The End of the Dichotomy: The Effect of Social Proximity to Prototype and Periphery Group Members on Political Attitudes*

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Objective. We extend prototype theory to explain why nonmembers who are socially connected to group members hold political attitudes that differ from nonmembers lacking that connection. We anticipate that the intensity of nonmember attitudes varies by connection to a prototype or periphery group member. Methods. Using data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we model group-salient political attitudes for veterans, union members, and their family members. Results. We find social distance from group members is theoretically linked to within-group variation that distinguishes prototype from periphery group members. Conclusion. Analysis of political attitudes is enhanced beyond the traditional member/nonmember dichotomy by accounting for nonmembers’ social distance from group members.

Research on political attitudes relies on contrasting members with nonmembers (Campbell et al., 1960; Hogg and Reid, 2006; Huddy, 1998; Steinel et al., 2010), or comparisons among group members—individuals whose relationships with each other make them interdependent (Cartwright and Zander, 1968:46). Here, we complement the member/nonmember dichotomy by connecting the social proximity of nonmembers to the prototype-periphery status of group members. Examining veterans and union members, our connection of social proximity and group centrality enhances explanations of attitudes toward military intervention and perceptions of labor union influence. Specifically, we extend previous findings that civilians with kinship ties to veterans express, on average, greater support for war than civilians who lack the familial tie, but less support than the service members themselves (Gartner, 2008). We interpret this sorting as the result of social distance between group members and nonmembers, and prototype dynamics among group members (Lakoff, 1987; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Our findings contribute to the study of public opinion by demonstrating that variation among group members and nongroup members can be as important as variation between them.

Next, we outline how the intragroup logic of prototype theory can extend to the role of social distance as a mediator of the policy attitudes of nonmembers. Using data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we assess the order and extent to which individual political attitudes that are salient to veterans and union members are organized on the basis of social proximity to exemplar, or prototype, group members. We find that nonmembers are simultaneously heterogeneous among themselves and with respect to group members, thus countering the presumption that a policy that is relevant
to members of a particular group is uniformly less salient for all individuals outside the group. The final section discusses the implications of these findings for the study of groups in politics.

Groups and Political Behavior

Groups occupy center stage in research on individual political behavior, but determining which groups influence political attitudes is not so simple (Huddy, 2003). Social connections range from primary groups like families, to less proximate collectives like private clubs and neighborhoods, to broader social groupings like class, gender, and ethnicity (Allport, 1979:43). In general, the study of groups and politics is oriented around the broadest of these groupings.

Groups embody “social interdependence” and group members presumably interact with each other to achieve some purpose (Cartwright and Zander, 1968), like providing information or securing desirable outcomes (Festinger, 1954). Such aims are compatible with prominent approaches to studying groups and politics: the social networks approach that posits political information processing is socially structured (Huckfeldt, 1984), the realistic interest framework that describes interdependence in terms of individual and group-based gains and losses (Blumer, 1958; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Sidanius and Pratto, 2001), and the “shared motivation” to enhance the self positively in relation to others that generates interdependence in social cognitive frameworks (Brewer, 2001; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987).

While these frameworks emphasize distinct concepts, they each rely on one of two strategies for comparison, either a comparison between group members and nonmembers, or comparison within a group. For example, basic indicators of specific group distinctions, such as union membership, help explain differences in support for union involvement in politics and vote choice (Hammer and Avgar, 2005; Hammer, Bayazit, and Wazeter, 2009; Sheppard and Masters, 1959). Similarly, the civil-military gap in attitudes leverages the dichotomous member, nonmember comparison to analyze differences between veterans and civilians in support for international war, civil war intervention, and confidence in specific military institutions (Feaver and Kohn, 2001; Holsti, 2004; Manigart and Marlier, 1993; Moskos, 1970). The substantive basis of either comparison strategy can be the composition of social networks or immediate contexts where individuals reside, the salience of relative gains and losses as found in realistic interest, or it can be differences in psychological attachment that arise through categorization processes.

