

2022

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Conservative Conservationists: Reconciling Conflicting Identities on Climate Change

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Identities – how individuals think about themselves in the social world – are powerful drivers of political attitudes and behaviors. On highly polarizing issues such as climate change, political identities are powerful predictors of attitudes, behaviors, and policy preferences. However, other, non-partisan identities are also relevant to climate change attitudes, particularly when the identity is threatened by climate change. What happens when an individual has two salient identities informing opposing attitudes on a political issue? This study leverages a unique sample of politically conservative members of an environmental conservation organization – “conservative conservationists” - to understand how people reconcile conflicting identities to form their environmental attitudes and behaviors. Using qualitative data from interviews (n=25) and participant observation, I document four strategies that participants use to reconcile identity conflicts and form environmental attitudes: distancing oneself from one of the conflicting identities; increasing deliberate political information seeking; redefining conceptions of an issue to fit with both identities; and creating a new identity that merges the non-conflicting aspects of the two identities. This research has implications for both the theoretical study of how identities influence political behavior and practical efforts to build bipartisan agreement on climate change.

Keywords: identity; climate change; identity conflict; environmental attitudes

Introduction

Over the past 100 years, social scientists have become increasingly interested in the role that identities play in our lives, shaping our sense of self and guiding our attitudes and behaviors. More recently, the role of identities in driving political attitudes and behaviors has received growing attention (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy 2001; 2015; Klar 2013; Mason 2018; Transue 2007). While partisan identities – identification with a political party – have received most of the attention, they are not the only relevant identities informing policy attitudes. Other, non-partisan identities

(such as racial, gender, national or parental identities) have also been shown to be powerful predictors of policy attitudes, particularly on issues that are relevant to that identity group (Greenlee 2014; Klar 2013; Krysan 2000; Transue 2007).

Recognizing that individuals hold many different identities is important for understanding how identities inform attitudes and behavior. Each individual has their own set of identities, accumulated over time, and these identities can be diverse and even contradictory (Gergen 1971; James 1890; Turner et al. 1987). When two of an individual's identities are triggered at the same time, this can often be uncomfortable, particularly if the identities are associated with opposing attitudes (Hogg and Smith 2007; Redlawsk 2004). Conflicting identities can lead to cross-pressures, where the divergent identities exert opposing pressures on an individual's political attitudes (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McFee 1954; Horan 1971; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968). For example, an individual may identify as both a fiscal conservative, leading to attitudes in favor of reducing government spending, and a schoolteacher, leading to attitudes in favor of expanding funding for education. Or a libertarian hunter whose recreational identity leads to a preference for preserving open land for recreation but whose political identity informs a preference against government regulation of fossil fuel drilling on open lands. When individuals hold multiple identities leading to attitudinal conflict, there is significant pressure to reconcile the identities so that they are less in conflict (Hogg and Smith 2007; Lau 1982; Redlawsk 2004).

While prior research in social psychology and political science has focused on developing theory as to how conflicting identities inform attitudes, fewer studies have documented how this plays out empirically in the polarized modern political context. This study offers that empirical evidence focused on a policy area in which individuals commonly face identity conflicts: climate change. As one of the most polarizing issues

in the United States (Egan and Mullin 2017), attitudes towards climate change have become closely aligned with political identities (Funk and Kennedy 2016). However, climate change is not solely a partisan issue; other non-partisan identities can also drive attitudes if the identities themselves are threatened by climate change. For example, because the impacts of climate change will be felt most strongly by future generations, parents may feel motivated to take action on climate change for their children's sake (Diamond 2020; Milfont et al. 2014; Zaval, Markowitz, and Weber 2015). Other identities may also motivate action on climate change, such as place-based identities (Milfont et al. 2014) or hobby-based identities threatened by climate change (Fountain, Pierre-Louis, and Tabuchi 2018; Jackson 1986). Similarly, identities that are threatened by climate mitigation policies, such as workforce identities (coal miners, for example) can motivate opposition to climate mitigation policies (Scheiber 2021).

Recognizing that many different identities can inform attitudes on climate change, what happens when an individual has two (or more) identities that inform opposing attitudes? And what strategies do they use to reconcile such identity conflicts? To answer these questions, this study examines a unique group of individuals that hold two conflicting identities on climate change: a politically conservative identity and an environmental conservationist identity. While there is a historical tradition of pro-environmentalism among ideological conservatives (including leaders of the American conservationist movement, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Russell Train, identifying as political conservatives), the modern American political conservative movement has distanced itself from environmental protection (Flippen 2006). Due to the debilitating levels of partisan polarization in American politics at the present moment, votes on environmental protection policies almost consistently fall down partisan lines. Modern

American conservatives inherently face a choice at the ballot box: support conservative politicians or support politicians who will favor pro-environmental policy proposals.

