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The Construction of Activist Identities in the Democratic Party: A Study on Collective Identity and Political Activism

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The Construction of Activist Identities in the Democratic Party:

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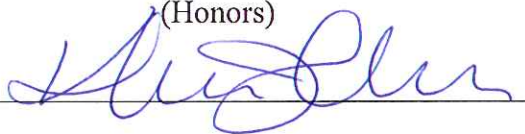
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from

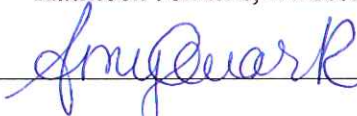The College of William and Mary

by

Derek Joseph Moretz

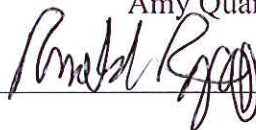Accepted for _____ Honors _____

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April 30, 2014

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A Study on Collective Identity and Political Activism

Derek Joseph Moretz

Honors Thesis in Sociology

The College of William & Mary

Williamsburg, Virginia

April 2014

Abstract: This study uses ethnographic methods to explore the relationship between collective identity, personal identity and activism in local Democratic clubs and county groups in Eastern Virginia. Drawing from interviews with activist group leaders and group members, participant observation at party events, and document analysis of party documents, I introduce the concepts of *maximal reality* and *submaximal reality* to help understand how individual and group practices reinforce collective identities that promote group activism. I argue that the emphasis of maximal realities through practices of silence and group activist rituals creates a dialectic of political participation that ensures Democratic identity is reinforced and group activism continues.

Introduction: Understanding Collective Identity, Party Activism, and the Maintenance of the Democratic Party

In the election of 2008, Organizing for America, the Obama campaign's political mobilizing arm, organized a staggering 8 million volunteers to canvass neighborhoods, participate in phone banks, and other political activities that supported then-candidate Obama's campaign for president. This great movement of political volunteerism sets new standards for future campaigns. These volunteers spread the message of the Obama campaign to voters and collected important voter information for the party, an important factor in the president's 2008 electoral victory. This immense demonstration of political activism speaks to questions of motivation on the part of millions of activists that have fueled the Democratic Party's success, and how parties facilitate and encourage this level of activism.

This partisan activity is especially interesting when understood in relation to identity. Many studies have demonstrated the deep connections between personal identity, collective identity, and activism in social and political movements, such as the U.S. civil rights movement (Chong 1991; Lichterman 1996; Jasper 1997; Morris 1984; Reger, Myers, and Einwohner 2008). How might these connections be carried into the study of political parties and their development of loyal party activists?

The literature on collective identity in the context of U.S. political parties is primarily quantitative in nature. What is more, most studies ignore the lived experiences of on-the-ground activists (Teske 1997:24). Additionally, there is little discussion on the workings of local groups, like clubs or city and county parties, in constructing political identities and spurring activism. This is so even though local groups are the most accessible manifestation of political parties and the organizations that directly work with many of the activists who do the parties' groundwork.

These groups also frequently have local events and meetings that provide direct opportunities for individuals to interact with the state and national party organizations.

This study endeavors to fill these gaps in the literature by studying the connection between activism and the personal and collective identities of active members in local Democratic Party organizations in eastern Virginia. I focus on the Democratic Party because of its status as a "big tent party," or a party that is known for its varied ideological and demographic composition of its membership. In addition, the Democratic Party's recent massive mobilization of active volunteers makes it an ideal organization to study local activism. While the majority of studies on political parties in the literature are quantitative, I utilize qualitative data from interviews with local party leaders and members, participant observation in local political events and canvassing and party documents to draw conclusions. Drawing from theory in sociology and social psychology, I formulate the concepts of *maximal realities* and *submaximal realities* to help understand the collective identities that inspire these activists to participate in the organization and how these individual and collective identities are constructed and maintained.

Literature Review

Literature on U.S. Political Parties and Participation

The literature from sociologists and political scientists on U.S. political parties is resoundingly quantitative in nature and diverse in focus, exploring numerous relationships between political party affiliation and effects on their membership. James Fowler and Cindy Kam (2007), for example, measuring political identity impacts one's charitableness toward others, showing that individuals tend to be more generous toward groups they perceive as a part

of their political in-group, and less charitable toward those in the out-group. Other quantitative

studies explore the impacts of membership in a party on member's personal beliefs, such as how

attachment to political parties can alter an individual's beliefs to become more consistent with

the party's beliefs (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Carsey and Layman 2006:467-474;). One

study found that party members' beliefs were highly influenced by those of the party's leaders

(Zaller 1992). In another, Richard Herrera studies the origin of party activists' beliefs using data

from party conventions, finding that activists' explanations of beliefs are influenced by party

candidates who galvanize particular segments of their party (Herrera 1999). In their recent book

Partisan Hearts and Minds (2002), Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler

measured party identity and commitment of voters using structured surveys and found that

individuals were often loyal to their party over long periods of time. The famous organizations of

Gallup and Pew Research are renowned for surveys that track beliefs of partisans. Although

useful for understanding trends in political belief, journalists and social scientist's demand for

their hard numbers illustrates the heavy focus by researchers on quantitative analysis.

Researchers emphasize measuring beliefs, rather than exploring how parties and their members

construct and maintain their beliefs (Fiorina and Abrams 2008).

David Young (2004), drawing from existing literature, theorizes about an important

consideration of party identity. He identifies party activism through the intersection of party

doctrine, the individual experiences and motivations of party activists, and the negotiation

between members and their leaders on what the organization represents in their particular

localities. His last point is important: partisans' unique local experiences determine how they

interpret and identify with the party (97-99). An individual compromise occurs between national

beliefs and local beliefs, resulting in identification with a collective group. One must recognize

here the intimate connection between personal belief and identity: only when a party's belief system is considered acceptable to an individual do they embrace its collective identity.

Steve Buckler and David Dolowitz (2009) analyzed partisan publications and events and found that parties adopt new ideological positions though a process of "renewal" to reinvigorate electoral support, highlighting the tactical dimension of ideology and identity. Buckler and Dolowitz also allude to the presence of identity threat, instances when identity is confused or challenged. Leadership, for example, is often portrayed as betraying the group's being when they change the group's mission and purpose (13). They argue that ideology is inextricably linked to the party identity, and there is often a compromise made by leaders for electoral success.

Identity and Activism in Social Movement Literature

A great deal of the social movement literature attempts to answer questions about beliefs and activism in social movements through qualitative methods. Several qualitative studies found that individuals become civically engaged in social movements as a means of fulfillment of a desirable self (Chong 1991; Taylor 1989; Teske 1997; Lichterman 1996). Chong (1991) describes this self-fulfillment as one of the intangible benefits of political participation, a reward that he calls psychological (or moral) rewards (or "purposive" incentives according to Teske 1997). One of the most influential studies on identity-affirming activism comes from Nathan Teske's 1997 qualitative work on American political activists. Teske interviewed dozens of full-time, paid political activists in interest groups and lobbying organizations on their motivations for participating in activism around causes ranging from environmental concerns to business advocacy. Teske demonstrated with rich personal stories that political activism enables activists to develop and live according to moral concerns rooted in the sense of who they are (96-98).

Thus, he explains, as activists advocate for public policy changes that help society reach a moral aim, activism helps construct an altruistic identity. He calls this model of understanding activism the "Identity Construction Model of Activism" (97). Clark and Wilson (1961) explain that providing purposive incentives, like this identity-affirmation, helps sustain groups (134-135).

Many other social movements scholars also highlight the interconnected nature of activism and identity, mainly using the concepts of personal identity and collective identity. Scholars James Jasper and Francesca Polletta (2001) define collective identity as the individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community. "It is a perception of a shared status or relation which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity" (285). Such collective identities are expressed, for example, through narratives, symbols, and rituals. Even so, the confluence of personal and collective identities in social movements remains elusive (299). Despite this unclear relationship, Polletta and Jasper note that an activist collective identity in social movements can be an important element of personal identity (290).

Other scholars explain that organizations such as the civil rights movement offer a unique place to build and create identities, illustrating the ways in which identity is fluid and is constructed and reconstructed in activist groups (Evans & Boyte 1986; Morris 1984).

Constructing a type of collective identity is often the work of organizers and leaders in movements and is fundamental to the maintenance of the group (Jasper 1997). As Jasper and Polletta (2009) explain, maintaining a collective identity is important to sustaining participation in social movements. In fact, one of the primary reasons of movement decline occurs when "the collective identity stops lining up with the movement" (292). In other words, "We stop believing that the movement 'represents' us" (292). Political scientists Clark and Wilson (1961) similarly

echo the importance of making sure the organization matches the personal values of members, as this is the "sine qua non" of participation (33). All of these authors emphasize that identity is a tactical approach in achieving the organization's goals. I argue later in this paper that creating a cohesive and complementary identity to the personal beliefs of activists is a tactical necessity for party organizations.

