Partisan legitimacy across generations

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that parties shape their supporters' views about the political system via the messages they communicate about the desirability of the political system. Moreover, we contend that the effectiveness of such communication varies considerably across generations. Combining data from election surveys collected in 15 democracies as part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project with data on the policy positions of 116 political parties collected by the Comparative Manifestos Project, we find that supporters of parties that express positive positions toward the political system report systematically higher levels of political legitimacy than supporters of parties that communicate negative views. Moreover, this communication is particularly effective among older party identifiers whose partisan identification tends to be more pronounced. Taken together, these findings suggest that political parties play an active role in shaping citizens' views of the political system but their success in mobilizing consent among citizens in contemporary democracies may weaken with partisan de-alignment and generational change.

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Like a good bottle of wine, good democratic citizenship seems to come with ripe old age. It is well known, for example, that older citizens in established democracies are more likely to participate in politics (e.g. Franklin, 2004; Blais, 2000; Dalton, 2008),[1] exhibit more crystallized political orientations, more stable party identifications (Campbell et al., 1960: 153–156; Miller and Shanks, 1996: 131–132; Sears and Funk, 1999), and report more positive attitudes about the political parties they feel close to as well as the political system in which these parties compete (Dalton, 2004; 2005; Holmberg, 2003). Whether they result from life-cycle or generational effects (or some combination of the two), the attitudes and behaviors of older citizens consistently reveal a more supportive stance toward politics and the existing political status quo (Hooghe, 2004). Older individuals, so it seems, provide the backbone of contemporary democracies, while younger citizens often are the sources of instability, innovation, and change.[2]

While correlations between age and political behavior are well documented in the scholarly literature (for an overview, see van der Brug and Kritzinger, 2012), it is not entirely clear how they fit into dominant accounts of political legitimacy, in part because they say precious little about voters' age, except for the descriptive inference that older voters have more faith in the political system. Instead, the most common explanation of how citizens come to form supportive attitudes of democratic systems relies on Eastonian notions of system outputs, which suggest that such attitudes are shaped by what political systems represent and how they perform: people are said to extend greater legitimacy to political systems that produce superior outcomes (economic, political, and the like), and that do so fairly in citizens' eyes.

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  [1] See also Konzelmann et al. (2012) and Bhatti and Hansen (2012).

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[2] Younger voters, however, have the advantage of being more adaptable to party system changes, as Franklin and van Spanje (2012) show using evidence from Italy.

While this account is plausible and frequently consistent with available evidence, it presumes that all citizens are equally affected by these outcomes. It suggests that partisans of all stripes are expected to see the outcomes of political systems in a similar light, and they do so regardless of age or partisan inclination. Given the passionate debates and disagreements between partisans of all ages about whether the state of the economy is good or bad or the government doing a superior or pitiful job, this is unlikely to be universally true. But as importantly, as we argue below, such accounts of system support too often ignore the role political elites can play in shaping what voters see and think about. We seek to remedy these shortcomings by building on the model developed by Anderson and Just (2010) that shows how political parties contribute to partisans' legitimacy beliefs. In line with their perspective, we argue that parties' positions influence their supporters' attitudes about the political system via the messages they communicate about the desirability of the political regime. Moreover, as we argue in this study, the effectiveness of party persuasion on their supporters is considerably mediated by individuals' age, as older partisans are more receptive to party messages than younger partisans.

To test our argument, we examine individual level survey data together with data on parties' policy positions in a broad set of established democracies. Our results reveal that supporters of parties with more positive positions toward the system report systematically more positive attitudes about the political system than supporters of parties that take negative positions. Moreover, we find that this communication is particularly effective among party identifiers who are older. These arguments and findings have implications for how we view democratic legitimacy because they imply that partisan legitimacy is actively shaped by political elites and thus can be mobilized "from above". Taken together, these findings suggest that political parties play an active role in shaping citizens' views of the political system but their success in mobilizing consent among citizens in contemporary democracies may weaken with partisan de-alignment and generational change, as partisans tend to express more positive attitudes than non-partisans, and partisans of younger age are less receptive to party cues than older partisans.

We proceed as follows. The next section explains how partisanship and system support may be connected, and the role age may play in connecting the two; we then explicate several hypotheses, which we subsequently test with data from 15 contemporary democracies. A final section discusses our findings and concludes.

1. Parties, partisanship, and system support

While studies of democratic stability have frequently assigned an important role to political parties and the actions of political elites in shaping the stability and legitimacy of democracies (e.g., Bunce, 2003; Geddes, 1999; Przeworski, 2005; Weingast, 1997), research on political behavior has paid relatively less attention to parties when seeking to explain people's beliefs about the political system. In particular, to date the literature on political legitimacy has paid limited attention to the role political parties play in shaping citizens' views about the political system.

To the extent that parties have played an important role in building system support, they have done so through what has been called "parties in the electorate." Since the behavioral revolution in political science, partisanship (or partisan attachment, partisan identification) has been a fundamental organizing concept for understanding political behavior. It is a major factor in shaping people's attitudes about politics and, subsequently, their behavior. Following *The American Voter*, party identification typically has been conceptualized as an individual's enduring affective attachment to a political party that is the product of early socialization experiences (Campbell et al., 1960; 1966; Hess and Torney, 1967; Franklin and Jackson, 1983; Franklin, 1984).[3] It is a kind of social identity, reflecting the idea that individuals often define aspects of the self in reference to secondary groups in society, including political parties (Campbell et al., 1960; Ch 6; Green et al., 2002).

