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Exploring the Contents of Collective Identity of Party Adherents

Some Thoughts and their Application

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Abstract:

Party identification has rapidly become one of the most used concepts in empirical election studies since its first emergence in the 1950s. While most debates center on the applicability of the concept for other countries and its appropriate measurement, the contents of party identification and the collective identity of party adherents were never explored systematically. We start with the assumption that party identification must mean different things to different people. After conceptualizing party identification within the social identity framework and locating our necessary research foci, we draw on focus group interviews with SPD and GREEN adherents to explore the meaning of party identification on the collective level. Although both parties are part of the same ideological camp, we found that they both emphasize the importance of shared values, issues and goals as key components of collective identity, but differ when it comes to the myth of origin, customs and lifestyle aspects.

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1 Introduction

Since the 1970s, party identification has been one of the most used and distinguished key concepts in empirical election studies. It is a vital factor for explaining individual voting behavior as well as voter turnout. According to Campbell et al. (1960: 121), the concept of party identification is used “to characterize the individual’s affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment” which means in this case, a political party. Party identification is usually measured with a single-item. In Germany, the same question has been used since the 1970s: “*Many people in the Federal Republic lean toward a particular party for a long time, although they may occasionally vote for a different party. How about you?*”

First, many authors challenged the general applicability of the concept of party identification on Germany and other multi-party systems until the concept was perceived – at least partially – as fruitful for measuring the individuals’ psychological identifications with political parties (see for an overview Kaase 1976; Falter 1977). New debates about the theoretical foundations of party identification and its measurement have come up regularly each decade (e.g. Budge, Crewe and Farlie 1976; Popkin et al. 1976; Weisberg 1980; Fiorina 1981; Greene 1999; Bartle and Bellucci 2009). While the measurement of party identification was heavily discussed, we still do not exactly know what party identification actually means to an adherent on the individual level as well as to a group of adherents on the collective level. We know that the standard questions measures some kind of orientation towards a political party, but which contents exactly are part of this identification and which dimensions can be found within the collective identity of partisans remains terra incognita.

We will go a step further to overcome these short-comings by focusing on the contents of collective identity of a group of party adherents. We will base our research on the notion of party identification as a part of an individual’s social identity³ and collective identity as the shared beliefs and values of a group of adherents. Drawing from focus group interviews with party adherents of the SPD and GREENS: that were conducted in June and August 2014, we will specifically explore the collective identity of party adherents.

2 Theoretical Background

³ More precisely, party identification should actually be perceived as in-group identification because it steadily links the group with the individual (Klandermans and de Weerd 2000), see for a further discussion Chapter 2.2. However, most authors in current research talk about party identification as a social identity (e.g. Green et al. 2002; Weisberg and Greene 2003; Greene 2004) although party identification as in-group identification that is part of social identity would be more accurate.

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The Michigan Model (Campbell et al. 1954, 1960) has rapidly become one of the most used theoretical approaches for the explanation of individual voting behavior and turnout. Its key concept, party identification, denotes a long-standing, affective, psychological link towards a political party (Campbell et al. 1960: 121). Although revisionists questioned this conceptualization – especially the stability of party identification (Fitzpatrick et al. 2012) – this notion can be seen today as the dominant one (Greene 1999). Party identification acts as a perceptual screen and shapes accordingly the perception of the candidates and assessment of the issues positions and competences as well as the identifier's voting decision (Campbell et al. 1960: 133p). It is strongly correlated with political involvement: party identifiers are more likely to vote; they assess party programs, party positions and candidates more positively and often take a more active part in campaigning than independents (Campbell et al. 1960: 132, 144p).

The theoretical foundations of party identification are based on reference-group theory (Hyman 1942; Hyman and Singer 1968) that was widely popular in the social psychology of the 1950s and 1960s. The political party makes up the group to which the individual develops “[...] an identification, positive or negative, of some degree of intensity” (Campbell et al. 1960: 122). Additionally, “[...] especially in multi-party systems multiple identifications [should] not be surprising” (Weisberg and Hesecke 1999: 727).