Next, we build theoretical connections between these disparate frameworks to show how the attitudinal consequences of intragroup dynamics that prototype theory anticipates for group members structure the attitudes of nonmembers as well. We outline how prototype theory’s conceptualization of group cohesion explains why people who are connected to group members, but who are not group members themselves, express policy support that falls, on average, in between group members and nonmembers who are not connected. The key theoretical insight we uncover is that group prototypicality or peripheral status also matters for nonmember attitudes because of their social connection to a prototypical or peripheral group member.

Prototype Theory and Moving Beyond Member/Nonmember Dichotomy

The concept of prototype is central in two versions of social cognitive framework of group behavior. In both self-categorization theory (Terry and Hogg, 1996; Turner et al., 1987)
and social identification theory (Tajfel, 1981; Turner and Tajfel, 1979), categorization processes and motivational factors underpin the development of a social identity.\(^1\) The motivation to see ourselves in a positive light relative to others and the cognitive processes that are hardwired in our minds to sort the world into categories give definition to groups in our mind. Social categories are organized cognitively, Hogg and Reid (2006:10) explain, as “fuzzy sets, not checklists, of attributes (e.g., attitudes and behaviors) that define one group and distinguish it from other groups.” Hogg (2001) notes that while most research in social psychology attends to how prototypes relate to intergroup dynamics, they may also influence intragroup dynamics.

For intragroup dynamics, Hogg and Hains (1996) explain that prototypic group members serve as the evaluative exemplars of a group. Prototypes are social benchmarks that represent the “fuzzy” set of attributes by which all group members compare themselves. Prototypes are ideals and not necessarily a specific person (Turner et al., 1987); however, individuals who hold many key attributes serve as leaders that embody the stereotypes associated with the group, and a source for norm transmission to other group members (Hogg and Haines, 1996; Hogg, 2001). In the language of political attitude formation (e.g., Berinsky, 2009; Zaller, 1992), prototypes are opinion leaders who give cues to periphery members about the beliefs, values, and behavior that is expected of group members.

Evidence of leadership and norm transmission is observed in research that traces attitudinal and behavioral differences among group members to whether individuals are prototypical or periphery members (Steinel et al., 2010). More recent advances by Noel, Wann, and Branscombe (1995) and Jetten, Branscombe, and Spears (2002) indicate that periphery members, in turn, respond to these cues through adoption of the expected beliefs and behaviors, especially when they perceive that those with more prototypical attributes are watching. We contend below that for group nonmembers, in addition to whether a group member is watching, it also matters whether that group member is prototypical or periphery.

Theory and Hypotheses

We argue that the attitudinal variation generated by the prototypicality of members within a group can be systematically linked to attitudinal variation among nonmembers, and in a way that is not conflict oriented or marked by mutual intergroup antipathy. Just as prototypical group members influence attitudes within their respective groups, their influence extends to nongroup members with whom they are socially proximate, such as immediate family members.

We are careful to not equate familial connections with social group identities. Familial connections are distinct as role identities with more of a conceptual “me” than “we” orientation, and less likely to generate collective action because they lack psychological attachment to a group (Brewer, 2001). However, interdependence can form for a role identity, and when combined with a relationship to a group member, familial connections blur the observed distinction between role and group identities more than other kinds of connections. Hence, the degree to which that interdependence is consequential for political attitudes depends on whether the connection is to a prototypical or periphery group member. Family-mediated connections to groups are more likely to be rooted in

\(^1\)Less relevant for our purposes here is the distinction between the two approaches: the importance of the motivational (social identity theory) and cognitive factors (self-categorization theory) (Huddy 2003).
life-long relations, accompanied by shared connections with other family members, and potentially more intense in terms of major life events (births, marriage, divorce, job loss, death, etc.). The shared interests and repeated contact that nongroup members have with group members through familial connections is evidence that group boundaries are not necessarily rigid and unbridgeable.