Social movement scholars have also tried to explore the mechanisms through which organizations maintain identity through collective activity. Many have found that some facilitate a collective identity through shared protest (Hirsh 1990; Fantasia 1988). This shared experience reinforces shared goals and is meaningful to members. Additionally, sharing stories of protest can help mobilize a collective identity, as numerous individuals come to identify with the movement through the related experiences of other members and reaffirm together their collective goals (Polletta 1998). Thus, collective action through shared protest is an important element of identity creation and maintenance. Leaders are cognizant of the importance of collective identity to the movement, and so are engaged in this creative process.

These findings in the social movement literature demonstrate the tactical necessity of a collective identity that can reinforce personal identity. Collective action, especially through protest as a group ritual, is a mechanism that helps reaffirm social movements' collective identity. The literature also shows identity to be fluid and flexible, which may ensure a group's survival.

Theoretical Understanding of Identity and the Construction of Knowledge

Social psychologists Brewer, Hong, and Li (2004) explain that groups are formed and united from either perceptions of shared traits or of shared goals, or both of these (26-27). For groups to

maintain their meaning, and also to retain their members, they must maintain perceived homogeneity to sustain "entitativity," the perception that a collection of individuals is a significant, separate, and meaningfully unique group of people (Brewer, Hong and Li 2004:25-26). It is important to note that these perceptions pertain to the construction of a collective identity, or a cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a group that one sees themselves as belonging to (Jasper and Polletta 2001). Under categorization theory, individuals place themselves into groups because the shared characteristics of the group that develops an individual's understanding of the self (Spears et al 2004:294-295). Members have the desire to maintain group entitativity, or distinctness, as these meaningful categories represent a meaningful part of self-understanding (295). If this is not done the group's existence is thrown into questionable validity (Abrams et al 2004:364).

Like the findings on social movement activism, social psychological theorists predict that because being a part of a group is meaningful to one's identity, and because group dissolution threatens the achievement of shared goals, attempts to reestablish distinctiveness or conformity to group norms occurs strategically (Abrams et al 2004:361, 367). Additionally, beliefs individuals identify with this group are important, as those who are dissatisfied with the attributes of a group may reject its identity and seek another group (Ellemers 1993). Challenges to identity create identity threat, which is when the legitimacy or value of an identity is called into question (Elmers, Spears and Doosje 2002:176). Thus, groups must respond and approach identity strategically. Additionally, individuals utilize group categorizations to construct positive self-understandings (Hogg, Terry and White 1995). All of these theorists create the groundwork that forms Social Identity Theory in social psychology, which helps explain identity (see Hogg, Terry, and White 1995).

Theorists argue that social identity influences individual thought, as when these identities become most preeminent our conduct and thought normally becomes in-group stereotypical (Hogg, Terry and White 1995:260). We utilize the perceived collective viewpoints that we associate with the perceived collective identity. Thus, beliefs and identity are strongly connected in social identities theories. I find that party beliefs can be best explained in terms of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) "realities," or sets of beliefs about the world and how it works, including moral perspectives that are socially constructed and reinforced. Berger and Luckmann acknowledge the connection between identity and beliefs, arguing realities define how individuals view the world. Objective realities also act back and are internalized by individuals, shaping their subjective identity (132-135). Berger and Luckmann explain that identity is a key element in the individual's constructed realities. Thus identities are constructed by social processes and simultaneously construct the social world through which they are adapted and modified (173).

In this study, I use concepts from Berger and Luckmann's theory on the social construction of reality and social identity theories to explain how identity is created and maintained in local political parties to spur activism. I create a framework to understand how belief systems are constructed through social processes within political parties and how this is done to maintain a cohesive collective identity. I do this through developing and utilizing the concepts of the *maximal reality* and *submaximal reality* as I analyze my ethnographic data in local Democratic groups.

Methods

    I conducted an ethnographic study to explore the relationship between personal identity, collective identity, and activism. I collected interviews with leaders of local Democratic groups and their members to gain the perspectives of both the individuals who run party organizations, and the perspectives of those in the organization who are participants in party events. Eleven in-depth interviews were completed with local party leaders and activists in eastern Virginia. Additionally, I conducted a focus group with four county Democratic leaders. I also made use of participant observation in a local Democratic college club. Participant observation included attending weekly meetings and participating in Democratic canvassing activities. I also observed club events, such as a Republican-Democratic policy debate and scheduled group meetings with two local Democratic politicians. I also studied national and local party documents to explore the construction of identity through party materials.

    To take into account differences in party beliefs and collective identity due to demographic differences, I attempted to recruit activists from regions with differing demographics. To achieve age diversity, I interviewed seven activists from an active college Democratic group. Four interviews and the focus group were done with older county party leaders and activists. This diversity was achieved through targeted emailing to active local college activists and leaders, and as county leaders. It should be noted here that during the year of participation observation I joined the local college chapter of Democrats not only as an open researcher but also a fellow Democrat. I presented myself in emails as both a researcher and a member of the local party group. Also, an effort was made to ensure all individuals interviewed were frequent participants in group events if not in the group leadership. Interviews and the focus group were recorded for accuracy.

Individuals in the target area of eastern Virginia included local Democratic groups in rural and urban counties, counties where the population was more Caucasian, counties of racial/ethnic, and counties dominated by African Americans. The eight activists from a local college group attended a medium-sized liberal arts university where the group was made up of primarily Caucasian college students in their early 20s. I also interviewed two activists from an African American-dominated group in an urban area, 1 activist from an African American-dominated group in a rural area, and 1 activist from a more diverse suburban county group. I also conducted a focus group with four activists from a diverse group in a rural county in the area.

All interviews and the focus group were semi-structured (See Appendix A for interview guide). When I met with interviewees, individuals were given a consent form to sign. After interviews and focused groups, typed transcripts were made from recordings. Field notes taken during participant observations were made into a field log. Also, if I spoke with other activists during my participant observation, I gave them a notice of my project to gain informed consent. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

I used a grounded theory approach to analyze my data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). I coded the responses for common themes through a process of open coding. As themes began to emerge, I conducted more focused coding of my data. Existing theoretical concepts were then useful in axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) as I explored relationships among common themes. Thus, findings from this study are grounded in the lived experiences of activists as well as sociological theory.

Findings & Analysis

Diversity in the "Big Tent" Party

The incredible diversity in the Democratic Party presents unique challenges in keeping individuals unified. My interviews with individual members demonstrate individuals' awareness of how differences in geographic location, career, race, and age shape diversity of beliefs in local groups. Respondents explained confronting this diversity and maintaining group cohesion in many ways, but a dominant theme was that the group shares certain common beliefs and thus engages in a type of "middling," or the development of a consensus around particular central belief systems. One college leader (Caucasian male, early 20s) explained this middling as having a unified ideology, among many personal beliefs, which tie individuals together to the group: "I think…to a certain extent there is no mainstream democratic ideology. I think there are Democratic Party ideologies and all these ideologies are unified by some common, perhaps even… unarticulated belief that has something to do with, again, everyone in America deserves a fair shot at success…"

This shared ideology centered on providing equal opportunity economically, educationally, and politically. One suburban county leader explained, "If you wrote out the principles of the Democratic Party, you would find five we all agree with. One would be equality for all. Every Democrat would say I believe in that. Then you start talking details…" (Caucasian female, mid-40s). Another college leader explained her opinion on the matter: "I think we've come to a point where it's in our best interest to coalesce on issues…I think we have managed to be pretty uniform on most issues. I mean you see splits on issues like, I mean gun control was clearly

evidence of that but I think on most issues you tend to see a pretty part coalescing around a general belief" (Caucasian female, early 20s).

This "middling" is of strategic importance, as the party must attract individuals to win elections. One individual elaborated:

A lot of times (the Democrats) look at their more liberal constituencies and say, 'Look we have to deal with these more fundamental issues,' for example with healthcare right? You had all these liberal Dems be like, 'you need a public option,' but…lets deal with more of these moderate issues. But a lot of times its like, sacrifice your really utopian things to help us win against the Republicans. It's like a middling. (College party leader, Caucasian female, early 20s)

For those people who are not active in the party, explains a suburban county leader, "they just don't feel like they fit in to the party. And that is a problem. We need to attract more moderates to the party" (Caucasian female, mid-40s). She goes on to explain that this presents a challenge in attracting Democrats in more conservative areas of Virginia. Illustrated in this example is the necessity that individuals feel as if they belong to the group. The development of a Democratic identity is important in getting individuals active, and developing this identity requires that individuals share core beliefs with others in the party.

An important dimension of sharing core beliefs is a compromise, which for many respondents involves sharing a majority of beliefs. A rural county leader explained, "You can't be a single issue voter. There is more going on in each party, you can't vote on a single issue… I think when you look at the overall totals for each party… what brings each party together is that you

look at the big picture. Which party is going to value the majority of your beliefs?" Another college activist (Caucasian male, late teens) made a similar statement: "A lot of people have some fundamental beliefs that they have and see to what party it applies most. Because it's hard to just split people into two categories…I work for what I believe so that I can promote those values. And if the Democratic Party supports those the most, that's who I'm going to support."