Because partisanship is assumed to reflect a psychological attachment to a political party, the conceptualization of individuals as partisans does not require their official membership in a party or other behavioral outcomes, such as voting for a particular party, although these may all be highly correlated with one another (Miller and Shanks, 1996). What is important, however, is that partisanship shapes how new political information is interpreted. It thus acts as a so-called "perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation" (Campbell et al., 1960: 133). In other words, partisanship can be interpreted as a cognitive short cut that assists citizens in managing complex information and organizing their views about politics (see also Sniderman et al., 1991).

1.1. The role of partisanship in shaping legitimacy

Aside from influencing how people select and interpret information, partisanship also provides an anchor for political legitimacy beliefs. Given the central role political parties play in modern democracies, it should be no surprise that partisans are motivated to accept the political status quo, including the political regime (its institutions and processes). Compared to non-partisans, partisans express higher levels of support for the role of political parties in a democracy, the party system they constitute, and the political order in which they operate (Holmberg, 2003; Miller and Listhaug 1990; Paskeviciute, 2009).

A number of scholars have argued that this connection between partisanship and system support can be viewed as an indicator of the health of democratic political systems (Dalton, 1996; 1999; Holmberg, 2003; Torcal et al., 2002; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Budge et al., 1976). In fact, because of the strong relationship between party identification and support for the political system, some worry that weakening partisan attachments might erode people's faith in democratic politics. Scholars are concerned that the decline

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[3] In the rational choice perspective, such an attachment is more of a cognitive short cut representing a running tally of retrospective assessments of party performance (Fiorina, 1981).

in partisan attachments across Western democracies could be a leading indicator of citizen disengagement from politics amongst voters and a decline in support for party-based democracy more generally (Dalton, 1999: 66; see also Holmberg, 2003). Similarly, the lack of strong partisan attachments in newly democratic states is seen as providing only a weak foundation for system support and its consolidation (Dalton and Weldon, 2007).

1.2. The role of parties and party positions

Given the discussion above, the traditional partisanship perspective would expect partisan attachments to lead to higher levels of political support generally, regardless of the specific party voters identify with. After all, even parties outside of the political mainstream signal an allegiance to the rules of the democratic game, due to the very fact that they organize themselves as parties and contest elections. However, we argue that this overlooks the obvious fact that partisanship can have a variety of effects on how people view the political system. Specifically, we posit that parties differ significantly in the positions they take with regard to the political system, and that partisans are predisposed to adopt these positions as their own. In short, parties differ in their fondness for the political system, and partisans' attitudes are likely to mirror these differences.

We theorize that voters are cognitive misers. And because the functioning of the political system is complex and often arcane, partisanship predisposes individuals to adopt the political positions of their party on a number of issues. Importantly for this study, we expect that the positions parties take about the political system signal to party supporters how well the system is performing. In most basic terms, if a political party takes a more positive position toward the functioning of the political status quo, its partisans will also express more positive attitudes about the political system. Conversely, political parties that take negative positions are also more likely to engender more negative attitudes about the political system among their supporters. As a result, parties' positions (and messages) about the political system provide the mechanism that links parties' policy positions and their supporters' views of the desirability of the political regime.

Our argument implies that parties' positions are exogenous to their supporters' views: that is, the causal arrow is expected to run from parties' messages to partisans' views, rather than the reverse. We cannot completely rule out that some individuals may develop a partisan attachment to parties whose positions on the political system they agree with. However, we believe that our argument can be justified on a number of grounds. First, our expectations about the role of partisanship as a mover of attitudes about the political system are plausible and consistent with considerable amounts of research into the role of partisanship in shaping political behavior. Among these, the Michigan-based conception of party identification as an "unmoved mover" supports this interpretation: most citizens develop partisan attachments early in life, and these attachments are strongly resistant to change (Campbell et al., 1960; Miller and Shanks, 1996; see also Green et al.,

2002). And while we acknowledge that the stability of party identification is sometimes less than perfect, we also wish to note that partisanship is a robust mover of people's opinions regardless of its stability at the individual level,[4] and that research on panel data consistently reveal partisanship to be causally prior to attitudes.[5] Taken together, existing studies strongly suggest that we are on safe grounds in asserting that partisan attachment increases the odds that voters rely on the party positions as a guide for political orientations, and that strong partisanship augments the persuasive power parties have for their supporters (Jacoby, 1988; see also Zaller, 1992). As a consequence, our model of party positions, partisanship, and legitimacy beliefs implies a set of variable effects of partisanship on support depending on, and set in motion by, parties' positions on the legitimacy and desirability of the existing democratic regime.

1.3. Partisan consent across generations

If parties indeed have the capacity to mobilize public support for the political system, this does not necessarily imply that party persuasion is equally effective across all partisans. In particular, we would expect parties to be more effective among party supporters who are more receptive to parties' messages. We argue that such receptiveness is more pronounced among partisans that are older, and this effect is due to both life-cycle and generational effects in established democracies.