Figure 1 illustrates this point with a continuum of social proximity for two examples, military veterans and union members, and their respective immediate family. The far-right column lists group members, veterans and union members, and distinguishes them in terms of prototypicality. Our classification makes two key assumptions. First, we assume, much like existing literature, that group membership indicators capture some nominal level of psychological identification with a group. Second, we reason that social interdependence, the defining characteristic of a group, is most pronounced for current group members. For service members, wearing the uniform, performing according to rank, living on a military installation, and other aspects of military life embody the stereotypes most associated with membership in the armed forces (Wakenhut, 1979). For union members, organization by rank and file, expressed solidarity, and participation in union activities render active members as more exemplary of stereotypes about union members (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). Thus, active duty veterans are designated prototypical members and retired or no longer employed by the military are accorded peripheral status. We designate currently enrolled union members as prototypical, and peripheral are former union members who were once enrolled but are no longer. This approach differs from that of Noel, Wann, and Branscombe (1995) in that our peripheral members were previously prototypes, whereas that work examined peripheral members who had newly acquired the identity and for whom acceptance as a prototypical member was possible. Figure 1 indicates the degree of social distance from group members (horizontally, from group members on the right) and prototypical or peripheral connection (vertically).
The analysis begins by assessing attitudinal variation between prototypical and peripheral group members on their respective issues. Consistent with prototype theory, we expect:

H1: Prototypical group members (active veterans and current union members) will express stronger support for their issues than peripheral group members (inactive veterans and former union members).

Just as group members differ attitudinally on group-salient issues from nonmembers, attitudes among nonmembers will depend on their social distance from the group. Social proximity, conceptualized here as a family-mediated connection, makes nonmembers more likely to hold attitudes consistent with a group member, relative to other nonmembers who do not have such a connection. This yields our first hypothesis about the influence of social proximity to prototypes (the horizontal variation illustrated in Figure 1) for political attitudes.

H2: Nonmember respondents with a familial tie to a group member will express attitudes closer to the attitudes of a group member than respondents who are unconnected to a relevant group member.

By extension, we also expect that group-connected respondents will exhibit distinct levels of support predicated on their connection to either prototypical or peripheral group members.

H3: Prototypical connected respondents will express stronger support for their respective issues than peripheral connected respondents.

These hypotheses may seem to dispute prior literature that has demonstrated that peripheral group members are more active than prototypical members in policing group boundaries (Noel et al., 1995), and that those who perceive a chance to become prototypes vary with their expectations for their future status (Jetten et al., 2002). However, Noel et al.’s 1995 and subsequent work emphasize the recency of the group attachment, the insecurity of a peripheral status, and subjects’ desire to achieve prototypical status as factors contributing to this result. Our categorization of subjects differs from this approach, and underscores the analytical flexibility of the concept of prototype as context specific (Hogg and Hains, 1996; Hogg, 2001). Prototypicality here is a function of respondents’ current job status. In this case, the borders between group statuses are permeable in only one direction (leaving the job results in a shift from prototypical to peripheral status), the identity is cultivated explicitly and implicitly throughout an individual’s tenure in the job. While prior work has examined attitudes and behavior of periphery members who may become prototypes, this study looks at former prototypes who have become peripheral. For these reasons, we expect that prototypical respondents, those themselves most likely to be affected by a given policy, will express the strongest opinions on those issues. We discuss this distinction further at the end of the article.

Many political issues are filtered through the lens of partisan politics (Campbell et al., 1960; Lewis-Beck, 2009). In our case studies, connections to political parties are also likely to shape respondent attitudes on the war in Iraq and the political influence of unions. Party elites often shepherd mass attitudes and cannot be ignored here (Berinsky, 2009; Zaller, 1992). As elites within a political party reach consensus on a given issue, variation within mass party members should decline (Berinsky, 2009). As a result, we believe that party

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2See also Segal (1986) and Krueger and Pedraza (2012) for more on the distinct attitudinal pressures faced by military families. As these authors note, these pressures create a “constellation of lived experiences” that is distinct from that of nonmilitary families.
attachments will reduce the influence of our group connections of interest. By contrast, among individuals for whom the constraint of partisan cues operates less, we anticipate stronger expression of prototype-periphery, intragroup dynamics.