Thus, this unity around some shared beliefs pulls together individuals who are otherwise diverse. To play on the Democratic Party's "Big Tent" status, by unifying around shared beliefs, individuals can maintain some deviating beliefs while feeling a connection to the greater party. This allows the group to attract a membership that reflects a variety of belief systems. My interviews reveal coordinated and uncoordinated tactics that leaders and members use for maintaining focus on a core set of beliefs and constructing a collective Democratic identity.

Membership Avoidance: Uncoordinated Strategic and Non-strategic Silence

Member activists often explain the absence of meaningful debate in the party. In fact, this absence came up in nearly every interview. One leader explained this absence in this way: "There is a generally acknowledgement that we more or less believe the same things and as a result we are working towards this goal of electing this person… I think that most of us agree on things and the things we don't agree on we wouldn't really talk about" (Caucasian female, early 20s). Thus, some individuals are cognizant about the issues that are potentially controversial and stay away from these issues. These considerations amount to a type of strategic silence in which members are themselves protectors of the collective unity through the self-censoring of topics.

On the other hand, collective identities also benefit from what apparently is non-strategic silence. This silence comes from the assumption of unity. For example, one college activist

describes her thoughts on group unity: "I think we agree and most passionate about the same issues…" She explains, "People are all a Democrat, so I'm going to support their candidates." (Mixed-race female, early 20s). The focus shifts from negotiation of group values to their assumption of unity and their focus on the election of Democratic candidates. Another college leader explains, "I think that people who aren't super involved with politics think that people who are really involved with politics are issue-oriented. We don't talk about issues that much when you have this much of an attachment to your party... You don't really talk about issues in a meaningful way… There is a diversity of opinions but it doesn't come out that much" (Caucasian female, early 20s).

It is important to emphasize, as the individuals above explain, local party activism is focused on campaigns. Especially at the county level, most events are focused on canvassing, fundraising, or exposing candidates. According to every interview account, policy discussions rarely make it onto the agenda. Most leaders and activists note that their participation in the party is fueled on the activists' work itself, through the work of phone banking, fundraising, interning, and canvassing. This type of work leads to little time to discuss issues, which inevitably reduces the chances of conflict over differing beliefs. This is a type of non-strategic and non-coordinated silence practice. On the other hand, there is uncoordinated strategic silence occurs when people avoid controversial topics. This protects the group by averting topics that would threaten the participation of activists who may be sensitive to disagreements.

Leadership Avoidance: Coordinated Strategic Silence

Although interviews show silence is often created by the avoidance of members of topics of controversy, silence on controversial issues is also strategic on the part of group leaders who can

control the local group's agenda. Interviews with leadership show their conscientiousness to the power of identity, and the importance of shaping people's perceptions of the party's belief system. According to one leader, some topics are excluded from discussion. She explained, "So if we are doing an issue education meeting, we are not going to talk about drones. We aren't going to be running a meeting about drones, because there is so much factionalism in the party on that subject. So by deciding to do social media instead of Benghazi… I guess it's by excluding by omission" (Mixed-race female, early 20s). Thus, when issues are presented leaders carefully select topics on the agenda. Thus, leaders try not to distract from these unifying belief systems.

Another college leader (Caucasian male, early 20s) put it different way, "I try to avoid controversy…never anything gratuitously controversial. That would be a bit selfish of me…(if that subject) may cause some friction within the group I think I would betraying my responsibilities…I would be alienating many of the Democrats and distracting everyone from the ideals of the party." Thus, these leaders understand the strategic importance of maintaining identification with the Democratic Party as being important to fulfilling the ideals of the party. "Alienating" Democrats is a violation of these leaders duties to cultivate an active local group.

To use the example of the strategic party leader mentioned beforehand, if a party seems to "liberal" it could alienate individuals in more conservative areas of the state. According to one suburban leader, this occurs in the case of the party in conservative, rural Virginia. For her, strategically maintaining an agenda that is inclusive of individuals by focusing on these unifying belief systems, the party can make sure all individuals feel they "fit in," (Caucasian female, mid 20s). As long as the party can do this, individuals will perceive themselves as being a part of the organization. This "big tent" will thus create a large base of support in the population from

which to draw activists. As I will explain in the section below, the unifying beliefs that cut across locality are those representing equality of opportunity in the economic, educational, and political senses.

Unifying Beliefs in the Democratic Party: Economic Opportunity and Civic Participation

      "...we don't see the obstacles that other people face...(The Democratic Party)

      recognize(s) some of those obstacles and works to make the government a means to

      overcoming them" (Caucasian male, late teens)

In the quote above, one college activist articulates a driving belief in the Democrat's collective identity: many individuals face unfair circumstances that inhibit success, and the government has the responsibility to help them to take hold of achieving opportunity of success. To return to a quote relayed earlier, one college leader explained, "…all these (Democratic ideologies) are unified by some common, perhaps even… unarticulated belief that has something to do with, again, everyone in America *deserves a fair shot at success [my emphasis]*" (Caucasian male, early 20s). As a previously presented county leader said, "…equality for all. Every Democrat would say I believe in that…" (Caucasian Female, mid-40s).

The idea of giving people a "fair shot" through government policy came up as a major point of unity in every interview and the focus group. This concept was brought up despite all demographic differences between interviewees, and could be found in every local group. One college group member (Caucasian female, early 20s) argued that, "When it comes to helping people that don't have the education or the opportunities, to just tell them to pull themselves up, like this "pull yourselves up by your bootstraps" mentality, it doesn't work." Another college

activist (Caucasian male, late teens) explained, "Welfare is also important. I know the more conservative side…have a belief that people need to pull themselves up, but I don't think that is always an option for some people. They need extra support." Not only did leaders and members mention this as a central tenet of the party, but also they understood that it was a belief that had the potential to unite diverse individuals.

Equal opportunity as a core Democratic belief was often articulated through ideas on social mobility via career advancement. For example, one county leader explained, "When it comes to Democrats, labor unites them all. They might disagree on the environment, they might not agree on pro choice... but when it comes to labor everyone agrees people should have a dignified job, a dignified rate of pay… a dignified manner instead of people relegated to be poor, just because you were born into that circumstance." Another example of this point arises from a focus group of community leaders. During the focus group I conducted, one county leader (Caucasian male, early 70s) substantiated, "For the vast majority of people it's about human capital, it's about employment, it's about not allowing burdens to be placed on them and making it harder and harder for them to achieve." Democrats often put this goal in opposition to the Republicans. For example, one activist (African American female, mid 40s) explained, "They (The Republicans) just want to keep us separate and keep us in our place. You know, keep us down. Democrats are more uplifting and (about) togetherness." Another added to this perspective, "The Democratic Party embraces the theory that a rising tide raises all ships," referring to policies that benefit all individuals (Caucasian female, mid-40s). Thus, Democrats hold worldviews that acknowledge injustices in how opportunity is distributed across society, and rally around the idea that government can work to stop these injustices.

There was an additional collection of beliefs around equal opportunity that united Democrats: their belief in the duty of being civically engaged and having the equal opportunity to vote. This belief unified individuals and motivated them all to be activists. This was found among individuals of all Democratic Party groups, both college and county, rural and urban, and those of differing age and racial makeup.

One local rural Democratic leader (Caucasian female, early 40s), who explained that most of her group was comprised of African Americans, said that "They are attuned to the Voting Rights Act ruling and things like that. A lot of the women in my group are from that 1960s era generation. They remember what it was like not being able to vote. They remember not being integrated into schools. Their consensus is we are moving backwards and it frustrating to them." A similar attention to voting rights played out in other Democratic groups as people cited their participation in terms of their experience with the civil rights movement. One rural activist explained (African American female, late 40s) that what interested her in politics was "…the struggle and the fight for women for African Americans for everyone to be able to vote." She went on to say, "we remember back when we didn't have that right."

Another rural leader explained that she felt the Republicans were attacking her right to vote as an African American. "They are trying to take our rights, voting rights," she said, "I want to make sure I'm in there" (African American female, late 50s).

Concerns around voting and participation came up constantly in my interviews, the focus group, and the group meetings I attended. Many individuals shaped their civic participation in terms of meeting social responsibilities. For example, one male college leader (Caucasian, early 20s) explained it as, "a responsibility to educate the electorate. I think we had a very disengaged voting population and I think that s huge embarrassment for the country and I saw it as my

responsibility to come to your door and alert you there is an election and this is one of your options for a candidate." Another individual (African American female, late 40s) explains, "I want them to get out here. They speak to me." She added, "We are passionate about voting."

It becomes clear that these beliefs in equality of opportunity to economic success, educational attainment, and voting rights are important to Democrats, and fuel their desire to participate. In addition, their dedication to making a difference through civic participation motivates them.