From the perspective of an individual's life-cycle, age in established democracies means longer experience with the functioning of a political system and parties that operate in it. To put it simply, older individuals have been around for a longer period of time than younger citizens.[6] This means that older individuals have had more opportunities to be exposed to politics over the duration of their life span than younger citizens. To be sure, age does not guarantee exposure to politics, as this process is likely to be mediated by a host of individual and contextual characteristics, such as individual's political interest and the salience of elections. Nevertheless, one could generally expect that older citizens hold a longer personal memory of political events and their key actors – such as major political parties – than younger voters who became members of their polity only recently.[7]

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[4] For useful literature overviews, see Johnston (2006) and Holmberg (2007).

[5] Studies of public opinion based on panel data show that partisanship causally precedes people's attitudes and values. For example, analyses of the interdependence of respondents' issue positions (on social welfare, race, and culture) and partisanship show that party attachment influences people's issue positions much more strongly than issue positions influence partisanship (Layman and Carsey, 2002; Carsey and Layman, 2006). As well, consistent with the limited evidence that exists about the link between legitimacy beliefs and partisanship (Koch, 2003), Goren's (2005) structural equation model of three-wave panel data reveal that partisanship affects people's political values more strongly than the reverse.

[6] We employ age to denote a general sense of temporality in the life of an individual (O'Rand and Krecker, 1990).

[7] Unfortunately, the survey does not include questions relating to respondent's exposure to politics throughout one's life time to enable us to test this idea directly.

Furthermore, if partisanship is stable and becomes more stable over time,[8] then older partisans should also be more familiar with their parties than younger partisans. What is more, existing research shows that older people in advanced industrialized democracies report higher levels of trust in political parties than younger people (Holmberg, 2003).[9] In these democracies, some argue, value change has led young generations to develop preferences for more direct and less hierarchical forms of political engagement than participating through conventional channels of politics dominated by political parties (e.g. Inglehart, 1984; Inglehart and Flanagan, 1987; Abramson and Inglehart, 1995). It is not surprising then that young people are less inclined to believe in the necessity of parties for the functioning of democratic politics (Holmberg, 2003).

These findings are important because existing research shows that familiarity and trust in parties encourage people to rely on party messages, especially with respect to more complex issues (Coan et al., 2008). Experimental research in social psychology demonstrates that familiarity with a source increases the persuasive impact of messages communicated by that source (Weisbuch et al., 2003). This means that prior exposure to a source makes its persuasive appeal more effective relative to a source that an individual was not previously exposed to. The relationship between exposure/familiarity and persuasion is attributed to a two-step causal process: 1) exposure to a source leads to an increase in attraction for that source relative to a novel source; 2) greater source attractiveness then produces greater acceptance of the source's message (Cialdini, 1993; Perloff, 2010; Petty and Wegener, 1998; for literature review, see Petty et al., 1997). Research on persuasion and priming similarly demonstrates that trust in a message sender (or its credibility) has a powerful effect on the individual's receptiveness to that message, particularly in low information and motivation environments (e.g, Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., 1997; see also Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Miller and Krosnick, 2000). Hence, the more an individual trusts a source the more likely one will accept a message communicated by that source as one's own.

If age among partisans is associated with greater familiarity with one's party and higher levels of trust in it, as shown in previous research, then partisans of older age should be more inclined to rely on party cues than younger partisans.[10] Note that this means we expect age to play two roles (though we focus on only one): first, we know from extant research that age is associated with more stable and more pronounced partisanship (Campbell et al., 1960: 153–156; Miller and Shanks, 1996: 131–132; Sears and Funk, 1999); second, we expect age to act as a moderator, with older voters making processing information more in line with their partisan predisposition.

We therefore expect party positions and age to interact in shaping partisans' attitudes about system legitimacy. Specifically, we posit that the effects of party positions on supporters' views should be particularly pronounced among older partisans and less pronounced among younger partisans. This means that while positive party positions about the system generally have a positive effect on satisfaction with democracy of their supporters, this effect should be more sizable among older than younger partisans.

2. Data and measures

Testing our hypotheses about the potential heterogeneity in partisans' views of the political system within countries requires that we combine and analyze data about individuals and political parties. We use surveys collected as part of the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (CSES) project (Module 1, 1996–2000) to measure partisanship, age, and system support at the level of individuals, and combine these with data on party positions from the *Comparative Manifestos Project* (CMP) (Klingemann et al., 2006). We were able to collect and combine public survey and party indicators for 116 political parties in a broad set of 15 established democracies (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Great Britain, and the United States).[11] Below, we describe the critical individual level variables (partisanship, age group, and system support) and the key party-level variable, a party's position about the political system.

2.1. Voters

2.1.1. System support

We measure citizen support for the political system with the help of a CSES survey item capturing respondent's satisfaction with the way democracy works in his or her country (for a discussion of the measure and its properties,

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[8] Existing research suggests that partisan ties – once acquired early in life through the process of political socialization – become deeply embedded in an individual's belief system and tend to strengthened over one's life span (Campbell et al., 1960: 153–156; Miller and Shanks, 1996: 131–132; Converse and Markus, 1979; see also Jennings, 2007). The latter is due to the fact that electoral experience normally reinforces initial partisan tendencies because most citizens cast their ballots for their preferred party. The accumulated experience of voting for the same party and the political agreement that leads to such partisan regularity tend to strengthen partisan ties. As a consequence, partisan loyalties generally solidify with age – or, more precisely, with continued electoral support of the same party (Converse, 1969; 1976). Empirical evidence from panel studies confirm that age is positively related to partisanship intensity and stability; and the life-cycle effects remain robust and consistent even when controlling for generational effects (e.g., Jennings and Markus, 1984; Sears and Funk, 1999; Claggett, 1981; see also Dalton, 2008: ch 9).

