prior political commitments. Parties are valuable, for Ypi and Muirhead, because they provide forums for the like-minded to best realize the principles in which they (already) believe. Ypi’s statement that partisanship ultimately “rests on similarities of belief in the value of specific political projects” (2016, 607) is telling, as is a strong emphasis throughout her partisanship corpus on understanding partisanship as “a highly principled mode of activity” best understood through the lens of the exchange of reasons (White and Ypi 2016, 3). Their accounts limit the role of noncognitivism (e.g., partisan friendship, loyalty, affiliation) to its felicitous effects downstream of (cognitive) belief formation, subordinating partisan identity to principled beliefs.

In contrast, I maintain that partisan identity can play a stronger role: not only in assisting the refining and enactment of one’s political beliefs but also in helping form those beliefs to begin with. Given some important caveats outlined below, the fact that a significant portion of many partisans’ beliefs stems from the arbitrary origins of partisan friends and party label can actually work to sustain political projects in the long term (2014, 115).

Partisan identity’s achievement in remedying potential citizen paralysis in the face of the indeterminacy of the political landscape gains urgency in light of the long-standing civic-republican emphasis that citizens are not born, but made, through a process of political “acculturation” (Rosenblum 2008, 450–2) and connection through which they are brought to care about participation and its meaning (Barber 2003; Putnam 2000; Sandel 1998). It is a commonplace in this literature that there exist certain “motivational prerequisites of democratic governance” (Laborde 2002, 592)—that civic culture must somehow empower citizens by

8 See also White and Ypi (2016, chap. 4).
inspiring “the moral and civic engagement self-government requires” (Markell 2000, 38). The likely practical alternative to agency through partisan identity is not a citizenry duly selecting a party based on their inventory of beliefs but an even more disengaged and apathetic citizenry with even less knowledge of the issues, justifying the stronger role for political partisan identity to influence belief origins. Consider here, also, the motivational benefits of partisan identity, which stem, for many, exclusively from its noncognitive components. Political psychologists have shown how it is the relational and symbolic bases of agency that “offer[s] emotionally significant connections between the fate of individuals and the group” (Ross 2009, 140). “Political participation can be a direct outcome of our sense of feeling attached to others” in addition to—and, frequently, in place of—motivation stemming from our issue positions (Mason 2018b, 104). The authors of one study claim that identity-based partisanship “has its place as a vehicle for democratic engagement, providing partisans with a stake in an election and a reason to get involved” (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015, 15). Partisan identity, at its best, is an especially effective source of democratic motivation, inculcating a participative civic culture.

So far, I have argued that partisan identity helps facilitate political agency largely in line with the social identity model of partisanship and certain aspects of the phenomenology of partisanship under conditions of polarization. Because I am suggesting that part of partisanship’s value derives from its origination, not just facilitation, of political beliefs, critics might think I am merely defending the status quo of tribal, “cultural” partisan identity. But I will now enter two constraints that must be met for this strong role for noncognitivism to be most plausible—one internal to the partisan and one relating to the broader social-structural partisan landscape.

In the current literature, the influence of partisanship’s noncognitive elements over its cognitive elements is rendered tolerable by principled reflection. Partisans must “orient themselves” to their political beliefs “based on an evaluation of the associated political objectives” (White and Ypi 2016, 26). Notice how both accounts recommend a cognitive reflective reference—that is, the “anchor” from which one continually judges the accuracy or authenticity of one’s partisanship is one’s considered moral beliefs. The duty to reflect is necessary for political commitment to genuinely further political agency. I, too, require political partisans to reflect on their partisan identity, but I understand reflection in broader terms. Along with cognitive reference points, partisans may legitimately incorporate affiliative or social reference points for judging the continued desirability and accuracy of their partisan identity. My political partisan reflection admits of judgment about the appropriateness of party label on the basis of an expanded set of reasons—those to do not only with partisan identity’s fit with some anchoring moral commitments or policy beliefs but also its fit with the sorts of social groupings one associates with one’s party and values.