If positive or negative identification is formed, political parties may be seen as reference groups whereas they “become reference points for the formation of attitudes and decisions about behavior” (Campbell et al. 1960: 296). This notion comes close to the concept of normative reference groups (Kelley 1952). While reference group theory was one of the leading theories in times of the *American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), its inconsistencies and short-comings were heavily criticized in the 1980s (Singer 1981). Building on the idea of reference group theory, social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT) (Turner 1982; Turner et al. 1987) took it further to a more consistent frame work that emphasizes the social comparison processes as well as the internalization of group-based values and attitudes (Turner and Reynolds 2010). These theories, often subsumed under the label “social identity approach”⁴, superseded reference-group theory. As reference-group theory cannot convincingly explain the perceptual screen mechanism of party identification and is seen “as old hat” (Weisberg and Greene 2003: 86), party identification is more and more conceptualized within the social identity framework (e.g. Kelly 1988; Greene 1999; Green et al. 2002; Weisberg and Greene 2003; Mari and Rosema 2009; Ohr and Quandt 2012).

⁴ Although both theories rely on similar assumptions and are based on the cognitive tradition, both focus on different parts of the connection between individuals and social groups/categories, SIT emphasizes intergroup relations while SCT concentrates on the group itself, e.g. its formation, cohesion, stereotyping of groups and their members, see for a further discussion Turner and Reynolds (2008, 2010).

2.1 Party Identification as In-group Identification

Questions concerning identity have widely become discussed in the humanities and social sciences since the 1980s. In political science, the concept can be applied to the analyses of nationalism and ethnic conflicts as well as identity politics (e.g. Hermann, Risse, and Brewer 2004; Livingstone and Haslam 2008).

The concept of identity itself though remains vague as there are several contesting theories that focus on identity. Depending on different assumptions and theoretical backgrounds, these different conceptualizations may lead to dissimilar and often confusing results (Hogg, Terry and White 1995; see for a different view Stets and Burke 2000). Our view on identity and in-group identification is based on the social identity approach.

2.1.1 *The Social Identity Approach...*

According to social identity theory, social categorizations are cognitive instruments that are used to systematically order the social environment into in- and out-groups. An individual's social identity is "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1981: 255). This notion of social identity contains a cognitive dimension (the knowledge of belonging) as well as an affective dimension (the emotional significance that the individual attributes to their group membership). SIT proposes that each individual strives to achieve a positive self-concept as well as high self-esteem and that social identities can be evaluated through comparisons between the in- and the out-group on a comparison dimension (Tajfel and Turner 1986: 16). Every individual holds multiple social identities that become salient according to social context and has the tendency to seek positive evaluations for these identities. When a social identity is negatively evaluated, several reaction mechanisms exist that take the permeability of group boundaries and the stability and legitimacy of the evaluation into account (Tajfel and Turner 1986: 19p). The definition of the self is "relational and comparative" (Tajfel and Turner 1986: 40) and depends therefore on the notion of the others: „We are what we are because they are not what we are“ (Tajfel 1979: 188).

Self-categorization theory concentrates on the "social identity theory of the group" and the underlying processes (Turner et al. 1987). When social identity becomes salient, depersonalization of the individual arises. Inherent to this process is a comparison with a relevant out-group to maximize meta-contrast between the own group and the others. The individual tries to maximize the contrast between the groups by relying on their view of a prototypical member (Turner 1982). Individuals try to self-stereotype themselves and try to come close to their cognitive representation of the group's prototype, their notion of an ideal or real existing group member. Automatically and fast, certain attitudinal and behavioral patterns of this prototypical member are internalized for reducing uncertainty (Hogg and Smith 2007: 97).

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2.1.2 ... *Applied to Party Identification*

In this sense, party identification means the knowledge that one actually is an adherent of a party combined with some affective/emotional value. If party identification becomes salient, the individual tries to relate to the prototypical group member to maximize meta-contrast. He applies attitudinal and behavioral patterns that he sees as typical of a group member to himself and tries to get closer to the party adherent's prototype. From this point of view, the function of party identification as a perceptual screen may be explained as a consequence of the depersonalization process. Holding multiple party identifications may decrease this self-stereotyping process (Mayer 2014).