It should be mentioned that Democrats often shape their beliefs in terms of being the opposite of Republicans. In the quotes mentioned above, we see the use of "we" versus "they" statements. Republicans are trying to "keep us down" and "they" are trying to take away our rights. Or how the conservative side's policies just do not work. Much of these Democrats' self concept comes from who they are not. What Democrats are quick to note is that they are not the Republicans who advocate for the opposite policies. Differentiating themselves from the out-group Republicans strengthens identity (Brewer & Hewstone 2004:155).

Diversity in Local Beliefs: Demographics and the Complication of the Democratic Identity.

The two concepts of equal opportunity and the importance of civic participation rally Democrats together regardless of demographics. However, interviews revealed a great deal of diversity among groups. Some unifying beliefs in one group of Democrats were considered controversial in others. Democratic leaders are aware of these differences.

A great example of this is on the issue of gay marriage and a woman's right to an abortion. The young adults I interviewed with the campus Democrat group overwhelmingly believed that the belief in marriage equality and a woman's right to abort were critical parts of their identity as Democrats. Many express the sentiment that "it's a matter of human rights." In fact, every youth

activist spoken with expressed these sentiments. Another female college activist (Caucasian, early 20s) explained, "we agree and are most passionate about the same issues… so college students are passionate about gay marriage and abortion (rights)." The particular beliefs of the college Democratic group were so well understood by Democratic leaders outside the group, that when a local politician visited the campus Democrat group to talk about rights, he tended to focus on these issues. One activist (Mixed-race female, early 20s) remarked, "you saw (the politician) speak about what he would do, which he wouldn't say around a group of 80 year olds." He thus catered to the unifying beliefs of the party to cultivate support.

Other groups found issues like abortion to be more controversial. One suburban county leader (Caucasian female, mid-40s) explained that it was difficult connecting with African American voters when a party's message focuses on issues like gay/lesbian rights to marriage. The focus group comprised of older Caucasian and African American county activists explained that gay marriage remains an issue in the African American community, as it is less agreed upon than in other groups, often grounded in the religion. Additionally, abortion is an especially contested issue in these groups according to others, especially in older or more rural communities. She explained that strategically there should be different messaging in campaigns to be inclusive of both groups. Thus, leaders are cognizant of differences between groups, and understand the strategic significance of catering messages.

Individuals in two groups in particular were heavily involved in union work, and this drove them to find identification with the party. One union worker (Caucasian male, late 50s) explained, "We have a lot of issues, we don't really select issues by party, we try to do it my working families issues… it's impossible to back a Republican in a right to work state. All they want to do is make right to work laws stronger. The Teamsters have probably supported more

Democratic candidates than any other union." He went on to explain that the Democrat's focus on working class issues made it favorable to the working class. In these two groups, the matter of pro-union labor policies was said to be strongly unifying.

Although labor issues were important to some groups, other groups expressed ambivalence or even a little hostility toward labor unions. "We differ on labor… because Virginia is a right to work state. We have a few folks who are pretty pro-labor unions. I'm not super jazzed about labor unions," one individual (Caucasian female, early 20s) explained. Thus, the same beliefs that unified some local groups were considered more divisive in others. I found that college-aged Democrats tended to be more wary of pro-union policy.

The focus group explained that more rural areas also were more "fiscally conservative" than urban Democrats, and thus disagreements occur over government spending. Additionally, rural areas also differ on issues such as gun control (Caucasian female, early 20s). For some groups, gun control was controversial, while in others stricter gun control was widely regarded as important. The college aged group tended to feel more supportive of gun control.

Additionally, although many Democrats feel strongly about voting and equal opportunity, many individuals explained that affirmative action remains a controversial policy in the party. This was especially found in with activists who were younger and white.

These examples of differences in the belief systems between Democratic groups remind us of this great ideological diversity within the party, which often stems from its varied demographics. Because the composition of each local Democratic group is different, the unifying beliefs of the group also differ. To connect this section to the findings above in relations to uncoordinated and coordinated strategic silence, this diversity means that each group engages in the silencing of different topics to maintain the party's association with unifying belief systems, and not those

that are controversial. However, all groups unite around the belief in equal opportunity and civic participation.

Interviews also show that the diversity in unifying and controversial beliefs among local Democratic groups presents challenges for politicians whose districts include many local groups. As a county leader presented earlier, sometimes separate messaging is needed to appeal to different groups. Inherent in this messaging is choosing and excluding topics of support. Thus, politicians must engage in strategic silencing in their publicity to maintain their connection to the collective identity.

The Group Ritual of Activist Political Participation

I have already demonstrated that individuals within the Democratic Party are passionate about particular policy changes, especially those relating to equality of opportunity, and firmly believe in the importance of voting and civic participation as a responsibility. These central beliefs motivate Democratic activists to contribute to their local party organizations through activities such as phone banking, canvassing, volunteering to do voter registration, attending party fundraisers, and supporting Democratic candidates in other ways, such as through internship roles on campaigns. The role of these practices in reinforcing Democratic identity and thus commitment to activism is remarkable.

Most activists associate a great deal of meaning with these experiences, and thus the completion of their moral obligation to be civically engaged reinforces their identity as Democrats. One college activist explained, "I felt the need to tell (the voters) why I cared" (Caucasian female, early 20s). This desire to actively campaign was a common theme in my

data. One college activist explained that recruiting activists was hardly necessary because of this drive: "People come to us, and they are already active" (Caucasian female, early 20s).

As one rural county leader explained, "…I love having folks around me and we all just come together for the common cause and candidate and make sure they're in office and that we rally the county," (African American female, late 40s). Working together with the group was played out in other interviews, as activists expressed the importance of finding like-minded people and advocating for their values through shared practices.

Some expressed canvassing as a type of realization of their Democratic identity:

> You feel like you're making a difference because the fact of the matter is, canvassing matters. You are getting these voters to change their mind and listen to you. It sounds cliché but you feel like you're doing something, and like I've never worked on a campaign for a job…But I just felt like…. It was the first time I am really participating, it isn't a theoretical 'I'm a Democrat because…' I was on the streets talking to people working for a campaign. (Caucasian female, early 20s)

Others expressed that it was these organized events that made them feel part of a greater movement. "I'm helping toward this (victory) on a small part... I never became active before. I was passionate about it I guess. But I never taken any action towards that… So it was nice to know that I was doing something" (Caucasian male, early 20s). Another expressed a similar feeling. Talking about politics, a college Democrat said, "I just really wanted to be a part of that and be a part of the biggest agent of change in our country. And especially with campaigns you are electing the people who are going to be those agents (Mixed-race female, early 20s). Thus,

campaign events often allowed volunteers to express their collective identity through action, which all activists sited as making them feel connected to the greater group.

Canvassing can also present challenges for activists. They often can face conflict from those that disagree with the party. This is especially true when Democrats canvass in conservative areas. One rural county leader (Caucasian female, early 40s) explained that many of her neighbors in the county are hostile towards Democrats. She explained that many disagreed with her while she canvassed for Democratic candidates. Thus, she treated canvassing much like a battle. In a passion-filled moment she explained, "By God to my dying day I'm going to sit here and fight every single day. I know my cause is right and my cause is just and I'm not going to let these people push me around."

Her language illustrates the potent relationship between belief and construction of identity active in the ritual of canvassing. In her description, she isolates Republicans as the hostile party to her and her group, the Democrats. "These people," shows her recognition of this categorized "other" group. Canvassing, although frustrating for her, was a way in which she could perform her identity and belief in a place where individuals were openly, and sometimes even physically hostile to her. She described moments in which her political signs were shot and even burned. For her, canvassing and other volunteering represented not only an expression of her identity and the contribution to the movement, but also a small victory against individuals who rejected and insulted her beliefs and her political group. In moments like these, it is apparent that one's political collective identity becomes extraordinarily active and powerful to personal identity. Canvassing provides a mechanism for the affirmation of her personal identity as a Democrat.

In their interviews, all of these activists highlight an important element of grassroots activism and identity: to truly feel that one is contributing the movement, many hope their efforts will

result in real change that fulfills their party's central goals. One leader (Caucasian female, mid 40s) stressed that activists must feel like their activism is making a positive impact and that the campaign they work for must have the ability to win. She went on to explain that activists "watch the campaign, and if the campaign isn't up to snuff they won't come volunteer. So you have to let them know that if they come and do their part it's going to matter." Thus, the campaign must be active and preferably winnable.

However, winning is not always necessary to attract activists and build political identity. A county leader (Caucasian female, mid 40s) explained that some are happy to go on "suicide missions." Activists pour out because, as she mentioned, "it's about ideology." She explained that going on such missions to highly conservative areas are not strategic for county groups. Given limited resources, it is most important to invest their resources into candidates that can win. The practice of canvassing in potentially hostile political territory demonstrates the powerful drive of ideology and identity on the part of some activities with the will to express their beliefs through grassroots campaign activities.