[9] This relationship, however, is probably due to generational effects because the pattern is reversed in newer democracies where young people express more trusting attitudes towards parties than old citizens (Holmberg, 2003).

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[10] A contrasting perspective would suggest that if younger individuals are more malleable, they can be expected to be more affected by party messages than older citizens. We are grateful to the reviewer for this observation.

[11] Our party and survey data are drawn from different time periods, and their causal ordering is as our theory implies. Specifically, the Comparative Manifestos Project data are very close, yet always temporally prior, to the CSES data. This is because all manifestos are pre-election documents and CSES surveys in our data are post-election surveys, and the interviews were usually carried out shortly after the elections.

see Fuchs et al., 1995: 330; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Klingemann, 1999; cf. Norris, 1999). This indicator focuses on people's responses to the actual process of democratic governance and attitudes toward a country's "constitutional reality" rather than democracy as an ideal (Fuchs et al., 1995: 328; Anderson et al., 2005: 41; Linde and Ekman, 2003). The relevant survey item asked citizens whether they are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. The variable ranges from 0 to 3, with higher values indicating a more satisfied response.

2.1.2. Party identification

The conceptualization and measurement of party identification has long been subject to academic debate (Campbell et al., 1960; Budge et al., 1976; Fiorina, 1981), including the question of whether the construct is applicable in countries outside the U.S. Scholars have concluded that respondents should be given a clear opportunity to register a "non-identity" (Johnston, 1992; Blais et al., 2001; Sanders et al., 2002). Thankfully, such a question is available in the CSES surveys, which asked respondents: "Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?" Response categories were coded dichotomously, with 1 indicating a positive answer and 0 otherwise (no or don't know).[12] This measure has been shown to be applicable not only in two-party systems, as in the U.S., but also in multi-party systems, and it has been shown to be valid across countries with variable partisan traditions and political institutions (Holmberg, 1994; 2003; Budge et al., 1976).

2.2. Parties

2.2.1. Party position toward the political system

We measure party positions toward the political system with the help of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) data collected immediately prior to the CSES survey in each country.[13] To validate the usefulness of the indicator, we read the original documents that the CMP data are based on and discovered that statements coded under the rubric of "constitutionalism" provide the most appropriate indicator of a party's stance vis-à-vis the political system, as they clearly reflect party positions about the fundamental rules of a political regime and maintaining its status quo.[14]

There are two categories of statements: first, "Constitutionalism: positive", which represents the extent to which a party supports specific aspects of the constitution, uses

constitutionalism as an argument for policy, as well as generally approves of the constitutional way of doing things; and second, "Constitutionalism: negative", which reflects just the opposite. The statements in these categories commonly included proposals for institutional changes, such as creating a presidency with substantial powers (proposed by the Australian Labor Party in its 1996 manifesto), or resisting changes in the existing constitutional order on the basis that it is "the product of hundreds of years of knowledge, experience and history" (as the UK's Conservative Party proclaimed in its 1997 manifesto).

In reading the manifestos, we also found that parties often express support for some aspects of the constitutional order while criticizing others. Thus, to capture overall party positions toward the country's institutional structure, we created a combined constitutionalism index by subtracting the percentage of "Constitutionalism: negative" statements from the percentage of "Constitutionalism: positive" statements. The resulting variable ranges from −10.61 (Bloc Quebecois in Canada) to 6.69 (the Liberal Party in Canada) in our sample, with higher values indicating a more positive party position toward the political system.[15] We have incorporated this variable in the CSES data by assigning its values to all respondents who identify with political parties.

3. Analysis

3.1. Aggregate evidence

Figs. 1 and 2 provide preliminary evidence at the aggregate level of the connections between party messages and partisan views of the political system, as well as links between partisanship, age, and citizens' attitudes about the political system. More specifically, we examined our data to see if party positions about the political system are linked to their supporters' legitimacy beliefs, and whether older partisans express systematically different views than younger partisans.

We can see whether there are differences in system support between partisans of different stripes by comparing average satisfaction with democracy between identifiers of parties that expressed high, medium, and low levels of support for the constitutional status quo in their country. As

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[12] An alternative would be constructing a four-category measure of party identification suggested by Holmberg (2003) that not only accounts for the presence or absence of partisanship but also for its intensity. However, survey items necessary for creating such more finely-grained measure were not available for Belgium, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. We therefore opted to rely on a dichotomous indicator of party identification.

[13] The CMP indicators represent percentages of party statements within party platforms designed to address each of the 56 issues within the CMP classification scheme. This means that the possible range on each measure is from 0% (when a party does not mention the issue at all) to a maximum theoretical value of 100% (when all statements within a manifesto focus on the issue).

[14] We are grateful to Andrea Volkens and Paul Pennings for making the original coded party manifestos available to us.