H4: Independents will express larger between-group attitude differences than Democratic or Republican respondents.

The above hypotheses suggest the generalizability of our group-connection approach across a range of group identities, as well as the nuances presented by the disparate connections respondents hold to issue-salient groups. The next section tests these claims across both of our groups using national survey data.

**Measures and Methodology**

We evaluate the testable implications of respondent proximity to a group described above using data from the 2006 CCES. The study is the joint effort of 36 research teams, and includes over 36,500 completed interviews of adults in the United States, conducted before and after the 2006 general election. Each research team fielded separately at least one national sample survey of 1,000 cases, with half of the survey content controlled by the research team and the other half devoted to common content (Ansolabehere, 2006). For this article, we draw exclusively from items appearing in the common content, which consists of questions appearing on all team modules. All surveys were completed on the Internet under the auspices of YouGov/Polimetrix, and cases were selected using matched random samples. Sample matching is ideally suited for Internet access panels, and the opt-in Internet approach generates data similar to telephone and mail modes of surveys (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2011).

The timing of the 2006 CCES is valuable for our project because the U.S. war in Iraq received considerable political attention and attitudes about it are likely to be salient and real. Though not occupying a high position on the public agenda at the time, the question of union influence is an “easy” issue for the public in terms of partisan and demographic sorting (Lipset, 1986; Putnam, 1966). While our selection of the issues was determined by the available information on the CCES about social group proximity, this sample allows scrutiny of our hypotheses with multiple and disparate groups. Veterans and unions can be understood in part by the issues of interest to their members.

Military intervention, defense spending, and veterans’ benefits have often been considered veterans’ issues in the public opinion literature (Fairweather, 2008; Feaver and Kohn, 2001). Unions and their members have acted to improve working conditions and compensation, improve government regulation of industries, and protect their right to organize (Gilbert, 2013). To capture the importance of veteran and union identities, the response options from their questions were collapsed from three categories to two. For example, the labor unions question reads: “How much influence would you like labor unions in
the United States to have?” Respondents could choose from “more,” “the same,” or “less” response options (see Online Appendix for details). We collapse the “same” and “less” response options since our theory suggests that prototypical and periphery (and—connected) respondents should be most likely to support an increase in union support. We place the same emphasis on the “war was a mistake” category for the Iraq question. In that case, we expect this answer, rather than “unsure” or “not a mistake,” to show the most robust differences between groups.

The issues relevant to each group’s experience provide a set of measures against which scholars have evaluated the distinctness of the group’s interests from the general public (Brewer, 2001; Feaver and Kohn, 2001; Sheppard and Masters, 1959). Further, the groups analyzed differ considerably in terms of prestige, purpose, and stigma. Veterans are arguably the most widely admired by the public, while union members are purpose oriented (e.g., organized workers. Unions, as a group, have historically demonstrated more coherent political action, and have been stigmatized in some states owing to divisive political debates over collective bargaining. Another key difference is that people choose to join the military (except the few remaining veterans who entered through draft), while union enrollment may be a prerequisite for accepting a position with some companies. Our measure of social group proximity draws on the items that ask people about their self-identification as veteran or union member. Important to our study here, for each group the item response options allowed nonmembers to clarify whether they have a connection to group members. In the case of union members, the connected are specified as household members. For veterans, the question wording allows us to specify a family-mediated group link.

Findings

The full model results can be viewed in Tables A1–A3. Substantial variation exists in the size and composition of our veteran and union member samples and their corresponding connected populations. Several of these differences merit attention, and are reported in Table A1.

A majority of respondents indicated either an immediate or familial connection to military veterans. Almost 9 percent of the sample indicated they had a family member who was currently serving, and another 42 percent identified an immediate family member who had previously served. Women were much more likely than men to indicate a family-mediated connection to the military; two-thirds of both active- and inactive-connected respondents were women. This finding is consistent with prior Kaiser Family Foundation surveys of military families, and other CCES surveys (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004; Krueger and Pedraza, 2012).