Most activists also explain an attraction to cultivating the feeling that they are making a real difference in their communities through political activism. One college activist (Caucasian female, early 20s) explained that, "you want to keep doing campaign work and help elect people. I definitely think I would be less likely to do something like this if I were in Massachusetts or something. You feel like you're actually doing something (in Virginia)." (Caucasian female, early 20s) She emphasized that feeling that she was making a difference in campaigns in a "battleground" state of Virginia drove her participation. Another activist (African American female, late 50s) mentioned that Democratic activists would stream into her rural county group from neighboring counties, leaving their conservative counties to find communities that were

more moderate and split politically. When referring to this, she explained, "They were coming over because this is were where they could live out their fantasy." Thus, being active in a place that was not so hostile, and was actually achievable allowed activism to take on a meaningfulness that drew people away from their home communities to participate. This experience shows that activists find it rewarding to feel as though they have contributed toward making a real difference in the movement. This would only occur in a more split county where victory is tangible.

One of the most powerful stories of political activism can be heard in how individuals experience victories, or profound moments of personal victory during the campaigns. Rather than every-day canvassing, these moments represent notable instances of connection between people, parties, and their identity. One touching example occurred during Election Day for an activist. She (African American female, late 50s) described the reaction of watching one woman and her father, whom she drove to the polls to vote:

> She happened to be a black woman whose father was an intermittent voter and in his late 70s or 80s and she was in her 50s… and she was very noncommittal of whether or not (voting) was a big deal or not, 'Because my dad wanted me to' or whatever. I drove him to the polls, and because of his age, I drove him up to the front of the courthouse. We walked him past this line-which was just magnificent to see, just a great turnout is inspiring- and she came out, tears running down her face and she got in the car and she said, 'I had no idea.' She was just stunned by the significance of the experience. I can't tell you what that meant to me. To be a

part of that moment in her life… it was something like seeing the birth of a child or as if she got married! She was overwhelmed

In this culminating moment, this activist described the profound experience of helping supporters engage with her movement and working toward equal opportunity in voting – a central belief in the party. The intimacy and weight of activism and its relationship to personal political identity is apparent in her comparison of this event to birth and marriage.

I heard other stories that were about the importance of activist grassroots duties, but some of the most widely shared profound moments for all activists occur at the point of their party's victory in a race. Often set in social events, such as victory or watch parties, group celebration of victory represents an important experience that can drive political identity and activism. One suburban county leader (Caucasian female, mid-40s) explained that victory was euphoric, and is what drivers her activism:

> It's like the biggest high. It's like drugs. I've never had them, but I imagine that's what they'd be like! It's weird because you go along...all your focus is on is winning. The thing that keeps you going is that you don't really think… it may be at the back of your mind, but not at the front, that you could lose. So you're so focused on winning and you get to this point in the campaign and you're like holy shit! You can lose. Wining is the thing that keeps you going. I wouldn't stay in this business if I didn't win more than I lost. It's a big bummer to lose… its very personal.

Another activist (African American female, late 40s) explained, talking about the election of 2008, "It's just rewarding and something you can look back on and say, I was a part of that. We can stick our chest out and be proud and say we helped put that man in office. And it's just great." Another (African American female, late 50s) explained, "It was one of the greatest days of my life. The election, I watched (county results) that night, and it was a long time before we got out… when CNN finally projected it, three of us at the precinct we were crying. And my nieces called me too, me and we were four way calling and we were crying." Similar stories of joy in victory shared through group activities exemplify the importance of rituals of victory celebration to these activists. Often the atmospheres were jovial. Many cite these party victories as some of the best moments in there life.

All of events and activities of the party above represent types of group rituals that help reinforce the importance of the party to the personal identity of activists. Their collective identity is legitimated through these rituals. Seeing how meaningful these events are to activists, we can understand how they continue to stay active in partisan activities. Experiences of emotional highs, of victories over competing groups, of feeling they have contributed somehow to the societal betterment of the world, of fulfilling civic responsibilities - all of these emotions help legitimate a central group Democratic identity that can be internalized by activists. These practices provide personal ratification of their beliefs, of the legitimacy and value of their group, and feelings of positivity to the self.

Thus far, I have demonstrated the incredible personal meaning that participation in activist rituals gives to individuals. How individuals present their party and their candidates to voters is an important element of ritual and identity as well. Volunteering for the party is important to them because it allows them to meet moral standards of civic participation and thus encouraging

others to vote is itself an important element of affirming their identity as Democrats. But leaders in the party's campaigns are also cognizant of how the party's activists must make their candidates seem to voters. In a similar way as how local leaders control a party's agenda to appeal to a wide range of individuals, canvassing and phone banking materials are tightly scripted. These scripts focus on central beliefs of the party, but can differ based on the politician's target audience. The scripts in the documents I was given during participant observation in canvassing were extraordinarily vague, and the issues that were brought up were not controversial. For example, the importance of equal opportunity in education was an issue that had significant focus. This belief in equal opportunity is a unifying belief in the party, and thus scripts that emphasized this appealed to beliefs that were appealing to all Democrats. This strategic effort is built around activists shaping the party as consistent with individuals' personal beliefs. Depending on the target population, this script can differ slightly. For example, one canvassing leader (Caucasian female, early 20s) explained that for a recent campaign for the politically "moderate" Tim Kaine in Virginia, the campaign attracted more moderate activists, who then in turn used a script that tried to "persuade" other moderate voters that the moderate Kaine was the right candidate for them. Thus, leaders shape campaign scripts to convince a particular target population/community by appealing to their unifying beliefs.

Activists utilize scripts that appeal to a large population during canvassing to create a collective identity of Democrats in the mind of voters that appeals to them. Simultaneously, these scripts emphasize their shared beliefs. Utilizing these scripts and participating via grassroots campaigning activities allows them to meet their moral prerogatives of being civically engaged individuals, which also helps reaffirm their identities as Democrats. Additionally, it is important

to note that these activists, through these scripts and their activities, are also active stewards of the Democratic collective identity.

Discussion and Analysis: Maximal Realities and the Cycle of Political Participation

Maximal and Submaximal Realities: The Tools of Identity Construction and Maintenance

The concepts of the *maximal reality* and *submaximal reality* can be used to articulate the various relationships between belief, identity, and activism described in the findings above. These concepts draw from Berger and Luckmann's (1967) theory on the social construction of reality. These theorists explain that particular socially constructed realities (or belief systems about how the world works and how it should work) become "ideologies" when they are attached to a "concrete power interest," (123). Ideologies are useful in helping motivate groups to act, and they play an important role in generating solidarity (124). Additionally, as Berger and Luckmann explain ideology can be modified through a process of "selection and addition" that help the group's cause (124-125). Berger and Luckmann argue that these realities are protected through certain procedures (126). Throughout their work they explain that challenging realities are addressed through "repressive procedures" (107), which include social sanctioning (59). There are also reality-affirming procedures through legitimations, such as theories, morals, and maxims, which all make an unchallenged reality self-sustaining (61, 105). In other words, as long as a belief system goes unchallenged, individuals will continue to utilize it when attempting to understand the world. Additionally, realities are also influenced through the process of socialization, as those who pass on beliefs can engage in "filtering," in which cases the experiences of these mediating individuals can effect what beliefs are passed on to others (131).

Berger and Luckmann provide the theoretical bases to understand Democratic identity and its maintenance in the party. I argue that political parties are "concrete power interests" in that to accomplish their goals they must achieve political power, which is fueled by loyal members. If people are able to define themselves through terms of this collective identity, of being a "Democrat," the party gains individuals who are loyal to the party and who will be active in its campaigns. The party has an interest in focusing on unifying constructed realities that promote solidarity. To do this, in terms of Social Identity Theory, the party must ensure there is a positive, self-affirming dialectic relationship between personal and collective identities. The Democrats must be seen as relevant to defining the self. They must also guard against threats to identity, which can occur when their group's value or distinctiveness comes into question (Elmers, Spears and Doosje 2002:165). Its important to note that the understanding of a group as being connected by particular, common characteristics is necessary for a group to be a category used in understanding the self. If it looses perceived homogeneity, it looses the "entitativity" needed to be a meaningful group (Brewer, Hong and Li 2004:25-26).

This entitativity problem is what the Democratic Party faces. It must create solidarity and perceived homogeneity in a group that, as demonstrated, is quite diverse in its belief systems. Yet the Democrats successfully unite individuals by emphasizing some belief systems and eschewing others. This is where the concepts of maximal and submaximal realities are useful in understanding identity.

Working from Berger and Luckmann's theory, I argue that a *maximal reality* is a system of beliefs associated with a collective identity that is jointly held by most or all individuals within a group. A *submaximal reality*, on the other hand, is a belief system that may be important to the personal identities of individuals, but are not held in common with the group. Submaximal

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realities can be diverse among group membership, and thus may be controversial to some. Both of these types of belief systems include perceptions on the logical workings of the world (cause and effect relationships) as well as moral prerogatives. The names of these realities come from the fact that unifying beliefs are "maximized" in their association with the collective identity, while controversial beliefs are "minimized" or made inferior ("sub") to maximal realities in their association with the collective.