This study focuses on members of the National Audubon Society (the largest national organization for the protection and conservation of birds) who also identify as political conservatives – “conservative conservationists.” Birders (individuals who engage in bird-watching and identify as bird conservationists) are an especially interesting identity group to study because the National Audubon Society has identified climate change as the number one threat to birds in North America due to its impact on habitat degradation and food availability (National Audubon Society 2015). On the issue of climate change, the political identity of these individuals would be expected to lead to attitudes opposing climate change policies, while their identities as environmental conservationists would be expected to lead to attitudes supporting policies designed to protect the environment.

Using original data collected through in-depth interactions with politically conservative Audubon members, I unite social psychology and political science literatures to document four strategies that conservative conservationists use to reconcile their identity conflicts and inform their political behaviors on climate change: distancing oneself from one of the conflicting identities, increasing deliberate political information seeking, redefining the issue of climate change to fit both identities, and defining a new identity that unites non-conflicting aspects of the original identities. The findings provide theoretical insight into how identities shape political attitudes and an empirical example of how these identity-reconciliation strategies play out in real life, offering suggestions on how to guide citizens through the reconciliation of identity conflicts to form policy preferences.

Identities and political attitudes

Identities are the ways that we understand ourselves and our place in the context of social groups. Social identity theory argues that an important part of one's self-understanding is comprised of social group memberships and intergroup relations (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1986). The core of the theory asserts that individuals think of themselves and others as group members, and aim to exhibit uniform attitudes, behaviors, and preferences to emphasize similarities with the in-group and differentiate oneself from out-group members (Ellemers and Haslam 2011; Hogg 2006; Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Identities are important to the study of public opinion because they are key determinants of attitudes. Attitudes – psychological tendencies expressed as an evaluation of a particular entity (Eagly and Chaiken 1993) – are “grounded in the groups we belong to and our relationships with others who are members of the same or different groups as ourselves,” (Hogg and Smith 2007, 90). Research has found that attitudes are formed in large part based on what people see as the normative or prototypical attitudes of groups that they belong to (Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995; Sherif 1936). Social identity theory describes how individuals try to emphasize similarities to their own identity group (the in-group) and differences from other groups that they do not identify with (out-groups) (Tajfel et al. 1971). To do this, individuals incorporate attitudes and behaviors that they see as prototypical of their identity group. The psychological act of self-categorization, or establishing oneself as a member of a social group, depersonalizes an individual's attitudes so that they conform to the attitudinal stereotype for the group (Abrams et al. 1990; Hogg and Smith 2007; Turner et al. 1987). Through this process, identities inform attitudes and behaviors. For example, a prototypical environmentalist identity is supportive of environmental

conservation policies and demonstrates behaviors in line with sustainable living (i.e., recycling, alternative transportation, etc.). An individual that identifies as an environmentalist, therefore, will express that identity by exhibiting conservationist attitudes and behaviors.

Conflicting political attitudes and identities

While political identities – an individual’s identification with a particular political party or ideology – are generally thought to be the most salient identity in determining political attitudes, evidence also suggests that these may not be the only identities that determine policy preferences (Converse 2006; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). Lazarsfeld et al (1968) describe how any social dimension that has relevance for politics can exert a 'pressure' on the political behavior of individuals. Sometimes those dimensions will be oriented in the same political direction, sometimes they will not (Horan 1971). When an individual’s long-term partisan identity conflicts with their short-term policy preferences or evaluations (often driven by another identity), they are considered *cross-pressured partisans* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McFee 1954; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1968; Mutz 2002; Treier and Hillygus 2009).

How an individual responds to identity conflict may be informed by how complex their internal identity ecosystem is (how convergent and overlapping their various identities are). Brewer and Pierce (2005) tested this theory and found that individuals who had more overlap in their identities (less complexity) were generally less tolerant of outgroups, while those who had less overlap in their identities (more complex identity ecosystem) were more tolerant and accepting. This may translate to cross-pressured partisans potentially being more open to other political ideas or perspectives than individuals whose identities all support a single policy preference.

Research on the political decision-making of cross-pressured partisans has identified several strategies that individuals use (not always consciously) to overcome the cognitive dissonance they experience. One strand of literature shows that when individuals are cross-pressured, the power of their partisan identity in driving their policy preferences is diluted. In such cases, cross-pressures lead individuals to distance themselves from the political process. Lazarsfeld et al (1968) show that cross-pressured voters take longer to make their voting decisions, show less interest in the process or outcome, and are more likely to party-switch. Berelson et al (1954) demonstrate that it is psychologically taxing to bridge the two conflicting pressures, and therefore to avoid this cognitive dissonance, individuals withdraw from politics and avoid making any political decision. Other research has supported this view, finding that cross-pressured partisans tend to have weaker partisan affiliations and levels of political engagement and activism (Brader, Tucker, and Therriault 2014; Klar 2014; Mason 2015; Mutz 2002; Nir and Druckman 2008).