For obtaining a positive social identity, individuals continue to compare their own party with relevant out-parties. In case of negative comparison results, the voter's identification may lessen partisan strength first and later lead to de-alignment from the previous identification party (individual mobility), when borders are perceived to be permeable. This could be the case for weak/short-term identifiers. In case of identifiers that have a deep-going link to the party, leaving the group might not be an option. Changing the perspective of comparison (e.g. compare their ideological positions instead of electoral results, social creativity) is possible as well as the derogation of the relevant out-groups and/or favoring the in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 38p). In-group favoritism may explain the function of party identification as a perpetual screen (Campbell et al. 1960: 133): for obtaining positive social identity, e.g. the candidates and issue positions of the identification party may be more positively evaluated and those of the other party may be evaluated more negatively. Social competition may lead to inter-group conflicts especially when scarce resources and interest conflicts between the groups exist (Tajfel and Turner 1979) which is the case for political parties that compete for political power and resources (Kelly 1988).

2.2 Foci of Party Identification Research

The term "identity" has become a catch-all term in the recent years and "the notion of identity means quite different things to different people" (Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 4). A myriad of theories try to provide their own perspective on identity and its determinants as well as its consequences like social identity theory, identity theory or role theory (Burke and Stets 2000).

Social identity is generally seen as "[...] the psychological link between individuals and the social groups [...] to which they belong" (Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 5p). It reflects a shared identity of a collective self. There is no clear and agreed definition of the term social identity. Furthermore, other authors, often from European identity research rely more on the term collective identity. Research on collective identities in political science mainly concentrates on the topic of national vs. superordinate (e.g. European) identities (Herrmann, Risse and Brewer 2004; Fuchs and Klingemann 2011).

The two terms cannot be easily distinguished. This confusion probably arises from the different research traditions these terms are derived from. Social identity research has its roots in social psychology, while the term of collective identity originated from social mobilization research. While some authors often use social identity and collective identity as synonyms (e.g. Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 6), others see collective identities as a part of social identities (Esser 2001: 345p). A third group uses social identity to denote the link between the individual's in-group identification and the collective identity of the group as a whole (e.g. Klandermans and de Weerd 2000). Social identity refers to the multiple in-group identifications of one individual while collective identity contains many people's in-group identification with one group. We will follow this last approach within this paper.

Trying to separate contesting foci in research more clearly, Kaina and Karolewski (2013: 19) distinguish between four main foci of research in collective/social identity research, based on two criteria.

First, the level of identity: Researchers from a socio psychological tradition more often analyze social identity on an individual analytical level (Cells A & C) while others (e.g. Habermas 2003) see a group of people as the object of their research (Cells B & D). General ideas of identity make up the second dimension. Kaina and Karolewski (2013: 19p) see two reoccurring major ideas of identities in social sciences; identity as something an individual or a group is and identity as something they have. Although this categorization is very helpful in structuring the existing research, it is not disjunctive. While the identity of being includes e.g. the contents that give meaning to a collective identity, these contents can also be seen as reasons for identifying with a certain group as well. If somebody regards the issue of sustainability and the protection of the environment as a main content of their identification, this issue can be the reason why he identifies with a certain group as well.

Drawing from the original categorization by Kaina and Karolewski (2013), we modify the categories to adapt it for party identification research. Party identification is different from other social identities like European identity. Party identification is a psychological identification that is per se politicized, a subjective identification and most likely never categorical compared to research on European and national identity. We rely on Herrmann and Brewer (2004: 6) that see the composition of group identity and the contents of group identity as two distinct and important aspects of social identity on the group level. It seems important to distinguish between a collective and an individual level for the exploration of party identification. While on the individual level social identity answers the question "Who am I" and "What am I", on the group level, collective identity can answer questions like "*Who* is 'us'?" and "*What* are we?" (Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 6).

Although these four foci of research are strongly interrelated (e.g. the contents of party identification may influence the perception of what the relevant out parties are), this grid allows us to precisely locate our research questions.