The sample as a whole showed fewer connections to unions. Although only 8.5 percent of respondents indicated they were current union members, 26 percent were previously union members. This figure is slightly lower than the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) estimate that 12 percent of the employed population were union members in 2006. This difference may be due to the wide variation in union membership across states. Despite this difference, the men were more likely than women to be union members, and women were more likely to indicate a union-connected status, consistent with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) report.

Turning to our hypotheses, the logic of group proximity suggests that group-salient attitudes should be structured in a manner that positions the active/current group members as most supportive of the salient policy or attitude, followed by the inactive group members and the active- and inactive-connected nonmembers. The nonmember respondents without
a familial connection should be least supportive (Hypotheses 1–3). Table A2 confirms these basic expectations for veterans and union members.

Veterans are more likely to say that invading Iraq was not a mistake by the United States, as are the service connected, relative to unconnected civilians. Union members are more likely to express that unions should have more influence, as are those who live in union households, relative to those who are not connected to a union member.

While this initial evidence supports our hypotheses, the evidence shown here does not account for factors critical to our understanding of public opinion, like partisanship and socioeconomic status, and other known correlates of numerous political attitudes (Lewis-Beck, 2009). We continue the analysis by including partisanship in our discussion of issue attitudes related to war and labor.

Table A3 presents the full regression models for these issues. Results indicate that veteran and veteran connected respondents are more likely to believe that intervention in Iraq was not a mistake when compared to unconnected respondents. Further, both current and previously serving veterans supported the intervention at higher rates than their respective, connected respondents. Union member and union connected respondents show the same patterns for the union influence question. These findings corroborate the theoretical sorting of attitudes reflected in Figure 1, and expressed in Hypotheses 1–3. Table A3 also presents our control variables, which indicate strong gender-based and partisan differences across all three dependent variables. The relative magnitude of respondent connected status and partisanship coefficients are illustrated in Figure 2, which plots the predicted probabilities for both issues.

Hypothesis 4 states that respondents who identify as Democrats or Republicans will express less attitudinal variation (across all groups) than independents. This expectation accounts for the pull of cues from partisan elites on respondent attitudes. Results indicate that the presence or absence of a connection to veterans or union members has an effect on respondent attitudes that is independent of, and at times greater than, partisanship. Readers unfamiliar with predicted probability plots should draw their attention to two patterns: the difference in position of specific groups across each type of partisanship, and the spread between groups with the same partisanship. The former indicates the relative strength of
partisanship, and the latter the strength of group connection in influencing attitudes. As Figure 2 indicates, partisanship had the strongest impact on support for the Iraq War, particularly among Democratic respondents. More variation is present on this question among independent and Republican groups; however, the variation is as large as the partisan differences between respondents. The pattern is less clear on the question of increasing the influence of unions: attitudinal variation rivaling that produced by partisanship appears based on connected status for Democratic and independent respondents.

While this snapshot does not speak to patterns across time, it is suggestive of the degree to which political consensus exists both among our groups of interest and political parties. Specifically, prototypical in-group members through unconnected out-group members, show less than a 10 percent change in probability within their respective partisan affiliations for Iraq War support. This suggests that by 2006 a consensus had developed within both political parties that typically supplanted the power of connections to the veterans. The substantial spread across partisan groups, and between groups of the same partisan affiliation, indicates a balance between the pull of partisanship and living in a union household.

In sum, we find support in Tables A2 and A3 for our hypotheses concerning our continuum of support for group-salient issues based on connection status for questions relevant to veterans and union members. We also find support for our fourth hypothesis, concerning the conditional influence of partisanship, although group proximity does appear to rival partisanship in the case of Democratic and independent respondents on matters of union influence.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The key finding of this article is that scholars must move beyond the traditional member/nonmember dichotomy of groups in public opinion research, paying particular attention to distinctions between nonmembers. To demonstrate the value of this approach, we have identified a missing variable in traditional models of public opinion: nonmember social distance from prototypical group members, and shown its application to veterans and union members. One’s proximity to a group, from being a prototypical group member (active veteran or current union member here) to having no direct connection to the group, influences political attitudes independent of major explanatory factors such as partisanship (also a form of group attachment).