While attitudinal conflicts can cause psychological distress (Hope 1975) and lead to political disengagement, another strand of literature suggests that cross-pressured partisans do not necessarily abandon their political identities but instead collect and weigh political information more deliberately. Some individuals who feel a conflict between their political attitudes may also become more thoughtful and deliberate decisionmakers. Lavine et al (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012) identify individuals who experience conflict between long-term partisan identities and short-term political evaluations as “ambivalent partisans”. These individuals think more deliberately about policy problems and tend to have more accurate perceptions of the political world. Ambivalent partisans are not necessarily more engaged in politics than

univalent partisans, but they may be more motivated to seek out policy information before making voting decisions (as opposed to relying solely on partisan cues).

Researchers in social psychology have identified another approach, hybridization, which occurs when identities are not assimilated or altered, but instead are merged into a new identity (Smith 2008). Hoek et al (2013), for example, studied how social smokers reconcile their identities as both smokers and non-smokers. They found that most social smokers recognize a dissonance in their identities but emphasize that they are different from habit smokers and claim that their smoking behavior is due to impairments (such as alcohol). By redefining themselves in a new identity as “social smokers”, they reduced the salience of the conflicting identity (that of being a smoker) until they are in a situation that activates and supports their identity as a smoker (e.g., when they consume alcohol).

Other studies have looked at instances when an individual’s religious and sexual identities conflict, specifically for homosexual members of religious communities that are not accepting of homosexuality. In these situations, individuals often seek to redefine the structure in which they operate (i.e. work to change the views of the religious leaders, support newer interpretations of religious texts). They may also simply compartmentalize their lives and activities to eliminate conscious conflict (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Liboro 2015).

With these findings in mind, this study evaluates what strategies individuals use to form their climate change policy attitudes when they hold two identities that conflict in their attitude formation. Because identities are so important both to how we make sense of the world and to how we form our political attitudes, it is important to understand how individuals inform policy preferences under instances of identity conflict. Additionally, as scholars and advocates increasingly look to identity-based

appeals to address highly polarizing and intransigent issues like climate change, understanding what happens when identities conflict will be of vital importance for future communication efforts.

Materials & Methods

This study leverages a unique sample of politically conservative members of an environmental conservation organization – “conservative conservationists” - to understand how people with identities that inform conflicting issue attitudes reconcile these identities. These individuals have two aspects of their identities that are associated with opposing attitudes towards climate change: politically conservative identities (which are generally associated with opposition to climate change policies) and environmental conservationist identities (which are generally associated with support for pro-environmental policies, which includes climate change mitigation).

Sample

I identified the sample of participants through a partnership with the National Audubon Society (Audubon), the largest American organization for the protection of birds. Audubon is a useful case study for two reasons. First, unlike many other environmental advocacy organizations, Audubon’s membership spans the political spectrum. Internal statistics estimate that approximately 45% of Audubon members identify as centrist to conservative (National Audubon Society 2018). Second, the identities of birders are particularly threatened by climate change. In 2015, the National Audubon Society published a report identifying climate change as the most significant threat to birds in North America (National Audubon Society 2015). Following the publication of this report, the organization launched a data-gathering and member-training program to understand their members’ views on climate change and train their

members to act as “Climate Change Ambassadors.” By clearly connecting the issue of climate change to bird conservation and welfare, Audubon’s activities in this area help members link their identity as conservationists with support for and activism around climate change mitigation.

As part of their efforts to engage members on climate change, state and local chapters of Audubon organized a series of half-day workshops – Climate Ambassador Trainings – to educate their members about the connection between birds and climate change. Attendees received training on how to talk about the impacts of climate change on birds and how to become politically active on the issue. Some states also followed up the trainings with an in-person “Lobby Day” at the state capitals. Audubon’s goal for these Ambassador programs was to increase bipartisan concern about the impact of climate change on birds and to politically activate Audubon’s members on the issue of climate change.

Data Collection

Because identities are often deeply and sometimes subconsciously held, it can be difficult to detect and quantify strategies of identity reconciliation. Identity conflict can also cause cognitive dissonance within an individual, making it difficult for people to acknowledge their conflicting identities (Cooper 2007; Festinger 1957; Hogg and Smith 2007). Because of this, careful conversations are most helpful to draw out evidence of each identity and to understand the cognitive processes that individuals use to reconcile the identities. This research used two qualitative research methods to examine and analyze the effects of identity conflicts among the participants: participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Participant Observation

From February 2017 – July 2018, I participated in five Audubon Climate Ambassador Trainings in North Carolina and New York state. Audubon organized these trainings to introduce their members to the impact of climate change on birds and to train the participants in how to engage community members and politicians in conversations about climate change (sample training agenda in online appendix). These half-day training sessions were each attended by between 30-50 Audubon members, invited through the Audubon chapter mailings lists. Politically conservative members (identified using Catalist ideology scores¹) were particularly targeted through additional direct email invitations. The training locations were selected due to the prevalence of politically conservative members in the surrounding areas, and therefore the higher likelihood of conservative member attendance.