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Figure 1: Foci of Party Identification Research

		Level of identity	
		Collective or group level	Individual level
Aspects of identity	Composition	B Collective self-image of party adherents > <i>Who are we? Who are the others?</i> Collective Identity	A The individual's self-concept and his attribution to a party > <i>Who am I (in terms of a shared collective self)? Who am I not?</i> Party Identification
	Meaning and Justification Content	D Contents of and reasons for self-representation of party adherents as a "we" > <i>What are we?</i> Meaning of party adherents' collective identity	C Contents of and reasons for the individual's identification with a party and its adherents > <i>What am I (in terms of a shared collective self)? Why am I an adherent?</i> Meaning of party identification

The composition aspect (Cells A & B) of party identification as a social identity describes the self-concept and the differentiation from others for "me" as a shared collective self and the "we" on the collective level. The content dimension (Cells C & D) includes reasons why a person or a group identify with something as well as the contents, e.g. the contents of collective identity could include attributes, values, symbols that are used to define the prototypical group member as well as the group in general (Hermann and Risse 2004: 6).

If we try to categorize the existing foci on partisan identity, we see easily the existing gaps in research. Cell A is regularly measured in all major (election) studies with the standard item for party identification. It is this cell that includes what we actually call "party identification". We always ask our respondents for their attribution to a group, "do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat" or "do you lean toward a political party?"⁵ What is rarely analyzed (notable exceptions Garry 2007, Medeiros and Noel 2014), is the negative facet of party identification and the questions which parties form the out parties and define who the individual is not. What is mostly overlooked as well, are the other three possible research topics. Cell B relies on the collective identity of partisans. What defines the relevant out parties to this partisan group? Who are the others for the group? While this question is

⁵ We tested competing measures for party identification with Q methodology (Fitzpatrick and Mayer 2014).

not a particularly interesting one in two-party systems like the United States (where often a simple dichotomy between the Republicans and Democrats is assumed, e.g. Greene 2004), it becomes increasingly relevant in multi-party systems with changing coalition governments like Germany. Because of its complexity this phenomenon is rarely addressed.

While the individual's attribution to a party (Cell A) was explored since the beginning of party identification research, the meaning of party identification to the individual (Cell C) as well as the collective self-image and the group definition (Cells B&D) are still terra incognita.

2.3 Collective Identity and its Contents

Although party identification research began in the 1950s, its psychological meaning and the reasons for the identifications have rarely been analyzed, both on the individual as well as on the collective level. When appropriate, we rely on analogous studies from social identity research that analyzed other social identities as there are almost no available studies that have analyzed party adherents on the questions we are asking.

2.3.1 *What Contains Collective Identity in General?*

Collective Identity has deep roots in sociology and social-psychology. We find similar concepts in Weber's and Durkheim's work (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995: 73). Eisenstadt and Giesen name "the breakdown of traditional political camps" as the first in a line of "the challenge of new historical agenda which converge in the theme of "collective identity" (1995: 72). Eisenstadt and Giesen's work lays ground for a political concept of collective identity. They develop "a general model for the analysis of collective identity" (1995: 74) and distinguish three types of codes: primordial, civic and, cultural (1995: 77pp.). The primordial code refers to natural distinctions like gender or kinship. The civic code captures "the routines, traditions and institutional or constitutional arrangements of a community" (1995: 80), which is vital for our engagement with collective identity, because party identity can be seen as a civic code for collective identity. The civic code is special in a way because it challenges the individual to actively engage in group activities in order to be accepted and to make it into the inner circle of the community (1995: 80). This leads to a hierarchy within the community (1995: 82). Veterans within the community have a higher social standing than greenhorns. The individual has to learn about customs and assimilate to the rules. The base for a community linked by civic codes is oftentimes some sort of epic event that creates a "myth of origin" (1995: 82). This should be passed on within a community and serve as some kind of historical glue. Eisenstadt and Giesen see certain virtues in the center of a community linked by civic aspects of collective identity (1995: 81). This allows the construction of an ideal member who embodies all of these virtues. All of these aspects will be in the focus of our interviews. The third "cultural" code allows a close look at the relation between "us and them" (1995: 82), which promises interesting aspects for our analysis as well. Will the parties differ in any of these aspects? Collective identity is linked to a "social self" who is either built upon

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interpersonal relationships which are referred to as interpersonal identity or “impersonal collectives or social categories”, the so called collective social identity (Brewer and Gardner 1996: 83). Party identity may include both components although the latter is of particular interest for us.