These beliefs are maximized and minimized using coordinated and uncoordinated strategic silence, as well as uncoordinated non-strategic silence (silence fueled by the assumption of group unity). I argue that these are types of the social "procedures" explained by Berger and Luckmann that are used to maintain unifying realities. Additionally, a part of silencing is individuals' choosing of what realities can be associated with the collective identity and which cannot. I believe this is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's process of "selection and addition" of the reality, and its "filtering" through individuals in the group (124-125, 131). Through these types of silence, by excluding topics that highlight the differences between members in the party using silence, leaders and members can ensure the group's distinctiveness and reduce threats to identity. I also argue that through political rituals like canvassing and celebration of party victory maximal realities are reinforced and activists come to feel that the group represents them. The group appears homogenous enough to be a meaningful category and they can thus internalize a collective identity of Democrat.

The relationship between maximal realities and submaximal realities in the Democratic Party can be illustrated below in Figure 1. According to my interviews, the belief in equal opportunity (of economic opportunity, educational opportunity, and voting opportunity) and civic participation drive all Democratic activists. However, I argue that each local group can hold

additional locally held maximal realities. In some cases an additional unifying maximal reality in one group may be a controversial submaximal reality in other groups.

In figure 1 I have given an example of the relationship between maximal and submaximal realities using the example of the local college Democratic group. In its maximal realities, I have used the example with one of the maximal realities that is common in every Democratic group I surveyed: the belief in equality of opportunity. I have also added the local belief in gay rights, which is present in unifying in the local group. These belief systems are maximal realities because both leaders and members emphasize them. I have also added a local submaximal reality.
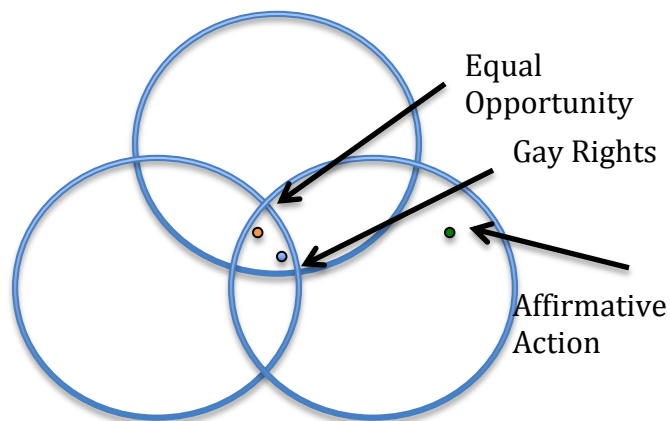
Figure 1: College Democratic Beliefs

Interviews showed that in this local group, affirmative action was considered to be controversial.

Each ring represents the range of beliefs of a particular individual. All individuals rallied around the reality of equal opportunity, one of the points in the overlapping section of the circle, it is located within the rings of all three people graphed. On the other hand, only one individual in the College group may hold the particular belief on the importance of affirmative action. This belief is still a part of this person's personal identity, yet others do not share it in the group. It would be dangerous to connect affirmative action to the collective identity in this college group because this controversial belief system could break the consensus on what the group believes. The lack of consensus would reduce entitativity, and cloud the commonalities between individuals' beliefs and goals. Individuals would then question their categorization as a

Democrat. Thus it would be damaging to emphasize affirmative action as a belief connected with the collective identity of this group, which is why beliefs such as these are silenced.

I've included more examples of maximal and submaximal realities below in Figure 2.

College Democrat Group

Older, African American Democrat Group
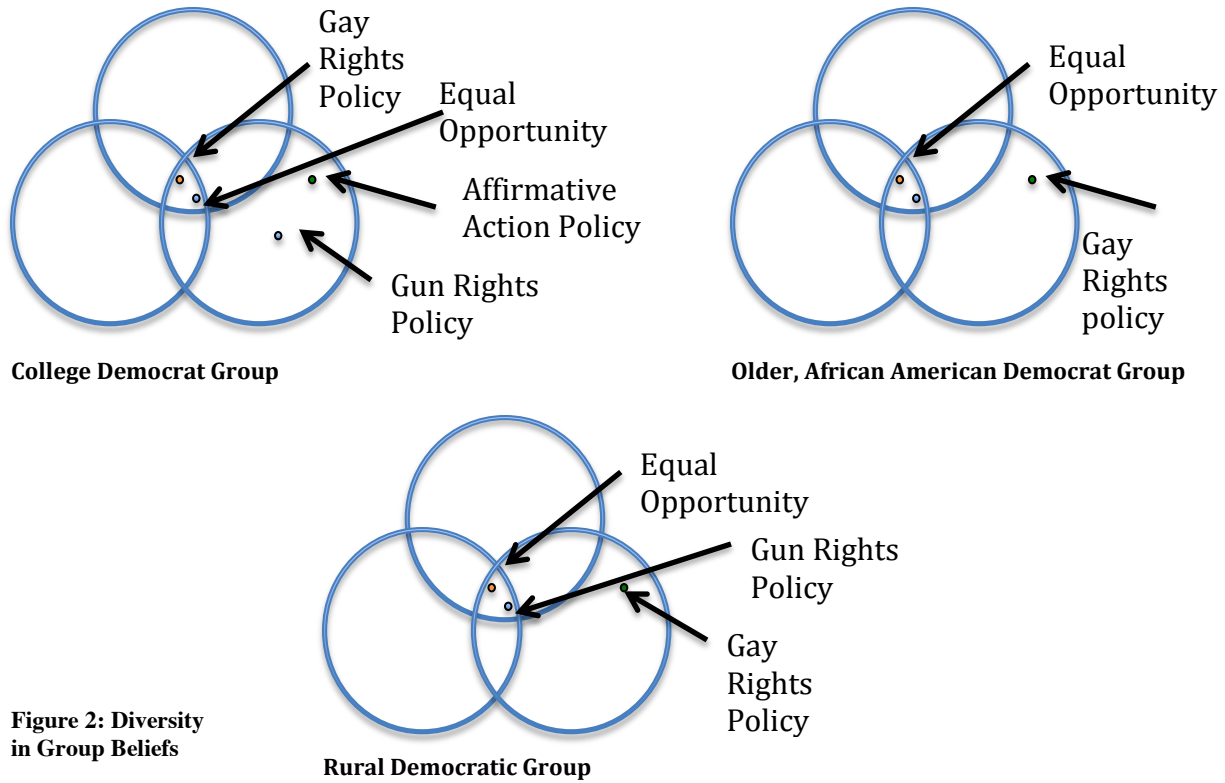
Figure 2: Diversity in Group Beliefs

Rural Democratic Group

This figure describes the great diversity that can occur in maximal and submaximal realities among groups.

As demonstrated by the figure above, some realities that are unifying and maximal are controversial and thus submaximal in others. A good example of this is gay rights, which is considered morally just and appropriate by the young College Democrats, but tends to be controversial in more African American-dominated groups.

Regardless of what belief systems comprise each locality's maximal realities, they are all sustained through similar processes of reality maintenance: coordinated and uncoordinated strategic silence and uncoordinated non-strategic silence. Coordinated strategic silence is orchestrated through leadership, such as through agenda setting and the controlling of discussion, both methods lead to a focus on unifying realities. Uncoordinated strategic silence is the self-censoring of individuals of controversial subjects, which also inevitably keeps the focus of group discussion and identity on unifying maximal realities. Uncoordinated non-strategic silence, which occurs when individuals simply do not engage in a discussion of group beliefs because of the assumption that everyone generally believes in the same things, also reinforces maximal realities. Thus some actors can inadvertently reinforce unifying themes through silence that abates the threat of controversy. Both coordinated and uncoordinated silence are parts of the filtering and selection processes that help maintain a solidarity-reinforcing social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This process is illustrated in Figure 3 above.
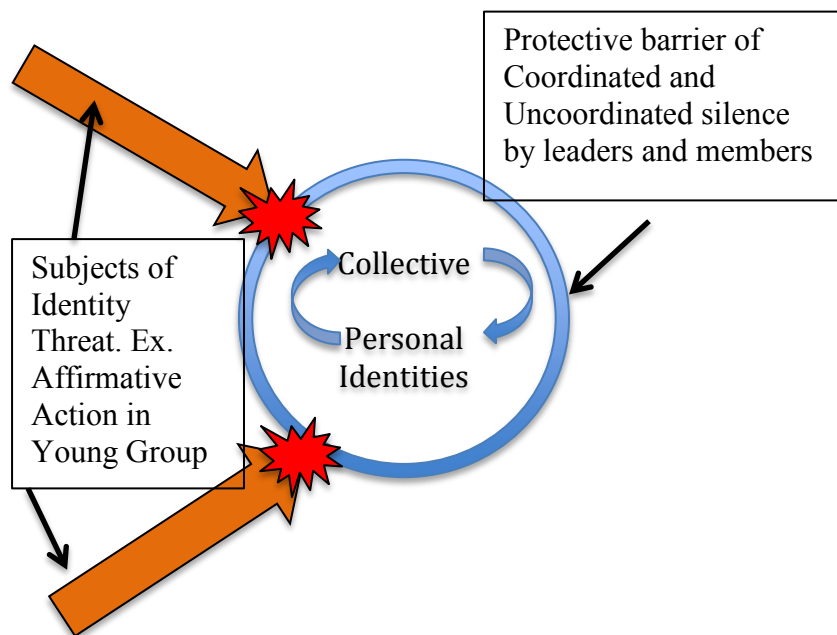
Figure 3: Coordinated and Uncoordinated Silence and the Protection of Identity