As mentioned, for many, partisan involvement is mediated by membership in one or more social identity groups. The common concern that such association undercuts agency neglects the fact that social identities are frequently reliable sources of the politically relevant interests of their members, as “[social] group membership is partly defined by epistemically significant social perspectives” (Lepoutre 2020, 42). It also neglects the fact that the association between social identity membership and party identity is a fluid, dynamic, and contingent process—participation in which represents another venue for expression of political partisan agency. This latter point is crucial to assuaging liberal concerns about identity essentialism and comprehensiveness and the imperative to preserve (the possibility of) identity fluidity. This additional, affiliative layer of reflection ought not to express a simple bias in favor of continued partisan association, even when cognitive reflection warrants abandonment, but seeks a bidirectional equilibrium that allows reformulation. When reflecting on the enduring appropriateness of their partisan affiliation, then, partisans may consider not just whether the party furthers their moral convictions; they may legitimately examine their partisanship through the lens of its historical association with one or more of their social group memberships.

But one big problem with this expanded mode of reflection in supporting my identity-based account of political partisan agency is that it becomes harder or impossible given the bifurcation of the social-political landscape into two aligned “mega identities” incorporating virtually all the politically relevant social identities on offer today (Mason 2018b). This necessitates consideration of the larger social-institutional context that my view of political partisan identity requires to operate successfully. The felicitous roles I have suggested partisan identity’s noncognitive elements can play in supporting political agency cannot occur when each identity is bound up with every other politically salient identity. As displayed above, identity aggregation makes any kind of reflection significantly more difficult.

In response, polarized partisan identity needs a spirit of contingency for it to promote, rather than hinder, political agency. The relevant sort of contingency is contingency among one’s various social identities and their relationship to one’s partisan identity. When partisans fail to maintain a degree of “independence” from social life, then their partisan identity becomes something immediately entailed by their other characteristics, and so not amenable to reflection or reinterpretation. As Rosenblum writes (2008, 346), there must be “transitional steps” of “loosening, eclipsing, or transformation”; partisanship “alters” social identities and “often transcends them.”12 The value of this sort of contingency is specifically democratically political, as it is

12 I am sympathetic to Rosenblum’s passages on partisanship as a form of identity politics (2008, 342–8). Her account, though, is largely prescriptive: I improve on it here by suggesting that what is normatively at stake in partisanship’s independence from social life is a form of agency.
essential to the possibility of change under democratic governance that political coalitions (identity-based and otherwise) be able to form and reform. There must be room for creative coalition formation. As Benhabib writes of social identities (2002, 17–8), we must view “processes of group formation” dynamically and “pay more attention to the mobilization of social and cultural cleavages in political movements.” “Cross-cultural and intercultural political associations ... should be furthered” (149). By reducing the capacity for identity reflection and the social and political tolerability of heterodox association, polarization threatens the contingency and flexibility of which democratic political agency consists.

The most promising facilitator of this spirit is a social-structural one. Our polarized times call for crosscutting identities. Increased interaction with those outside of one’s “mega identity” along identity lines that bisect each sorted group—for example, by national or local identity—humanizes the other and reduces bias (Brewer and Roccas 2002). Encouraging crosscutting identities also enhances the contingency of partisan identity, making it easier to reflect in the senses I have recommended and licensing the potential reformulation of partisan involvement away from the two grand narratives that dominate political life. The ossification of partisan identity (and its accompanying social identities) is due not only to entrenched interpretative patterns but also to the broader social-structural features of American society across many identity groups. This poses a formidable obstacle to any attempt to challenge the deep-rootedness of partisan identity within many partisans today, and this is what crosscutting identities address. To advocate for polarized, highly aligned identities to be crosscut, then, is to advocate for a kind of social disaggregation or decoupling that underwrites the potential for ossified cultural partisan identity to be creatively reformulated, freeing citizens to assert the claims from aspects of themselves that do not neatly align with those of their partisan “mega identity.”

In addition to encouraging such forms of connections in civil society, the natural home of crosscutting association, the imperative of partisan-identity contingency provides one (albeit defeasible) argument for more extreme partisan-integration strategies. These might include citizen service programs or even housing “integration” of partisan opponents.

One might worry, though, that premising the development of a civic-cultural identity within the frame of partisanship—even after securing the conditions under which identity contingency becomes more likely—comes at too high a cost, dividing the public. The next facet of the distinctiveness of political partisan identity addresses this challenge.