2.3.2 *Collective Identity evaluated through Focus Group Interviews*

It is quite surprising that qualitative approaches for collective identity are not naturally considered as means of choice in party identity research. It was only once adopted in order to debate items (Bartle 2003). However, looking at other socio-political phenomena seems to deliver promising approaches. Over the last few years the debate of collective identity has been immensely discussed in the debate of a European identity. Although the dimensions are quite different in the European context it seems that we can still learn a lot from the engagement with party identity. In the European identity debate the different entities are local, national and European, in the party identity debate this is expected to correspond with the affiliation for different parties. Duchesne (2013) understands identity “as self-identification of people as member of a political community”. This is the same for party identification as for European identification – both parties and Europe considered as political communities. In order to grasp the concept of identity focus group interviews seem to be a frequently adopted method (Duchesne 2013). On the European matter it seems that the Question of “who profits?” is essential (Duchesne 2013; White 2010: 1021pp.). This question of benefits might be of importance for party identity as well. From a study of European identity among taxi drivers we can draw further interesting observations. Similar societal/governmental goals seem to be unifying (White 2010: 1025pp). This will be especially interesting for the engagement with party identity. Another identity influencing indicator might be some sort of successful experience: in the case of Europe the long lasting peace which differs Europeans from others according to the taxi drivers (White 2010: 1024p).

2.4 Contents of Collective Identity of Party Adherents

Gluchowski (1983) could show that party identification means different things to different people. Our approach will start from scratch so we will be able to freely explore the meaning of party identification on the collective level. This approach seems well suited as collective identity may not be measured well (if not at all) within a standardized survey (Duchesne 2013). So far, collective identity and its meaning were never analyzed for party adherents. We know from collective identity research that collective identity’s contents could include various attributes, values, symbols that are ascribe to the prototypical group member as well as to the group in general (Hermann and Risse 2004: 6).

Collective identity encompasses the perception of the individual about the commonalities with a group, but focusses on a common set of values and principles between the group members, a common history, collective memory or a shared feeling of similar collective experiences.(Kaina and Karolewski 2013: 17).

Drawing on the civic code from Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995: 81p), we expect that the collective holds a shared perception of a certain myth of origin that may even be an event from the past that is passed on through the years. Furthermore, routines, customs and institutional arrangements may be a vital source for collective identity as well as certain virtues that are agreed-on by the group.

Most parties⁶ in the German party system were founded outside the parliament, except for the Linke that resulted from a merger of the PDS and the WASG). Historically, the foundation of a new party is often related to some kind of crisis or certain issues that the political system was faced with when the established parties may not have been able to adequately offer solutions (Niedermayer 2013: 66). Examples for this may be the founding of the GREENS out of the ecological/anti-nuclear movements of the 1970s, the re-founding of the SPD after its forced dissolution in the Third Reich or the emergence of the WASG as the Western split-off from the SPD when larger parts of its adherents and members were dissatisfied with the welfare state reforms of the Government. We expect that party adherents may easily identify a common set of values and principles that refer to the general principles of the political party (e.g. ecology and sustainability for the GREENS, social equality for the SPD and the LINKE, Christian-conservative values like the importance of the traditional family for the CDU).

We would like to explore the contents of party adherents' collective identity: What is their common story and history? Which set of values and principles gives meaning to their identity? What collective experiences are shared? Furthermore, we will look at the relation of these different components and see if there are specific components that are seen as the core of collective identity. We assume that these contents differentiate between the different party groups but expect to find common structure of collective identity.

⁶ We decided to focus on the German left political camp. The main parties in this camp are the SPD (Social Democrats), the German Green Party *Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen*, and the German socialist party *Die Linke*. While the Greens and the SPD are quite close when it comes to the political program, the Linke's position in the political system differs heavily in West and East Germany. Especially in the West, the Linke is mostly not seen by the SPD as qualified for a coalition. The SPD is one of Germany's oldest parties. Adherents are traditionally located in a blue collar environment although this was never exclusively. The SPD was the only party that openly took a stand against Hitler's NSDAP and was re-founded on this base after the Second World War. The Green Party emerged during the environmental movement and was elected in the nationwide parliament, the Bundestag, in 1983. Together with the SPD the Greens were part of the opposition in the Bundestag until 1998, when both parties formed the first red-green Government in Europe. On their agenda was a massive re-construction of the German welfare system which led to strong disputes within the coalition. As a result the left wing of the SPD formed an independent alternative party that later merged with the PDS, who until then was rather seen as a league of GDR- nostalgics. This party was *Die Linke* who successfully entered the Bundestag and grew to be a strong opposition party. These recent developments create an interesting environment for researchers of party identification.