Protective barrier of Coordinated and Uncoordinated silence by leaders and members

Subjects of Identity Threat. Ex. Affirmative Action in Young Group

Collective

Personal Identities

Thus far, I've explained the maximal and submaximal realities in the Democratic Party's local groups and how silence practices help reinforce unifying maximal realities. The main

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mechanism of participation lies in the ritual of activism, which includes the actual grassroots *experience* of activism. Individuals express feelings of immense satisfaction from participating in these grassroots activities, as these activities reinforce their identities as Democrats. This Democratic identity is firmly rooted in the belief in civic participation and contributing to the social good. Thus activism reinforces a positive self-identity in which Democrats meet their moral goals as active citizens.

In terms of Social Identity Theory, activism locates individuals in a social category that defines them positively (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995:260). These findings reflect those found by Teske's (1997) study on political activists in America at grassroots advocacy organizations. These moral motivations drive political participation. However, I go further than Teske's vague assertion that activism helps reconstruct identity, I suggest how activism in the Democratic Party reinvigorates individual's concept on the Democratic *collective* identity, which then is reinforced into their own *personal* identities and self understandings. Thus, my assessment highlights the importance of the creation of an external category that is then integrated into one's personal self-definition. An activist's construction of this positive self-concept utilizing the category of "Democrat" reinforces activists' dedication to the party, as through this categorization they meet their goals of being a moral, civically engaged person. In other words, activists feel they are "actually doing something," which allows them to meet their engagement goals. The collective identity then becomes an important tool in reaching personal moral goals. This relationship is supported by Social Identity Theory's prediction that individuals will use group membership to construct a positive self-concept (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995).

Additionally, this study has highlighted the *practices* within the ritual of activism that further reinforces the seamlessness between group identity and personal identity. By utilizing
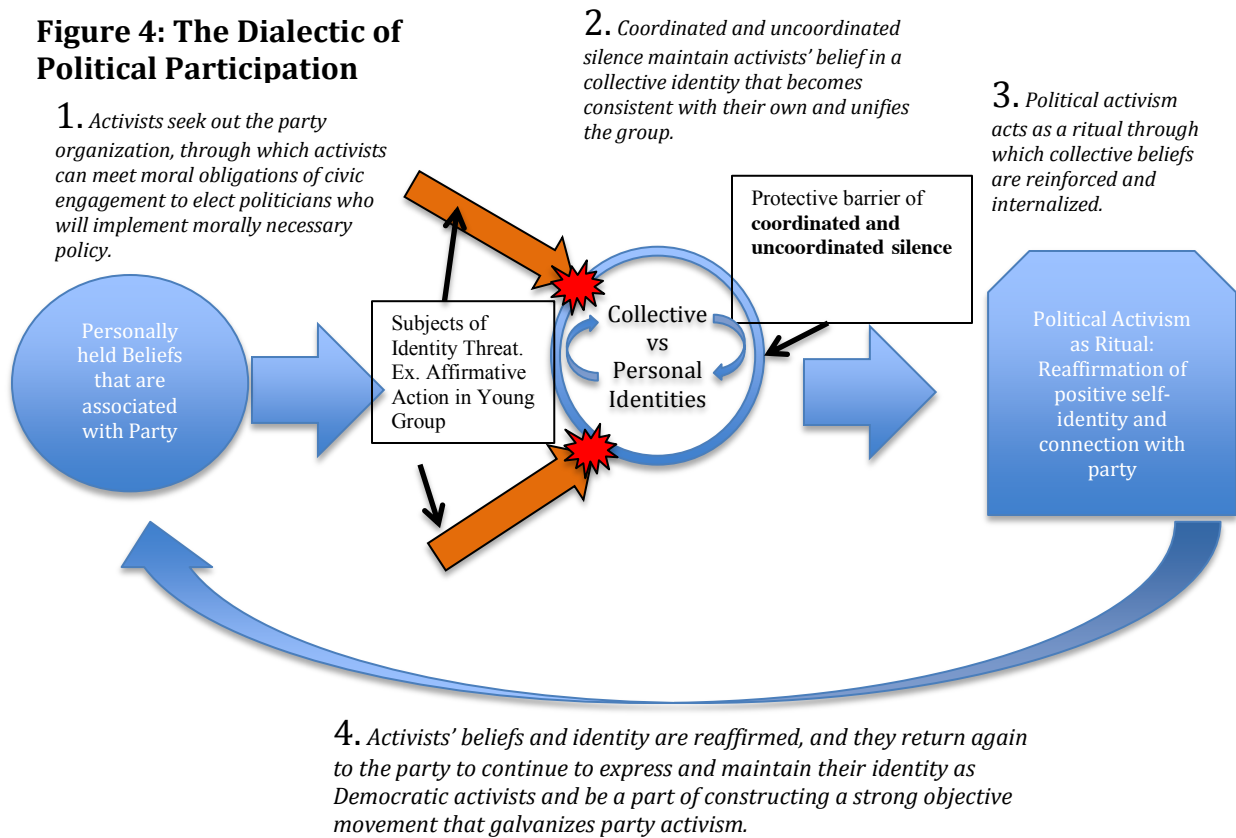
intentionally vague, non-controversial scripts during campaign activities, parties reinforce unifying maximal realities, as these scripts emphasize unifying group beliefs and ignore controversial ones. The utilization of these scripts is another example of strategic silencing within the ritual of activism. I find that this is an additional demonstration of Berger and Luckmann's (1967) "selection and addition" process for group reality maintenance (124-125). This is strategically done to maintain the unifying maximal realities of the group over the controversial submaximal realities.

Finally, through experiences of collective victory when the party wins its political races, individuals perceive these victories as personal victories as well, which further increases the creation of positive self-identities. All of these grassroots experiences and processes reinforce activists' dedication to the party by reinforcing the collective identity's place in activist's personal identities. As long as this reinforcing continues by the party, the party is likely to have a consistent stream of dedicated activists who will conduct its important grassroots work.

I argue, in conclusion, that through silence practices, both in group agenda settings and discussions and in campaign scripts reinforce collective identity, the party emphases maximal realities that reinforce a unifying collective identity, and thus maintain the process of political participation. Individuals then fulfill their realization of their political values of civic participation through grassroots activity, which further reinforce the collective identity into their personal identities by constructing a positive moral self-identity through the self-categorization as an activist Democrat. These processes form what I call the "Dialectic of Political Participation," seen below in Figure 4. I argue that this Dialectic contributes to other organizational processes in political parties that protect and reconstruct identity and group solidarity, which help ensure that activists will continue to come back to the party for future

activism to reaffirm their Democratic identities. I argue, however, that this process is imperfect

and can fail when significant controversial topics are nevertheless introduced to the collective

identity. This could occur, for example, because of misjudgment by leaders and members alike

of what beliefs are jointly held and which are controversial. This failure is one of the reasons

why identity threats can destroy group identity and solidarity.

Figure 4: The Dialectic of Political Participation

1. Activists seek out the party organization, through which activists can meet moral obligations of civic engagement to elect politicians who will implement morally necessary policy.

2. Coordinated and uncoordinated silence maintain activists' belief in a collective identity that becomes consistent with their own and unifies the group.

3. Political activism acts as a ritual through which collective beliefs are reinforced and internalized.

Personally held Beliefs that are associated with Party

Subjects of Identity Threat. Ex. Affirmative Action in Young Group

Collective vs Personal Identities

Protective barrier of **coordinated and uncoordinated silence**

Political Activism as Ritual: Reaffirmation of positive self-identity and connection with party

4. Activists' beliefs and identity are reaffirmed, and they return again to the party to continue to express and maintain their identity as Democratic activists and be a part of constructing a strong objective movement that galvanizes party activism.

Implications

This study's findings contribute to the political identity literature as well as the study of party

strategies. It may also help scholars to think about identity and identity construction in other

groups with diverse memberships.