[15] One shortcoming of the CMP data is that they provide measures only for parties that won two or more seats in parliament, ignoring smaller parties. To keep at least some smaller parties in our analyses and to test the robustness of our results to the inclusion of these parties, we did the following: we excluded small parties that never appeared in the CMP data from beginning of its coverage in 1950 until the CSES survey. However, we kept parties with previous experience of legislative representation, that is, parties that although they did not appear in the CMP data in the election just before the CSES survey, they were included in the CMP data in previous elections. We assigned these parties a value of 0 on the constitutionalism index, which assumes that they take a neutral position towards the political system. Since parties without legislative representation are more likely to be dissatisfied with the political system and its institutions than parties in parliament (please note that our analyses control for party legislative size), coding them this way offers a conservative test of our hypotheses – that is, it makes it harder to uncover the expected effects on partisan attitudes toward the political system. Excluding all small parties from the analyses, however, does not change our results appreciably, and our inferences remain the same (the results are available from the authors upon request).
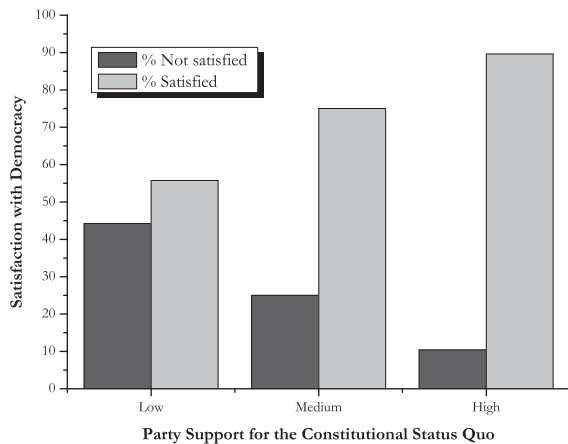
Fig. 1. Satisfaction with Democracy among Partisans by their Party's Support for the Constitutional Status Quo.

Fig. 1 shows, the patterns in the data are strongly consistent with our theoretical priors. Partisans' attitudes toward the functioning of the political system vary with a party's level of support for the constitutional status quo. Specifically, we find that 44 percent of individuals who identify with a party with low constitutionalism score (1 Standard Deviation or more below the average constitutionalism value in our sample of parties) are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country, while only 25 percent of supporters of parties with medium constitutionalism score (within +/− 1 SD from the mean), and 10 percent of supporters with high constitutionalism score (1 SD or more above the mean) hold such views. In contrast, the percentage of satisfied partisans increases from 56 percent to 75 percent when we compare supporters of parties with low and medium constitutionalism score, and to 90 percent for partisans of parties with high constitutionalism score. Clearly, followers of parties that take positive positions towards the political system see its performance in a more positive light than partisans whose parties adopt more negative views.

To examine whether partisans' age is also related to individual positions on the desirability of the political system, we calculated average scores of satisfaction with
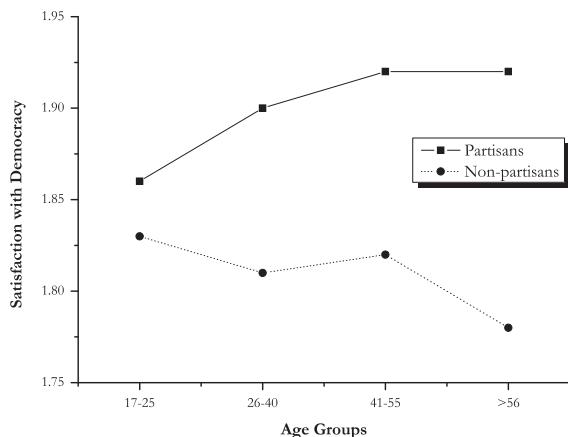

Fig. 2. Satisfaction with Democracy by Partisanship and Age Group.

democracy for partisans and non-partisans of different age groups (Fig. 2). Our calculations show that partisans of any age are significantly more satisfied with the way democracy works than non-partisans. However, there also are considerable differences in the patterns of satisfaction with democracy across different ages within groups of partisans and non-partisans. While age is positively associated with system support among partisans, the pattern is reversed for non-partisans. Specifically, the average satisfaction with democracy scores for the oldest and youngest partisan groups are 1.92 and 1.86 respectively, while the scores for non-partisans of the same age groups are 1.78 and 1.83. Taken together, these results suggest that age matters for people's legitimacy beliefs, but it matters differently for partisans and non-partisans.

Finding that age is negatively associated with system support among non-partisans rejects a simple life-cycle hypothesis that aging means becoming more conservative and hence more supportive of the existing political status quo. If this explanation were correct then we would observe a positive relationship between age and system support for both partisans and non-partisans. Instead, what we see is a diverging pattern, suggesting that partisans are systematically different from non-partisans in the way they form their attitudes about the political system. This also suggests that focusing on party persuasion and supporters' receptiveness to party views as people age should be particularly useful in explaining citizens' legitimacy beliefs.

3.2. Multivariate estimation strategy

To establish the magnitude and robustness of these relationships, we proceed to multivariate models of citizens' legitimacy beliefs. Combining data about parties with data about individual respondents implies that our dataset has a multi-level structure (cf. Snijders and Bosker, 1999; for applications in political science, see Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). We therefore estimate our models using multi-level statistical techniques with random intercepts (to allow for cross-country heterogeneity in levels of citizen support for the political system), and individuals clustered at the level of countries.

In these estimations, we controlled for a number of individual, party, and country-level characteristics past research identified as consistent determinants of system support. We take into account respondent's status as government supporter because citizens who endorsed parties in government have been shown to be more satisfied with democracy in their country than opposition supporters (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Ginsberg and Weissberg, 1978; Nadeau and Blais, 1993; Norris, 1999). Similarly, as respondents who identify with larger parties might express more positive views towards the political system, we control for party legislative size, measured as percentage of party seats in national parliament.