This work also contributes to the discussion on how best to distinguish among group members. Our findings suggest that one’s status as a group member (prototypical or peripheral) influences not only personal political attitudes, but also the attitudes of those they are connected to. On both questions active (prototypical) members expressed higher levels of support than inactive (periphery) members, and active connected nonmembers expressed higher levels of support than the inactive connected. These findings are subject to several important caveats, which in turn form a foundation for further research.

The data reported here do not allow for a test of the mechanism driving attitudinal differences across groups. Our discussion has focused on the information-sharing benefits of one’s proximity to group members as the explanatory force behind our results. It is possible, however that these findings are driven less by proximity than by the perceived self-interest of respondents. This would be consistent with our findings that active (prototypical) group members and their connected nonmembers showed greater attitudinal divergence from the unconnected than respective inactive (peripheral) group (or connected) respondents.
Further work is needed to evaluate the relative impact of self-interest and proximity on attitudinal differences.

Another limitation of this work is that the data represent only one point in time. In the absence of longitudinal data, many of the dynamics of group proximity are unclear. As a result, the effect of group proximity on issues at equilibrium in 2006, such as opinions on the invasion of Iraq, could be substantially smaller than in nonequilibrium environments owing to the strength of partisan consensus. We might expect that those issues that are less salient to public discussion (such as union influence) or not at equilibrium for both political parties in 2006 would be influenced at a greater degree by group proximity. Our findings suggest this is likely the case, but require longitudinal analysis of one (or all) issues to clarify. Beyond attitudes, this longitudinal work would also increase our understanding of group proximity on issue salience. Examining shifts in respondents’ “most important issue” across years may yield results similar to the positional differences identified in this piece.

Beyond partisan consensus, it is possible that the nature of the group also has a substantial influence on the strength of that group’s influence over political attitudes (again mediated by a respondent’s connection to the group). For example, individuals must choose to volunteer for the military or work in a union shop, whereas one’s ethnicity or sexual identity is not chosen. Further, basic training and the military institution create strong opportunities for the inculcation of a distinct culture and set of interests in a manner that may not be present for other communities. What impact, if any, this has on the attitudes of group members, those connected to group members, or the unconnected also requires further research.

Other avenues for exploration should develop the effects of contextual cues. Measures such as changes in population (Hopkins, 2010), local war casualties (Gelpi, Feaver, and Riefler, 2009; Krueger and Pedraza, 2015), the presence of veteran or union candidates for public office, the passage of high-profile legislation, or news articles reporting on a given issue may affect political attitudes and issue salience. Exploration of contextual cues will improve scholarly understanding of not only the importance of group proximity, but also how “connected” respondents perceive themselves to be.

A final possible avenue for future research would further examine effects of peripheral group membership status on the formation and expression of political attitudes. This is particularly important given the many possible conceptions of “peripheral” in the social identity literature, including those who identify peripheral-ness based on recency of group attachment (Noel et al., 1995; Jetten et al., 2002), and where within-group status change (such as moving from peripheral to prototypical) is possible. For groups where member status changes are not possible, such as occupational groups, peripheral status may lead to other expectations (Krueger and Pedraza, 2012). As this work shows, this distinction on members’ status mobility can influence their attitudes on group-salient issues. Prior work has identified several different categories of connection to a group based on recency of group attachment, and a variety of personal, professional, or social network connections to a group. This is hardly an exhaustive approach. Gaining a clearer sense of which types of connections influence the formation and expression of political attitudes, and when, will provide much greater leverage over the importance of group attachment to the study of public opinion.

REFERENCES

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s website:

Table A2: Cross-Tabulations of Salient Political Attitudes by Social Groups, 2006.
Table A3: Base Model Estimates of Group Proximity.