During the trainings, I captured notes about what participants said about climate change, their political identities, and their conservationist identities. I circulated among groups of participants and engaged participants in discussions to capture evidence of identity-driven political attitudes, identity conflicts, as well as initial reactions when the participants experienced identity conflict. These observations were used to identify overall trends in attitudes and the existence of (and potential conflict between) conservationist and conservative identities.

¹ Catalist and The Yuhus Consulting Group jointly developed a nationwide ideology model that is available to Catalist subscribers, including the National Audubon Society. The model provides an ideology score for each registered voter and unregistered Voting Age Person (VAP). The scores have a value between 0 and 100, with 0 being the most conservative and 100 being the most liberal.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Between March 2017 and August 2018, I completed 25 semi-structured interviews with politically conservative Audubon members. These participants either self-identified as politically conservative through exit-surveys during the Ambassador Trainings or were identified by the National Audubon Society as politically conservative using Catalist ideology scores (and later self-identified as conservative in the interviews).² After the trainings or Lobby Days, all participants who fell into one of these categories were contacted and asked if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Overall, 30 individuals responded to this initial request, and interviews were completed with 25 of them. Twenty interviewees lived in North Carolina and five lived in New York. Interviews were held both over the phone and in-person (depending on location and convenience for the interview participant), generally lasted between 30-60 minutes, and participants were compensated for their time using Amazon.com gift certificates. Of the 25 individuals interviewed, 14 identified as female and 11 identified as male. While all interviewees' Catalist ideology scores were less than 40 (putting them on the politically conservative side of the scale), not all identified as Republican. Nine of the 25 self-identified as Republican, while the remaining self-identified as Independent. I also collected descriptive information on their attitudes towards climate change through an exit-survey after the Ambassador Trainings. Twelve of the 25 interviewees reported believing that climate change is happening and is primarily human-caused. Three reported believing that the climate was not changing. The remaining interviewees (10) had mixed views on climate change – they were either uncertain about its causes or believed that any changes were due to natural patterns.

² It should be noted that the Catalist scores were used only for population identification and were not part of the data collection or analysis process

The interviews asked participants directly about their identities as both environmental conservationists and political conservatives (for example, “Is bird conservation[/your political identity] an important part of who you are?”). I also asked about the social aspects of their identity, such as whether their friends and families also identified as conservationists or political conservatives, which is one signal of the strength of each identity (McAdam and Paulsen 1993). I asked participants directly in the interviews whether they recognized a conflict in their identities, while discussions in the participant observations provided more indirect evidence of identity conflict and reconciliation strategies. The semi-structured interview guide is provided in the online appendix.

Data Analysis

The interviews and participant observation provided written products (transcripts or notes) that I analyzed for evidence of identity conflict and reconciliation. I did this through inductive thematic analysis using NVivo12 qualitative analysis software, which allows the researcher to identify and evaluate common themes across data sources (Braun and Clarke 2006). I followed a realist epistemological position in coding the transcripts, taking participants’ accounts of their cognitive processes as the reality of such processes. While the coding process was inductive, I coded for themes in several categories: (1) how the participants identified themselves in terms of the political and conservationist identities, (2) the characteristics of these identities, particularly those characteristics that informed attitudes on climate change, (3) whether they perceived an identity conflict, and (4) what strategies they reported using to reconcile the attitudes informed by each of these identities. This fourth category represented the bulk of the findings, with the first three categories allowing me to

establish and understand the existence and nature of identity conflicts. The full coding structure can be found in the online appendix.

Findings

The primary goal of this study was to understand and document the strategies that individuals with conflicting identities use to manage these conflicts and form political attitudes on climate change in an applied setting. Four distinct strategies were identified and are discussed below. These strategies included: (1) distancing themselves from politics and their political identity (12 interviewees); (2) increasing their objective, information-based decision making to make more informed political decisions (9 interviewees); (3) redefining climate change to fit with both identities (9 interviewees); and (4) creating a new identity that merges the non-conflicting aspects of their conservative and conservationist identities (6 interviewees).

Strategy 1: Distancing from political identity

One of the most common strategies observed among participants was an attempt to distance themselves from one of the conflicting identities – often their political identity. This technique mitigates cognitive dissonance that arises from identity conflict by foregrounding one identity while explaining away their affiliation with the other identity.

While all the participants identified as politically conservative, it was very common for participants to describe how they have shifted away from identification with the Republican party. Many of the participants clarified that they do not identify with many of the Republican policies that they view as anti-environmental. As one interviewee from North Carolina described,

“I don’t feel like the Republican Party as it stands at this moment in time necessarily represents the majority of Republicans in this country...I think that the Republican Party has been touted as not caring about the environment and yet my friends who are Republicans are very concerned about the environment and they want to see a clean environment.”

Others clearly rejected the notion of identifying with any political party: “I feel like I have attitudes about things versus a political identity. I think politicizing things puts people in a box, and it’s so polarized now, that it’s not really a positive thing to do,” noted a North Carolina interview participant. When asked about their party affiliations, many participants appeared conflicted, or preferred to identify as independents or Libertarians, although most noted that they had previously identified as Republicans.