At the individual level, we include respondent's left-right self-placement because right-wing ideology is usually associated with conservatism and stronger support for political institutions and the existing status quo, while left-wing orientations – with openness to change and more critical attitudes towards the political system (Anderson and

Singer, 2008). Furthermore, since radical views usually lead to more dissatisfaction with a political system and a willingness to mobilize for change (Riker, 1982; Anderson et al., 2005, ch.5), we include a measure capturing individual's distance from the country's median on the left-right continuum. In addition, we sought to identify citizens with a greater stake in the maintenance of the societal status quo using variables such as income and education, as well as gender and race, which reflect citizens' socioeconomic status or political resources (Almond and Verba, 1963; Anderson et al., 2005: 20). Finally, since positive economic outcomes tend to strengthen system legitimacy (e.g. Clarke et al., 1993; Anderson et al., 2005,148; see also Lipset, 1959; Przeworski, 2005), we included individual evaluations of economic performance as well as countries' GDP per capita, GDP growth, and government expenditure (see appendix for survey question wording and variable coding for all measures).

3.3. Multivariate estimation results

Table 1 reports the results of our base-line and interaction effects models where we estimate citizen satisfaction with democracy using age, partisanship, and party positions towards the political system as predictors alongside a number of control variables described above. We first report the results for all respondents, that is, both partisans and non-partisans. To test the impact of party messages on their partisans' legitimacy beliefs more rigorously, we additionally present the results of our analyses using a more restricted sample of partisans only. Party views about the political system were added to the individual level data by assigning partisan respondents in the CSES survey the value of their party's position towards the constitutional status quo from the CMP data.[16]

The results indicate that partisans whose parties express more positive positions toward the political system report higher levels of satisfaction with democracy. Our estimations also show that age and partisanship have no independent effect on people's satisfaction with democracy, as the coefficients of these variables are positive but fall short of conventional levels of statistical significance.

The interaction models in Table 1 are identical to base models with one exception: they include an interaction term between party positions and respondent's age. The results reveal that age does matter for legitimacy beliefs but in a less than straightforward way than is commonly assumed. We find that messages about political system that parties communicate to their supporters are especially powerful in shaping the attitudes of partisans who are older. Specifically, a positive coefficient of the interaction term indicates that supporters of parties that take positive positions about the political system are particularly satisfied with the way democracy works if they are older. The results also reveal that the additive terms of party

messages, partisanship, and age are statistically insignificant when we account for their multiplicative effect.

To test the robustness of our estimations, we re-ran our models separately for older and younger respondents, using 60 year olds as a cut-off point. The results (reported in Table 2) are again in line with our expectations. Party positions towards the constitutional status quo have a statistically significant effect on both age groups, but the substantive impact is larger for the older partisans, as hypothesized. This finding is reinforced by the results for partisans only, as the coefficients remain highly statistically (and even more substantially) significant.

The control variables produce results consistent with prior research. We find that identifying with a party that is in government contributes positively to citizens' legitimacy beliefs, although split-sample estimations in Table 2 indicate that the results are driven by a significantly more powerful effect among older citizens. Similarly, partisans of larger parties express more positive attitudes about their political system than individuals who reported being close to smaller parties. The results also show that right-wing ideological orientations consistently predict more positive opinions about the functioning of a political regime, while ideological extremism reduces citizens' satisfaction with democracy. Furthermore, citizens' support for the political system is stronger in countries with higher GDP per capita and among citizens who more positively evaluate their country's economic performance. Finally, we find that education and income at the individual level increase people's satisfaction with democracy, and that men are more optimistic about the political system than women.

But how much does the combination of age, partisanship, and party positions matter for legitimacy beliefs? To answer this question, our multivariate results can also be expressed substantively as predicted changes in the dependent variable for different values of the independent variables. Fig. 3 uses the estimates reported in Table 2 to chart satisfaction with democracy for partisans across different age groups and their party's support for the political system. The figure indicates predicted values of satisfaction with democracy (with 95% confidence intervals) when we compare supporters of parties with 1 Standard Deviation below and above the average constitutionalism score in our sample of parties (−1.154 and 1.436), estimated separately for those who are 60 years old or older, and those below that age.[17] Differences in satisfaction with democracy can be seen as the joint effects of party identification and party positions on people's attitudes toward the political system.

The calculations of substantive effects reveal that an individual who is 60 years old or older and whose party takes a positive position towards the political system is .098 points more satisfied with the way democracy works than a partisan of similar age but whose party expresses a negative opinion (1.851 vs. 1.949) (Fig. 3). In contrast, the gap in the levels of system support among partisans of parties with more and less enthusiastic endorsement of the constitutional

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[16] Technically, this means that this variable is an interaction term of partisanship and party position.

[17] We hold other variables at their means, and dichotomous variables at their medians.

Table 1
Multi-level Estimations of Satisfaction with Democracy in 15 Democracies, 1996–2000.