3 Exploring the Contents of Collective Identity of Party Adherents

3.1 Method

Focus group interviewing has advanced to a frequently adopted method for qualitative research in the social sciences. Previously located in market research focus group interviewing entered social sciences about 30 years ago (Morgan 2002: 142). Focus group interviews can be defined as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (Morgan 1996:130). Morgan (1996: 130) identifies three components of this definition: (a) the goal is collecting data by (b) the source of group discussion taking into account that (c) the researcher has an active, directing role in this discussion.⁷

These components come with costs and benefits: the success depends on the cooperation of the group. Due to the low number of cases it does not allow estimations on the society level. It is perfectly suited though for getting to the bottom of a topic and the researcher is able to direct the attention of the group to details while conducting the interview. It offers a flexible setup so that concerns and questions arising during the interview can be addressed right away. Especially for complex social phenomena such as the meaning of collective identity of party adherents focus group interviewing seems to be an excellent means to see how individuals are aware of their own identity and reflect it.

The interviews were recorded and transliterated. We developed a coding scheme based on theoretical considerations and coded the interviews.⁸

3.1.1 *General remarks*

The 30 year tradition of focus group interviewing in the social sciences has led to some useful information about best practices (Krueger and Casey 2009). Built on these recommendations we conducted two group interviews for illustrative purposes. The first interview was conducted in June 2014, the second interview in August 2014. Participants were recruited among a student panel study at Mainz University. We chose this sample for several reasons: individuals are politically informed, were willing to participate in studies before and agreed to participate in further scientific projects. They are easy to access and many are in favor of the German political left camp, which we are interested in. In order to enhance the willingness to participate an incentive in the form of a ten Euro voucher was offered. We invited participants to the interviews with a week notice. Interviews took place in a conference room on campus for the participants’ convenience. In order to enhance a comfortable atmosphere, we proposed to use the German informal “Du” to address each other. Participants were asked to choose a different first name to remain anonymous. The meetings lasted sixty to ninety minutes for each group and were documented with a voice recorder. We decided to have a team of two modera-

⁷ For an overview of the development and a closer distinction of focus group interviews as such please see Morgan (1996 and 2002).

⁸ We used the program MaxQDA to assist the coding process.

tors since this made it easier to monitor and take notes at the same time. Before the group interviews, we prepared some key and follow-up questions. The key questions were derived from social identity theory. The follow-up questions evolved out of the different key questions and were meant to be a guideline in case the discussion stalled or went into an unintended direction.

3.1.2 Group design

Each group was homogenous in terms of age (20-25), social status (student) and also in party affiliation (strength running from moderat to very strong) but was mixed in the gender aspect. The standard question for party identification was used to measure party affiliation. All students were majoring in social sciences. We neither expected nor observed any difference in the participants' willingness to debate, because of their high level of political interes-, they are familiar with discussing political content and party ideology.

Our groups therefore were designed as follows:

Group A consisted of four students who feel affiliated with the Greens.

Group B consisted of six students who feel affiliated with the SPD.

We were curious as to how the Greens and the SPD affiliates would characterize their group, what unifies them. Additionally we wanted to learn if in fact there are common grounds in the eyes of the adherents of the same group and whether adherents of different groups relate to different defining categories.

3.2 Results

The two focus group interviews were analyzed for the meaning of collective identity to its adherents. We used the civic code by Eisenstadt and Giesen as the bases for displaying our results and will later discuss communalities and differences between the two groups.

3.2.1 What are We?

We know from Chpt. 2.3.1 that the civic code is separable in different major aspects which will structure our analysis. After taking a look at the virtues of an ideal adherent, their common interests and issues, we will focus on the myths of origin and the customs.