# Political Identity, Recognition, and Compromise

Earlier, I argued that polarization has caused partisan competition to increasingly assume the logic of conflict over recognition, as a significant part of the substance of partisan contestation concerns the authenticity of partisans understood as an essential core demanding exclusivist elaboration. A natural response would be to seek to reduce the sense in which partisans seek meaning from political life. In my view, however, attempting to rid politics altogether of the expressive dimension would be a mistake. While a political understanding of partisan identity eschews the collapse of electoral politics completely into status-based competition, it retains a role for recognition. But political partisan identity commands recognition without authenticity—or, more specifically, without the particularized, exclusivist form of authenticity undergirding claims for recognition of social identities. By decoupling recognition from authenticity, political partisan identity enables a mode of interpartisan interaction that renders compromise more likely.

The political form of recognition appropriate for partisanship differs from recognition in the social sphere in both its moral grounding and content. Demands for recognition of social and cultural identity, recall, are grounded in their link to human dignity. Each person’s claim to dignity is supported by recognition of their authentic, particularized selves, demanding deference to that person’s or group’s understanding of their identity. But in the political realm, the relationship between dignity and these demands of recognition is reversed: recognizing citizens’ dignity requires not deference but engagement, rendering the aspiration to preserve authenticity by claiming exclusive interpretation of the identity inappropriate.

I ground political partisan recognition in the role of active citizenship in the maintenance of democratic life and the role positive affirmation of our interdependent contributions to this project plays in supporting it. Partisan identity is a kind of participative shorthand or vehicle for democratic identity, for membership in the public. Partisanship tracks inclusion and commitment to the shared endeavor of making democracy work. When citizens advance “out into the bright light of the public stage” through the efforts of partisanship and engage in the “self-revelatory character of [political] action,” they receive and return the equalizing gaze of their fellow citizens similarly committed (Canovan 1985, 628). Partisanship is conceived as an especially visible way of enacting the duties of active citizenship, and so partisan political recognition can facilitate a powerful recognition of political equality.

Contrast this civic-republican defense of political partisan recognition with that emphasized by certain agonist theorists, who similarly seek a political, not social, form of recognition. Theorists such as Markell understand their hopes to transform citizen–citizen relations into nonadversarialism in a negative register of “intersubjective vulnerability” (Markell 2003, 4). In my view, priming existential stakes is liable to induce a counterproductive scarcity mindset, increasing outgroup hostility (see Kinder and Kam 2009). Contrast, too, with the foundations of White and Ypi’s (2016) and especially Bonotti’s (2017) accounts, which ground their understanding of political interactions among partisans in virtue of their capacity as reasoning agents. This broadly Rawlsian foundation lends itself to a view of duties toward opponents limited to the rational (the
duty to reason publicly), obscuring other dimensions of citizen–citizen relations crucially at stake under polarized conditions.

Having established why opposing partisans want to recognize one another, it remains to be seen what this requires—the content of political partisan recognition. Political partisan identity rejects partisanship as expression of authentic private experience deserving of particular recognition, based on a politics of difference, and embraces, instead, partisanship as expression of a more general form of shared experience in the maintenance of democratic governance. Whereas the politics of difference demands that we “give acknowledgment and status to something that is not universally shared” (Taylor 1994, 38)—and that, given the partisan desire for status through winning, cannot be universally shared—political partisan identity draws on the shared experience of coparticipation in the democratic project. Apart from the daily tally of partisan wins and losses, the elections, and the differences lies a common commitment to brave the public square to contribute one’s part to the only system of governance that cannot exist otherwise. What partisans are asked to recognize is this state of interdependence with their opponents arising from their mutual contributions to the shared action of maintaining democratic governance.

Note three distinctive features of this view. First, it denies claims to exclusivist interpretation and instead requires equal standing to partisan debate. Although it is generally inappropriate to ask someone to change, or revise their understanding of, their social identities, querying someone’s partisan identity is fair game—required even, in open democracies. No partisan group has exclusive ownership over a terrain of issues. This dovetails with my discussion above on the necessary contingency of political partisanship. Social identity’s occasional preservationist impulse has no place in political identity.

This leads to the second characteristic: political partisan identity demands continual engagement. We recognize partisan opponents when we argue with them. This follows from the grounds of the view as rooted in each citizen’s potential to actively contribute politically. The duty to respond to opposing arguments gains urgency in light of polarized cultural partisan identity’s tendency to induce consolidation into silos of the like-minded rather than engage the opposition and thereby recognize their capacity to contribute, and perhaps persuade and create the conditions for new coalitions. The political requirement to engage does not demand public reason constraints; I follow arguments holding that respect for citizens in the political realm is more consistent with a willingness to engage with their most basic commitments (e.g., Pallikkathayil 2019, 77).