Independent Variables	All Respondents		Partisans Only	
	Base model	Interaction model	Base model	Interaction model
Party position toward political system	.021***(.005)	−.012(.014)	.025***(.005)	−.008(.014)
Age	.000(.000)	.000(.000)	.000(.000)	.000(.000)
Party identification	.011(.017)	.011(.017)	–	–
Party position toward political system * Age	–	.001*(.000)	–	.001*(.000)
Government supporter	.054***(.016)	.055***(.016)	.047**(.016)	.049**(.016)
Party legislative size	.003***(.000)	.003***(.000)	.003***(.001)	.003***(.001)
Left-right self-placement	.023***(.002)	.023***(.002)	.023***(.003)	.023***(.003)
Individual left-right extremism	−.012***(.003)	−.012***(.003)	−.006(.004)	−.006(.004)
Economic evaluations	.150***(.007)	.150***(.007)	.136***(.009)	.136***(.009)
Male	.022*(.010)	.023*(.010)	.034**(.013)	.034**(.013)
Education	.011***(.003)	.011***(.003)	.009*(.004)	.009*(.004)
Unemployed	−.104***(.025)	−.104***(.025)	−.042(.036)	−.041(.036)
Married	.002(.011)	.003(.011)	.014(.015)	.015(.015)
Income	.035***(.004)	.035***(.004)	.026***(.005)	.026***(.005)
GDP per capita	.021*(.008)	.021*(.008)	.021*(.008)	.021*(.008)
GDP growth	.068***(.017)	.068***(.017)	.034(.021)	.034(.021)
Government expenditure	−.009(.012)	−.009(.013)	−.002(.012)	−.002(.012)
Constant	.708*(.351)	.716*(.351)	.713*(.334)	.725*(.335)
Standard deviation of random intercept	.183(.038)	.183(.038)	.170(.036)	.171(.036)
Standard deviation of residuals	.694(.003)	.694(.003)	.686(.004)	.686(.004)
Number of observations	21,105	21,105	11,559	11,559
Wald X^2 (df)	1279.2(16)***	1285.7(17)***	607.5(15)***	614.05(16)***

Note: Results are multi-level (random intercept) linear regression estimates using STATA 11.0's xtmixed command. Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors; †: $p < .1$, *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$.

status quo is notably reduced among young respondents (1.874 vs. 1.908, a difference of .034). Taken together, the results suggest that party messages about the political system make a difference to partisans' legitimacy beliefs, and that this impact varies considerably across different age groups.[18]

4. Discussion

Although modern democracies are party democracies, political parties have rarely played a starring role in scholarly literature when it comes to understanding how citizens evaluate the political system. And while older citizens are consistently more positive in their attitudes about the political system in established democracies, age has rarely figured as an important explanatory variable. This study was designed to engage these two shortcomings in two ways. First, we sought to show that political parties play an important role in shaping citizens' legitimacy beliefs. Specifically, we argued that partisanship provides the critical link between party elites and party supporters in transmitting views about the political system. By expressing their positions, parties engender different levels of enthusiasm for the constitutional status quo among their

supporters. Moreover, we demonstrated that this communication is particularly effective among older partisans whose familiarity and trust in political parties increase their receptiveness to party's cues. Using survey data collected in 15 countries and data on parties' positions for 116 parties, our results confirm that political parties actively shape the beliefs citizens adopt about the functioning of democratic governance in their country. However, they also show that party success in mobilizing consent among citizens in established democracies varies across partisans of different ages.

Finding that political parties have the ability to create or undermine support for the political status quo has important implications for system legitimacy. Parties have incentives to express positive views about the political system to the extent that they are part of the system and want to sustain it, especially if they have been its long-term beneficiaries (e.g., established parties as opposed to newer parties). However, parties may also have incentives to express negative views, for example, if they believe that doing so will help them gain support and win an election. Hence, short-term incentives to support or criticize the status quo of a political system might be at odds with competing long-term incentives.

Among political parties that take non-neutral positions towards the political system (50 out of 116 political parties in our sample),[19] only 28% (14 parties) communicate negative views, while the rest (72% or 36 parties) endorse the status quo of the political system. Hence, we find that parties contribute to system legitimacy more than undermine it. This means that overall political parties play a positive role

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[18] Although the magnitude of these effects might appear small, its impact is similar to the effects of many other factors known to be important determinants of people's attitudes and that are commonly observed in individual level analyses. For example, calculating predicted effects of individual's income on satisfaction with democracy in the sample of older individuals (and using values +/− 1SD from the mean on the income variable) reveals that income moves the score on the satisfaction with democracy variable by .064 points (from 1.815 to 1.879), holding other variables at their means and dichotomous variables at their medians.

[19] Excluding parties with a zero value on the constitutionalism index does not change our findings (the results available from the authors upon request).

Table 2

Multi-level Estimations of Satisfaction with Democracy by Generation in 15 Democracies, 1996–2000.