Echoing the literature on cross-pressured partisans (e.g. Berelson, 1954), some of the conflicted participants chose to back away from politics in general to avoid confronting the conflict. Indeed, 12 of the 25 interviewees commented on how they were uninterested in or disillusioned with politics (however, without a comparison group it is difficult to specifically attribute this to the identity conflict versus other factors). When asked about whether her political identity was important to her, one interviewee in North Carolina responded, “Not at all, not at all. When I vote, those issues may come into play, but on a daily basis, I’m pretty non-political.” Another frequent sentiment was a strong disillusionment with the political process and politicians, which led many of the participants to back away from politics because they did not feel that they were being represented: “The wants and the needs of the people, the voters, constituents, no matter what comes out of their mouth, it’s not high on their list of priorities,” described a North Carolina interviewee. While this sentiment is common among the American public (particularly after the 2016 election) (Pew

Research Center 2019), participants discussed it as a long-standing orientation that they held towards government. This suggests that while many Americans currently feel disillusioned about politics, individuals experiencing identity conflict may feel this sentiment more strongly or consistently.

Strategy 2: Acknowledging conflict and increasing rational decision making

The literature on cross-pressured and ambivalent partisans finds that when individuals feel conflicted, they become more likely to seek out political information and often become more informed and rational in their political decision making (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). Whereas unconflicted partisans can generally rely on partisan cues to determine their political attitudes, these individuals were unsure of whether to use cues from their partisan or conservationist identities to determine their climate change policy preferences. As a result, they reported thinking more critically about political issues and using thoughtful and thorough decision-making techniques. For example, when asked about how she makes political decisions, an interview participant in North Carolina described her tendency to do more research when balancing her political and conservationist identities:

“It's just tough. I have to do like the whole pros and cons list and then just sort of balance all the different issues and kind of try to figure out what are they really going to actually focus on and you know, where are they going to make the biggest impact...”

Many participants also admitted to doing detailed research on policy issues and rarely voting straight-ticket, particularly when environmental issues were involved. “I do go to each candidate... their background and what they stand for on every single issue,” said a North Carolina interview participant. While previous research suggests that many individuals report thinking critically about their voting decisions, the

participants also reported party-switching frequently. In general, participants seemed more issue-motivated in their political decision making than most American voters, which may reflect their identity conflict leading to increased information-seeking in the political world.

Given the importance of their conservationist identities, many participants used deliberate evaluation of candidates' environmental records to make their political decisions. This provides some evidence that for most of the participants, their conservationist identities were stronger drivers of their political attitudes than their politically conservative identities. One interviewee from eastern Long Island commented on how he is "supposed to be a Republican" given where he is from and his peer group, but he generally votes based on how the politicians want to impact the environment. When asked if he felt torn between his conservationist and political identities, he responded, "Not at all. If I feel a candidate is going to do better for the ecology and the environment, I would vote for them." Others had similar sentiments, with one New York interviewee discussing how they "look for someone that is conservation-minded. All the other issues, conservation is at the root. Without conservation, everything collapses."

Strategy 3: Reconceptualizing climate change to fit partisan identity

A third strategy that participants used to reconcile conflicting identity preferences on climate change was to redefine the issue (or solutions to it) in a way that fit both of their identities. Traditionally, the environmental movement has positioned itself in opposition to conservative values such as small government or private sector leadership, in favor of more politically liberal government regulations. However, the participants in this study embraced traditionally conservative attitudes including a distrust of government and a preference for solutions that emerge from the private

sector. To maintain both these conservative values and the pro-environmental attitudes driven by their conservationist identity, participants focused on conservation strategies that either come from the private sector or are based on free-market principles. By focusing on a solution to climate change that does not threaten principles of political conservatism, participants could embrace both their political identity and protecting the environment.

Several participants discussed putting the onus on responsible companies to prioritize environmental protection as opposed to the government, and there was a sentiment of trusting in corporations to act responsibly (a pro-business perspective that fits within American conceptualizations of political conservatism). One North Carolina interviewee in the land development industry described a conflict that developers face between clear-cutting and conserving habitat. He emphasized that these choices made by the private sector can have a big impact on the environment, while not sacrificing economic development through excessive government regulations: “They’ve accomplished their goal and they have made money, but they didn’t just rape the land in everything they did.” Another interviewee emphasized that if corporations held themselves to a high standard of safety and environmental consciousness, then things like deep-sea oil drilling wouldn’t be a problem.

For others, their political conservatism was grounded in their religion, which they saw as motivation for environmental conservation. These individuals viewed their political conservative identity in conjunction with their religious identity (in this sample, generally Christian) that mandates a strong ethic of stewardship of the natural world. One North Carolina interviewee described what he called a “Whole-Life Platform,” where traditionally conservative pro-life attitudes concerning abortion should be extended to all living things. In this sense, he argued that if Christians are called to

protect the lives of unborn children, they should also prioritize the life of other living beings in nature and the health of the planet. In this case, a third identity was introduced to moderate the conflict between the conservative and conservationist identities. By redefining his politically conservative attitudes through another identity (religious identity) that also supports environmental stewardship, this participant could maintain attachment to both identities.