3.2.1.1 Virtues. Goals and Interests

We started both interviews with the request to name features of ideal adherents of the respective party. While the GREEN group did not have any difficulties painting a stereotypical ideal adherent with colorful terms ("long-haired, bearded, knitting", René), the SPD group struggled surprisingly and did not come to an agreement.

"Especially naming features was actually least directly to answer." Kevin, SPD

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„Vor allem das mit den Eigenschaften. Das ist eigentlich am wenigsten, direkt eindeutig zu beantworten“ Kevin, SPD

It was rather a common base of shared value that adherents saw as a characteristic similarity. When then asked about the content of these values, it was quickly agreed upon that solidarity was the main feature together with social justice and awareness for social issues.

“Liberty, equality, solidarity. Considering these three key words it is the common foundation that one shares with other social democrats. That is the connecting piece for me.” Thomas, SPD

„Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit, Solidarität. Wenn man mal diese drei Hauptpunkte nimmt, dann ist das für mich schon diese Wertebasis, die man mit anderen Sozialdemokratinnen und Sozialdemokraten teilt, das verbindende Element“ Thomas, SPD

The adherents of the GREENS agreed on a common foundation as well, although they did not label this as values but as a common theme. This common theme is connected with post-materialism. As thematic aspects, sustainability and ecology were named by all participants. For female adherents, gender equality was seen as a central topic.

Adherents of both groups frequently related to issues as a key component of their collective identity_

„First of all it’s the policy-level, simply the issues“(René, GREENS)

“For me issues [come] before anything else” (Guido, SPD)

„Als erstes ist das die policy-Ebene, einfach die Themen“ (René, GREENS)

„Bei mir inhaltlich vor allen Dingen“ (Guido, SPD)

The way a party places itself in terms of specific economic and social policies seems to be vital for SPD adherents while the more general term ”GREEN policies” was used as a synonym for a mix of policies without mentioning any specifics.

3.2.1.2 Myth of Origins

We expected this to be an essential part of the collective identity of SPD adherents as the SPD is one of the German parties with long-standing proud tradition dating back to the 19th century.

However, during our interview we had to hint twice towards this aspect to trigger answers in this matter.

We assume that this might be due to the age of our participants. When pushed into this direction, all of them had comprehensive knowledge about the SPD party’s history (“diese große Geschichte”, Horst, SPD) as well as the mile stones in the SPD trajectory. One historical event that was key to the party’s image, was their open resistance against the Hitler regime in the Third Reich.

“I think the behavior during Third Reich matters to quite a share of adherents. That [the SPD] was the only party that resisted against it. I actually know some people my age who became members of the SPD because the party has this great history.” (Horst, SPD)

„Ich glaube, dass für einen Teil der Anhänger das Verhalten in Nationalsozialismus eine gewisse Rolle spielt. Das ist die einzige Partei, die sich dagegen aufgelehnt hat. Ich kenne auch verschiedene Menschen, die deswegen in die SPD eingetreten sind, in meinem Alter, aus diesem Grund, weil die Partei diese große Geschichte hat“ (Horst, SPD)

With the GREEN adherents, the myth of origin was more present and was named by the participants from the beginning of the interview spontaneously. All participants agreed that the anti-nuclear movement along with the environmental movement had been the origins of the GREEN party: “that to a certain degree the environmental movement is common history” (Adrian, GREENS) “dass die gemeinsame Geschichte so ein bisschen die Umweltbewegung ist“ (Adrian, GREENS)

Currently, the GREEN party adherents were influenced by the protests against Stuttgart 21⁹, which brought back the idea of grass-root democracy and civil disobedience on the agenda. Both were thriving ideas of the early days of the GREEN party.

In both groups, charismatic leaders were associated with the success of the party. Joschka Fischer, the former German vice chancellor and foreign minister, has become a living legend among young party adherents as he symbolizes the development from stone-throwing riots to government coalition (“So mit dem Minister vom Steinewerfer oder sowas”, RENE, GREENS).

Willy Brandt seems to be the counterpart for the SPD adherents. Surprisingly Gerhard Schröder, the former German chancellor from 1998-2005, was not named as a central figure, despite his major accomplishments in the rebuilding of the SPD in the recent past.