Firstly, this study adds to the literature by highlighting the perspective and experiences of activists when understanding political identity, which as Teske (1997) explains is overwhelmingly dominated by studies on political leaders and bureaucracy (24). My findings simultaneously reinforce findings from other key studies on activists while adding to them. For example, Teske's 1997 qualitative study of identity. Activism, and the victories within activist activities, help create a positive self-identity and is deeply meaningful to activists. Yet his simple "Identity Construction Model of Activism" (97) oversimplifies identity by ignoring the differences between collective identity and personal identities. This, and similar findings in the literature (see Chong 1991 and Flacks 1988) miss the strategic importance of the maintenance of a solidarity-producing collective identity that is consistent with activists' personal beliefs and how leaders and individuals alike maintain this complementarity. This study explores the practices that are used in party organizations to maintain this positive relationship, finding that they occur through coordinated and uncoordinated strategic silence by leaders and members respectively, as well as uncoordinated non-strategic silence by members.

My findings regarding the affirmation of the power and agency that member activists have in creating group identity and beliefs, and thus priorities, of local party groups is a refreshing change from the literature in political science that often focuses on leadership strategies alone in the political process. This study also shows how this silence is strategically used during the ritual of political activism, such as through the use of unifying, non-controversial scripts that reinforce maximal realities during activism.

On a theoretical level, this study also further develops Berger and Luckmann's (1967) theory on the social construction of reality and its connection to identity by marrying Berger and Luckmann's theory with concepts in Social Identity Theory. By creating the concepts of

maximal and submaximal realities, this study shows how particular beliefs systems are emphasized and deemphasized in creating group solidarity, which is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's theory (124). It also complements Social Identity Theory, which helps explain that the perceptions that a group is homogenous are important to maintaining group commitment (Abrams et al 2004:364; Spears et al 2004:295). Additionally, social identity theory's prediction that collective identities help create a positive self-identity reinforces the idea of the dialectic of political participation and its connection to identity (Hogg, Terry and White 1995:260). Also, I argue that by bridging theories in sociology with theoretical questions in political science, this study goes a long way in breaking down the type of theoretical cleavages between political science and sociology that weaken the study of political identity. Teske (1997) and other theorists rarely site sociological theories on identity in their studies. This study's embrace of powerful sociological theory on identity and belief systems has resulted in rich explanatory conclusions that help understand the connections between activism and identities.

This study also challenges a position made by scholars Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002) who wrote the quantitative research-based *Partisan Hearts and Minds*. Both this study and theirs are related to the political identity of partisans, although mine focuses on party activists. However, Green and his colleagues explicitly explain that they reject Social Identity Theory as a useful theory to understand political identity, as they believe social identity theory explains that individuals categorize themselves in socially valued groups to gain a positive self-identity. They further that if parties loose elections, these individuals would quickly abandon their party to join the victors. Because this does not occur, they argue, Social Identity Theory must be an inaccurate explanation of political identity (11).

The problem with what Green, Palmquist, and Schickler argue is that they too narrowly understand Social Identity Theory. It is true that Social Identity theorists propose that group switching can occur to achieve a position in the dominant group. However, it is not an inevitable result. The theorists also emphatically do not insinuate that non-dominant groups cannot construct a positive identity. In terms of political identity, this kind of group could be the Democrats after a devastating electoral loss and such a group can still be valued by its members. A positive self-identity does not necessarily require a political group to always achieve greater strength. In fact, qualitative analysis found in this study and in Teske's (1997) suggests that although victory is an important element of building a party identity, individuals find meaning in advocating for a group that shares their values. In the case of Democrats, activism allows individuals to meet moral standards in civic participation, which builds a positive identity even when the party is out of power. Positive self-identity creation can and does occur in non-dominant groups in society (see Hogg, Terry and White 1995:260). Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) write an impressive book that quantitatively sheds light on dedication to parties by party identifiers, as well as party identity in general. I posit that qualitative interviewing and the use of Social Identity Theory in their analysis would have added to these authors' understandings of political identity and its motivations.

I have thus demonstrated this study's unique contribution to the literature on activism and identity in political parties. I finally would like to emphasize that one of the most exciting aspects of this studies' theoretical findings is its applicability to a variety of social groups, that are composed of individuals with diverse beliefs, including other political parties. In a shorter exploratory study, I found that the presence of submaximal realties, maximal realties, and silence strategies could be also seen within groups in the Republican Party, although with different

policy legitimations, and different maximal and submaximal realities (Moretz 2013). For example, I found Republicans tend to rally around a maximal reality centered on American individualism in economic activity, and younger groups often keep quiet on particular social issues-based submaximal realities, like gay rights.

Additionally, I explored how maximal and submaximal realities might be present in other organizational settings. In the summer of 2013 I studied their existence in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), a development research organization based in Geneva, Switzerland. For this summer project, I conducted interviews with eight economists there to explore how such a development organization with diverse economists from all over the world was able to unify around a common cause. I found that individuals rallied around a belief system centered on creating individualized growth policies for countries, recognizing their inherent differences and their need for unique plans that respected their diversity. This united the organization even in the face of policy disagreements. They additionally utilized this self-understanding as economists at UNCTAD in describing how they were different from international organizations like the World Bank, which they considered to be self-interested, narrow-minded in the policy realm, and disrespectful of the unique needs of poorer nations.

Thus, maximal realities, submaximal realities, and silence practices play a role in maintaining solidarity-enforcing collective identities in other non-profit organizations. These concepts and an understanding of the dialectic of participation, commitment, and identity could also be stretched to how churches and other religious organizations might mediate diversity in parishioners' perspectives on the beliefs associated with their faith. For example, the split in American churches over issues like gay marriage presents challenges to mainstream Protestant churches

and Catholic churches as church leaders and members alike navigate these controversial issues and construct collective Christian identity.

Further research is needed to add finesse to these concepts and explore their applicability. However, the lived experiences of interviewees and these conclusions' grounded in the well-established sociological and political science literature give its findings explanatory strength in understanding the relationship between belief, identity and activism within the Democratic Party. Importantly, I shed light on the relationship between identity and activism in the lives of the thousands of activists that work in our communities, and help explain this critical and understudied democratic phenomenon. It is my hope that this study's concepts will be useful in studying other forms of activism, and that other researchers continue to break down the cleavage between the social sciences' theories and subject areas. As this study exemplifies, interdisciplinary research has great potential in understanding topics of social behavior.

Appendix A

Interview Guide:

What is your age?

What is your Occupation?

Did you have a religious upbringing?
- If yes, what faith tradition?

Do you currently have any religious beliefs?

Where did you grow up?
- What were the politics like in your area?

What did your parents do for a living?

What were your parents' political opinions?
- Did they have a party affiliation?

How do you feel you developed your political opinions?
- Any major experiences that stick out in your mind?

What led you to become politically active?

I'd like to ask you about your political ideology.
- Tell me about your views of the world.
- What party beliefs are most important to you?
  - What is the reason for this?
- What public policies do you feel are the best?
  - How do they meet your goals?

How would you describe a perfect world?
- How are resources distributed?
- How is justice dispensed?

What kind of world do you think is attainable through public policy?
- What kinds of policies need to be implemented to reach this?

Is there anything else you find meaningful about your party's values and its mission?

How do you feel about the country's current economic trajectory?

How do you feel about the country's current social trajectory?

How are you involved in the local (club/political party)?
- What are your duties?
- What events have you participated in?
- Can you tell me about these experiences?

How do you feel about the opposing party?
- What are their beliefs like?
- How do you feel about their general membership?
- How would you describe the average (Democrat/Republican)
- Do you think they are portrayed accurately in the media?

What is the generalized image in average America of your party? How about the opposing party's view of your party?
- Do you think your image is correct?

Do you have any beliefs that other individuals in your party may disagree with?
- How do they react to your beliefs?

Describe your party group. Are they very diverse in beliefs?
Do you have debates over issues with your group?
- How are they resolved?
- Do you come to any common conclusions?

How would you describe the college organizations of the (Democratic Party/ Republican Party)?
- Do the national organizations or state organizations interact with these college organizations?
- Is there a national college (Democratic/Republican) organization?
  - Are you involved with these national student organizations?
    - (If yes) How so?
- Do the national organizations differ from the college organizations?
  - (If there are) How does the party deal with these differences?
- Are the national organizations and college organizations similar?
  - (If yes) In what ways?

What kind of group-sponsored political events have you participated in?
- What were these events like? What was the purpose?
- What leaders were involved?
- What was the message given?
- Did the event affect your thinking?

Have you been to any county or national political events?
- What were these events like? What was the purpose?
- What leaders were involved?
- What was the message given?
- Did the event affect your thinking?

Have you ever campaigned for a politician?
- Can you tell me about the experience?

What kinds of news sources to you listen to/read/watch for news?

Do you ever look at (liberal/conservative) media?
- What do you think about it?
- What are your reactions?

What were the feelings of watching President Obama win in 2008/2012?
- What were your initial impressions?

(For Democrats): How did you react to the fact that Democrats lost electoral support in the midterm elections in the past few years?
- What were the reasons for these losses?

How did you feel of the Republican's victories in Virginia in the past few years?
- What does this mean to your party?
- What do these victories mean for your understandings of the world?

Is there anything else about your involvement in local politics or your political beliefs that you think is important that we haven't addressed?

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