Finally, some participants conceptualized climate change in a way that did not mandate immediate policy action that may conflict with their political identity. Specifically, there was a shared sense that climate change is a distant problem, and immediate policies are therefore not necessary. When asked about solutions that they thought should be taken to combat climate change, many of the participants focused on educating future generations instead of taking immediate policy action. For these participants, they felt that the most meaningful thing that could be done for both birds and climate change is to invest more in teaching children about the problem so that they can address it when they become adults. As one North Carolina participant stated, “We must act. I am saying act in a different way than climate change policies. I’m saying teach the grandchildren how to preserve and care for all living things.” Another interviewee in North Carolina emphasized that this is a big problem, and we shouldn’t rush into anything, and that incremental changes should be the core solution: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. You don’t eat an elephant in one bite. That’s how [we are going to have to tackle climate change], that’s how this is going to have to go. It’s gonna take time.” By focusing on climate change as a distant issue that primarily requires more education for future generations, conflicted partisans can recognize the issue and convey their concern, but not threaten their political identity by supporting climate change policies.

Strategy 4: Defining a New Identity

Finally, at least six of the interviewees and many others in the trainings reconciled the identity conflict by defining an identity for themselves that merged aspects of their conservative and conservationist identities but was distinct from both. For many of the participants, this meant describing themselves as political independents, or sometimes “fiscal conservatives³,” who prioritized environmental protection. Many of the interview participants specified that they thought of themselves on a social vs. fiscal conservatism axis as opposed to lumping all aspects of political conservatism together. This strategy allowed them to select which aspects of their partisanship to merge into their political identity, to avoid conflict with other parts of their identity (such as their conservationist identity).

For others, it meant defining a new identity that merged both their conservatism and their identity as an environmental conservationist. For some, the core tenets of conservatism – that of “conserving” – seemed to fit perfectly with their orientation towards environmental conservation. One interviewee in North Carolina referred to this as a “Crunchy Conservative” identity:

“I would broadly align myself as being conservative in terms of my worldview, but I am what has been termed in other contexts is a ‘Crunchy Conservative’, therefore I may be sympathetic to some aspects of the Republican party platform, but I am dismayed at any attempt at reversing environmental progress.”

³ Although there are aspects of fiscal conservatism that may conflict with many government climate policies, these participants felt that being supportive of addressing climate change conflicted with being a social conservative, but not a fiscal conservative. This may be due to the grouping of political issues and social identity that has emerged under the label of social conservatism (Hayward 2014).

This tendency was echoed by other participants as well. One participant in North Carolina identified as a “world citizen” as opposed to any other political label. Another interviewee in North Carolina defined herself as a “rabid-environmentalist Republican” who was fiscally conservative, socially liberal, and prioritized environmental issues over all else. By redefining their political identity in a way that promotes environmental conservation, these individuals were able to maintain both their political and conservationist identities in a way that did not cause an evident identity conflict.

Discussion

As more issues in America become highly polarized, an increasing number of citizens are likely to experience conflicts in how aspects of their identities inform political attitudes. Understanding the strategies that individuals use when facing this challenge will be important for researchers and practitioners seeking to document, respond to, and predict citizen attitudes and behaviors on important political issues. To that end, this study examined a group of individuals who must reconcile two conflicting identities to determine their attitudes towards climate change. As politically conservative members of the National Audubon Society who are coming to terms with the threat of climate change to birds, this study identifies four strategies individuals use to reconcile their identity conflicts: (1) distancing themselves from one of the identities; (2) acknowledging the conflict and increasing deliberate decision making; (3) redefining the issue of climate change to fit their identities; and (4) creating a new identity for themselves that merges the non-conflicting parts of the two identities. Notably, having only studied individuals with conflicting identities and not those with congruent identities on this issue, this study cannot claim that these strategies are unique to those experiencing identity conflict. However, they do offer insight into how citizens

manage conflicts and form political attitudes in an increasingly polarized and divisive political environment.

In many ways, the strategies identified in this study support the findings of existing literature on cross-pressured partisans - that experiencing conflicts in policy attitudes can lead people to distance themselves from their partisan identity. Most of the study participants had, in some capacity, distanced themselves from their political identity. However, I did not observe this across the board. For some participants, the political threat to the environment seemed to motivate them to become more involved in politics. Many attendees of the Ambassador Trainings, for example, left feeling prepared to use their social connections with other political conservatives to begin conversations about the importance of acting in support of climate change mitigation.

I also found evidence that feeling conflicted between their partisan and conservationist identities led participants to spend more time researching and making political decisions than they otherwise would have. This finding reflects that of Lavine et al (2012) that ambivalent partisans become more deliberate political decisionmakers, relying less on their partisan cues and instead actively seeking out information to form policy attitudes. In a world where growing levels of political polarizing lead individuals to rely more and more on their partisanship to make political decisions, instances of identity conflict may offer unique opportunities to bolster democracy.