Independent variables	All Respondents		Partisans Only	
	60 and older	Younger than 60	60 and older	Younger than 60
Party position toward political system	.025*(.011)	.019***(.005)	.035**(.011)	.023***(.005)
Party identification	.048(.036)	.003(.019)	–	–
Government supporter	.113***(.033)	.036*(.018)	.087**(.034)	.035†(.019)
Party legislative size	.001(.001)	.003***(.001)	.002*(.001)	.004***(.001)
Left-right self-placement	.025***(.004)	.022***(.002)	.023***(.005)	.024***(.003)
Individual left-right extremism	−.009(.007)	−.015***(.004)	−.009(.008)	−.005(.005)
Economic evaluations	.158***(.015)	.142***(.008)	.162***(.019)	.123***(.011)
Male	.029(.022)	.023*(.011)	.022(.028)	.039**(.015)
Education	−.002(.007)	.016***(.003)	−.006(.009)	.014**(.005)
Unemployed	−.176(.101)	−.085***(.026)	−.151(.151)	−.025(.037)
Married	.013(.024)	.005(.013)	.038(.030)	.014(.017)
Income	.026**(.010)	.040***(.005)	.019(.012)	.031***(.006)
GDP per capita	.021*(.008)	.021*(.008)	.023*(.008)	.020*(.008)
GDP growth	.046†(.027)	.070***(.019)	−.006(.032)	.043†(.023)
Government expenditure	−.021(.013)	−.004(.013)	−.010(.013)	.001(.013)
Constant	1.094**(.358)	.592†(.359)	1.049**(.365)	.603†(.347)
Standard deviation of random intercept	.178(.039)	.187(.039)	.171(.039)	.176(.038)
Standard deviation of residuals	.731(.007)	.682(.004)	.718(.009)	.675(.005)
Number of observations	5009	16,166	3022	8587
Wald X^2 (df)	293.5(15)***	1000.5(15)***	168.1(14)***	461.2(14)***

Note: Results are multi-level (random intercept) linear regression estimates using STATA 11.0's xtmixed command. Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors; †: $p < .1$, *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$.

in mobilizing consent among citizens in contemporary democracies. However, this role is not guaranteed – it depends on the number of partisans in the electorate and their receptiveness to party messages that in part depends on individuals' age. This means that with declining numbers of partisans and generational change,[20] the role of parties in mobilizing citizen consent for the political system may weaken. Moreover, party support for the political system might not be stable. For example, parties may also reduce their endorsement of the political system if they face more challenges to their organizational survival – e.g, as a consequence of growing role of interest groups and the media in the political sphere of society that undermines the need for political parties in contemporary democracies (see Dalton, 2008: 186). And while understanding the causes of party support for the political system is beyond the focus of our study, it certainly deserves more attention in future research.

By integrating research on partisanship, parties, age, and legitimacy, we sought to make a contribution to each of these literatures. Regarding democratic legitimacy, our findings suggest that parties clearly have the capacity to mobilize public consent or dissent from above. Thus, legitimacy is as much a process of bottom-up politics where citizens hold the political system accountable for its performance, as it is a process of top-down politics where strategic elites seek to further their own goals, sometimes at the expense of the broader body politic. We need not resort to extreme examples like the failure of the Weimar Republic to appreciate this point – examples of party elites shaping the views of their supporters abound in a variety of policy areas (e.g., Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007; Gabel and Scheve, 2007). Whether this mobilization of consent is desirable is a normative question that hitherto has not been

asked. We suggest that, at a minimum, it is worth thinking about.

Our study also contributes to the literature on the consequences of parties' policy positions. While these have mostly been studied from a cross-national perspective with an eye toward the quality of democratic representation (Kim et al., 2010; McDonald and Budge, 2005), or how the translation of voters' preferences into government policy promises shapes public support for the political system (Paskeviciute, 2006), our study suggests that parties' positions on the functioning of the political system can also be fruitfully understood to form the foundations of citizens' legitimacy beliefs, particularly among individuals more receptive to party cues.

But age enters this story in a complex way. We show that older partisans in established democracies are more
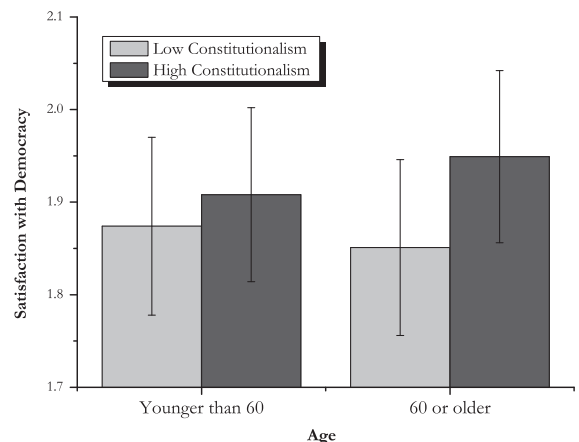
Note: The graph indicates predicted effects at +/- 1SD from the mean constitutionalism value within our sample of parties.

Fig. 3. Predicted Effects of Party Support for Constitutional Status Quo and Individual's Age on Partisan Satisfaction with Democracy.

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[20] See also Walczak et al. (2012) and Wagner and Kritzinger (2012) for evidence of de-alignment among the younger generations.

receptive to the mobilization of consent "from above" – that is, as a result of the positions parties take about the political system. This means that parties are better able to successfully influence their older identifiers who more readily take their cues from them. In a curious way, then, our findings reinforce Dalton's concerns that a loosening of the connection between political parties and citizens observed in established democracies may undermine mass support for the democratic governance. And this is likely to happen not only because decline in partisanship through generational replacement weakens citizen attachment to a political system generally (Dalton, 1999). Given that political elites are usually more supportive of democratic principles than are ordinary citizens (Sullivan et al., 1993; Converse and Pierce, 1986), support for the political system may be eroding also because fewer citizens will be receptive to the positive messages parties may articulate about the political system. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, our study shows that party messages are less effective in shaping system support attitudes of younger partisans. Thus, with partisan de-alignment and generational change legitimacy from above might be harder to come by. What this means for the future of democratic politics remains to be seen.

Appendix. Supplementary material

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2011.11.003.

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