3.2.1.3 Customs, Lifestyle

Especially for adherents of the GREENS, a certain life style, vaguely named as “alternative life model”, seems crucial for the collective identity. A certain district of Berlin (“Berlin-Prenzlberg”, Anna, GREENS) seems to be the green house for all this concept of life, well-known beyond Berlin’s boundaries.

The connection to a certain concept of life was not as pronounced as in the case of the GREEN adherents. Participants related this to SPD itself as a very heterogeneous party that “represents an average of German society”(Kevin, SPD). The terms “workers” and “labour unions” were the only marks of a common life concept. Hence, the adherents do not share a specific way of life but rather a deep understanding for people in different circumstances (“Verständnis für verschiedene Lebenslagen

⁹ Stuttgart21 is a local social movement which questioned the decision making process in Baden-Württemberg in the case of the new main station in Stuttgart. The GREEN party sympathized strongly with the social movement and was able to win the following state election.

4 Conclusion

und verschiedene Menschen”, Sophia, SPD). A unifying moment seems to be the custom of being on first name terms when SPD members are approaching each other. This seems to create a low hierarchy image for adherents.

3.2.2 *Common Terms and Differences*

Our findings show that a common value foundation seems to play a major role in the construction of a meaning of “we” for both SPD and GREEN adherents. Solidarity and social justice are key goals of social democratic collective identity whereas sustainability and ecological accountability matter most for the GREEN adherents.

When analyzing the myths of origin, we found that the party history was more present and easier to recall for GREEN adherents that named the anti-nuclear movement as the founding event. History was not a central aspect of collective identity of the SPD adherents, only when hinted towards, they admit to the importance of the role of the SPD in the Third Reich.

In two central matters, we found a fascinating difference between both groups: while the GREEN adherents could easily paint a picture of an ideal adherent, while the SPD group could not agree on any common grounds. The same holds true for concepts of life and customs.

The younger GREEN party seems to be linked with a certain life style that was associated with the terms “alternative”, “nonconforming”, and “Postmaterialism”. Common symbols include the party’s newspaper “Grünspecht” (green woodpecker) and the picture of the protesting stone thrower of the late 1970s. The SPD adherents had major difficulties to agree on a common concept of life which may result from its very heterogeneous base.

4 Conclusion

While we know a great deal about the effects of party identification on vote choice and political attitudes, the contents and collective identity of party adherents have not been explored so far. Our studies display that this topic is fruitful for research and is relevant for further scientific engagement. For the first time, we were able to explore the collective identity of party adherents. Our findings show on the one hand that a common value base and an agreement on central values is seen as the major aspect of party identification in both groups. On the other hand, we saw major differences for the accessibility of the party’s history and the group prototypes.

We were successful in the way that we identified central aspects of Eisenstadt and Giesen’s (1995) civic code for collective identity in our interviews. The civic code is the core element for communities that are based on voluntary membership, for example “institutional or constitutional arrangements”

(Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995: 80). However, we suggest including political goals and issues as a dimension since this seemed crucial for both groups.

Although our sample was well suited for first investigations, we would like to expose our assumptions to different societal groups, not only to students from West Germany, but also conduct interviews in East Germany, and with adherents from different age groups. So far, we have only analyzed the SPD and the GREENS coming from the same ideological camp, but we would like to also conduct interviews with adherents from other political parties. With the recent failure of the FDP to make the 5 percent threshold and gain entrance to parliament, this would be especially interesting for FDP adherents.

Even with this homogenous sample in a student population for two parties from the same ideological camp, our results interestingly show differences between the collective identities of both party adherent groups.

As party identification is the key concept within the Ann Arbor Model and one of the most used indicators in empirical election studies, enhancing our understanding of its contents would help us to explore the contents of this valuable concept more thoroughly. Shedding more light on the collective identity of party adherents, we would also enhance our knowledge about key aspects of party identification, and about the dos and don'ts of party transformation. If parties try to change their brand essence like the SPD did in the early 2000's, the effects on adherents that base their identity in large parts on these principles and values, may turn out desasterous. Furthermore, we could learn from such interviews for exploring the processes that lead from party identification to voting behavior.

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