Several participants used tools such as compartmentalization to reconceptualize the issue of climate change in a way that allowed the participants to avoid feeling conflicted. For example, by focusing less on the need for climate change policy and instead on how to secure clean air, plentiful water, and appropriate bird habitats. This reframing allowed participants to demonstrate their conservationist identity without necessarily threatening their conservative identity. Others acknowledged the issue of

climate change but punted the main responsibility for action on to future generations. By emphasizing that the primary policy priority should be educating children about climate change, these individuals could maintain their conservative opposition to aggressive climate change mitigation policies while still acknowledging that something should be done.

A final strategy observed – and the strategy that most reflects a conflict in identities and not just attitudes – was to define a new identity that merged the non-conflicting parts of participants’ conservative and conservationist identities. I detected identity creation through the ways that participants talked about themselves – defining themselves in the social or political world. For some, this meant defining their political identity in a different way, such as “fiscally conservative”. For others, this meant creating a new identity for themselves, for example the participants who labelled themselves a “Crunchy Conservative” or “World Citizen.” This approach signals an appetite among participants for a way to unite their environmental concern with more traditionally conservative ideological principals. One implication of this strategy may be that it could lead individuals to try to organize with others based around this shared identity (like the rise of the Tea Party in American politics).

The strategies identified here should be seen as a contribution of empirical evidence of theoretical strategies established in both the political science and social psychology literatures – and a contribution in uniting two theoretical approaches that are too frequently considered separate but clearly both impact the development and formation of political attitudes. For those interested in political outcomes and policy attitudes, the strategies identified in this study can be viewed as explanatory and to help shape policy and communication approaches. For those coming from a theoretical

social-psychological perspective, this study offers a new empirical test of how theorized identity reconciliation strategies are playing out in a true political context.

Recognizing how individuals react to identity conflicts and understanding reconciliation strategies has broad applications, particularly for organizations or campaigns that aim to garner political support and cultivate activism by relating an issue to a non-partisan identity group. For example, recognizing the tendency for conflicted partisans to try to redefine an issue to fit both of their identities, advocates may want to emphasize private sector solutions to climate change or the impact of climate change on hobbies (like birdwatching). Other effective strategies could be to guide the development of new identities that allow the combination of various aspects of previously conflicting identities, such as the “Crunchy Conservative” identity.

While the cognitive dissonance experienced by individuals with conflicting identities can be difficult, a major takeaway from this research is that conflicting identities may also be a good thing for democracy. As noted in previous research, these conflicted or “ambivalent” partisans may end up making more objective and informed political decisions that truly reflect individual preferences, as opposed to relying solely on cues from a single identity. However, evidence from this study shows that not all individuals follow this strategy. Future research should investigate what types of individuals are most likely to resort to critical thinking and issue-based voting, versus those that are more likely to redefine an issue to fit their existing identities or distance themselves from one of the conflicting identities.

While the findings of this study are a helpful first step for understanding how conflicting identities inform climate change attitudes, there are also limitations. First, the study sample – politically conservative members of environmental conservation organizations – should be understood as a case study, not a representative sample. The

sample size is small, and this restriction made it difficult to unpack the characteristics of individuals that led them to employ one strategy over another. Importantly, prior attitudes about climate change did not seem to guide participants towards one strategy over another. Understanding what motivates the use of the different strategies should be studied further in future research. Additionally, the demographics of the participants limits the generalizability of the findings. Members of the National Audubon Society tend to be older and wealthier than the average American, often retired, and predominately white. This may influence the findings because the participants likely have more time and resources to expend on political research, for example. They may also not have many other highly politically salient identities (such as racial, ethnic, or class-based identities) driving their political attitudes.

It must also be noted that identities are not always concrete, stable, discrete entities that translate into consistent action, and the results discussed in this study should not be interpreted as purporting this. The strategies highlight the fact that identities should be thought of as fluid, with the emergence of hybrid identities (as described in Strategy 4) a real possibility. However, the currently polarized state of American politics rarely welcomes such hybrid identities, when there tend to be clear delineations between the policy attitudes of liberals and conservatives that rarely are seen to overlap, at least at the political elite level. This reality inspires the treatment of a political conservative and environmental conservationist identity as separate and conflicting in the context of this study.

It is also important to consider how some features of this study may have influenced the construction, or interpretation, of identities among participants. The phrasing of certain questions in the interviews may have led to participants conceiving of themselves as holding a particular identity (conservationist or conservative) that may

not be as salient to them in their everyday lives. Because participants were interviewed following their participation in an Audubon Ambassador Training, their identity as a conservationist was likely to be highly salient. This may have led them to downplay the role that their political identity plays in their decision making. I attempted to alleviate this by waiting several weeks in between the training and the interview, but this effect should still be acknowledged and taken into consideration when evaluating the results. Moreover, the context of the interview itself may have led participants to consider their identities in conflict in a way that they have not previously perceived, and the “strategies” observed may not persist outside of the study context. Participant statements were taken at face-value, but there are forces such as availability bias and social desirability bias that may have influenced responses. The findings, therefore, are caveated by the fact that what individuals *say* about their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes do not always translate into their true actions and attitudes.