Third, political partisan recognition involves a distinctive affective relation across party divides. The objective is to achieve a minimal form of positive respect for partisan opponents—those who are equally “in it,” committed to the democratic process. This mode of recognition will not doubt often be grudging and involves no personal relationship or intimacy any more than recognition of social identities demands or requires those things. Still, interpartisan recognition is special, and substantive, for being earned—conditional on particular actions (partisan contribution to democracy) rather than granted simply in virtue of humanity or undifferentiated citizenship. Partisanship as predicate of recognition unites opposing partisans in mutual acknowledgment of shared commitment to a common project.

A primary advantage of this account is its potential to reframe partisan conflict to lessen the zero-sum competitive logic that polarization has imposed while retaining the participation-affirming qualities of recognition. When partisanship is no longer conceived as a core aspect of the self that is bound up with the vicissitudes of elections, constantly vulnerable, then the stakes of each individual partisan debate are lowered. This helps debate become more tractable. Compromises stand a better chance of occurring when partisans are relieved of the demand to remain true to themselves at all costs—when the source of meaning, value, and pride they get from the political sphere attaches to an enduring feature irrespective of the fortunes of their party. In a similar fashion, the meaning, value, and pride partisans derive from their manifold other social identities is not tied so tightly to the partisan contest, and so due recognition of those identities does not depend on defending partisanship at all costs. These are the senses in which partisan conflict and recognition become quarantined from conflict and recognition in other areas of life.

Political partisan recognition also allows for a more productive politics of contestation over national identity in divided contexts. We should be less worried that opposing partisans engage in a “battle for the meaning of America” (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), participating in an ongoing reformulation of the meaning of national identity, as long as partisans avoid claiming exclusivist interpretation. Allowing such contests over the resources of collective meaning is preferable to a preservationist, static mindset regarding identity and also responds to a deep need many feel to relate to a sense of “peoplehood” (Smith 2020). Attempting to suppress the aspiration to broader forms of recognition and expression in political life would be a dangerous mistake, liable to push them into more pernicious avenues. We must never “underestimate the psychological sources and strength” of the chance “to lose ourselves in something more general, more abstract and more noble than our own lives” (Garsten 2009, 409). Rather than seek an elusive partisanship of pure principle, we should seek to channel the impulses that inspire political recognition in other-oriented directions rather than just into the partisan team.

The viability of the political form of partisan recognition I here advocate likely depends on certain favorable institutional considerations. The hope that partisans will respect their opponents’ contributions to the common goal of improving democracy and will continually engage would perhaps be made more likely under cogoverning arrangements. Institutional innovation could devise venues requiring more collaborative
contribution at each stage of policy development and execution, building on evidence of effective cross-partisan interaction at the local level—for example Katz and Nowak (2018).

Future research must consider the relationship between this form of interpartisan recognition and other forms of potentially attractive recognition in politics (whether through nonpartisan participation or principled nonparticipation). But I hope I have done enough to show that it is not recognition or the expressive dimension per se that is the problem of partisanship but only the ways they have been distorted through polarization.

CONCLUSION

The analogy of partisanship to identity—the starting point of much explanatory work on polarization and the bête noire of some normative work—is not straightforward. In this article, I have attempted to provide a new conceptual mapping of partisan identity, sketching what it would have to look like not only to avoid the dangers of affective polarization plaguing contemporary American politics but also to positively contribute to democracy. The problem with partisan polarization is not that partisanship has become “an identity.” The problems lie with partisan identity’s assumption of qualities of social identities that are inappropriate to democratic contestation.

This argument holds implications for how we should understand two prominent views on the crisis of polarization. A common position holds that we should minimize the senses in which partisanship is an identity and advocate a principled relationship to politics: if partisanship has a place, then it should be derivative of other foundational beliefs, moralities, etc. But this solution overlooks partisanship’s profound benefits in facilitating a civic culture—benefits that, in part, precisely from partisanship’s identitarian nature.

But accepting this role does not mean we should succumb to a pessimistic reading of the empirical literature on tribalism, whose location of polarization’s problems deep in the human psyche neglects the different forms partisan identity can take. This puts pressure on the widespread argument from our inherently groupish nature to the inevitability of tribal political conflict—the swift theoretical move from the psychology lab to the public square.

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