To overcome the deep partisan divisions and legislative stagnation on climate change and other highly polarizing issues, advocates and policy communicators will need to gain a better understanding of how to engage voters in more thoughtful, deliberate, and issue-based political decision-making. Recognizing that many individuals may feel conflicted on issues like climate change is a challenge, but also an opportunity. This research offers a first step in understanding how people reconcile identity conflicts in an applied setting, and how future communication and engagement campaigns can be developed to support individuals through this reconciliation process.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank the Audubon members who participated in this study, as well as Kim Brand from Audubon North Carolina and Lynsy Smithson-Stanley who were instrumental in this research partnership.

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Appendix A: Sample Audubon Ambassador Training Agenda



Audubon Ambassador Training –

Agenda

Saturday, March 4, 2017

St. Francis United Methodist Church, Cary, NC

9 a.m. Welcome and introductions

9:30 a.m. Impact of a Changing Climate on Birds in NC

10:20 a.m. How to Engage on Climate Change

11:20 a.m. Plants for Birds: How you can help birds by gardening

12:10 Group photo

12:15 p.m. Lunch

1 p.m. Take Political Action

1:25 p.m. How to get involved locally

1:45 p.m. Online Resources & How We Will Stay Connected

1:55 p.m. Evaluations and goodbyes

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Part 1:

1. I like to start off by asking people to come up with the three nouns that describe them the best. So for example, I might say “Student, Daughter, Dog-lover”. Thinking about your life and who you are, what are the top three ways you would describe yourself? This could be anything – a role you play, a job you do, something you love or hate, a group you belong to, whatever best defines you.

Part 2:

Next I'd like to talk a bit about your experience in Audubon.

1. How did you first become interested in birds?
2. Tell me about your experience with Audubon as an organization. How long have you been a member? Can you tell me about some of the activities do you do with Audubon?

I am also curious about the role that bird conservation plays in your life.

3. Is bird conservation an important part of who you are?
4. Do you have many other friends or family members that are engaged in Audubon or care about birds? If so, who?

Part 3:

5. Have you ever attended an Audubon Ambassador training, that focuses on the impact of climate change on bird populations?
6. What are your thoughts on the issue of climate change?
 - a. Do you think it is happening?
 - b. What do you think causes it?
7. Have you experienced any of the effects of climate change? (Either personally or seen it happen to others?)
8. Do you think much about the issue of climate change and birds?
9. How did attending the Ambassador training change your thoughts about climate change?
10. What do you think we need to do to stop climate change? Are we currently doing enough?

Part 4:

Since I'm interested in how Audubon helps the public navigate political engagement, the next few questions are about your political identity. I'm interested in how you think about the political world, and how interested you are in politics. People have very busy lives and sometimes don't really have time to pay attention to or participate in the political world.

11. How about you? Would you say you are someone that is interested in politics?
12. How important would you say your political identity is to who you are?
13. Would you say that you were a Democrat, Republican, or Independent?
 - a. [If Democrat or Republican] Strong or weak?
 - b. [If Independent] Leaning toward Democrats or Republicans?
14. Do most of the people you interact with on a daily basis share the same political views as you? What about your family and friends?

Part 5:

15. We've talked about your views on climate change and your political views. Do you ever feel torn between these?
16. Imagine there is a policy proposed in your state that involves limiting emissions to fight climate change. Would you support that policy?
17. Would you:
 - a. Be willing to vote for a candidate from another party that supported climate change policy?
 - b. Be willing to press for change within your own party?
18. Has your experience in Audubon encouraged you to think differently about policies that aim to address climate change?
 - a. If so, how did your views change? What prompted that change?
19. In what ways has participating in Audubon impacted your political engagement?

Any closing thoughts or comments you'd like to share?

Appendix C: NVivo Coding Structure

1. Characteristics of conservative identity
 - a. Distrust of government
 - b. Favor private sector
 - c. Climate denial
 - d. Religion
 - e. Fiscal conservative
 - f. Distrust science
 - g. Anti-immigration
2. Characteristics of conservationist identity
 - a. Stewardship of nature
 - b. Source
 - i. Family or childhood
 - ii. Seeking community
 - iii. Personal experience
 - iv. Faith/religion
 - c. Motivation
 - i. Threat to birds
 - ii. Threat to nature
 - d. Membership in other conservation organizations
3. Perceive an identity conflict?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Reconciliation Strategies
 - a. Detaching
 - i. Politics
 - ii. Climate change
 - b. Rational decisionmaking
 - c. Redefining issue
 - d. Create new identity