Walk the Party Line: Individual-Level Determinants of Trust of Political Parties

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I. Introduction

In seemingly every post-election analysis, scholars and political commentators set out to debate whether Americans are becoming more partisan. Academic research is compared with public perceptions. All involved attempt to decide if we, as a nation, are becoming more red, blue, or just simply turning purple. In an era where party-lines seem to have drawn individuals within our nation to cheer the failure of an American city to receive the 2016 Summer Olympics and question the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to our own president, it goes without question that partisanship is alive and well within our nation.

In the immediate aftermath of Barack Obama's inauguration, America watched as Rush Limbaugh and Michael Steele utilized popular media to run a clandestine campaign against each other to run the Republican Party. We watched as different shades of red emerged based on the camp that self-identified Republicans aligned themselves with. With these events have come questions of political trust. Much research has been conducted in recent years to examine individual-level determinants of support and trust regarding major political institutions and leaders, yet political parties (the major linkage institutions of American politics) have largely been neglected in this regard.

Defining trust as the expectation held by citizens that policymakers will do what the citizens want them to do in a predictable way (Hetherington 1978), it is evident that there is a potential for individuals that self-identify in a particular manner to be distrustful of the party they claim allegiance to. If Miller (1974) is correct in arguing that low levels of trust ultimately undermine legitimacy,

political parties could be facing a struggle if trust levels continue to fall. If individuals do not trust or approve of the political party that they belong to, the party will have a more difficult time maintaining consistency in message, persuading individuals to donate money, and ultimately voting on party lines.

II. Review of the Literature

Voting trends in America clearly point towards a polarized electorate. Party and ideology play a significant role in shaping voting behavior within our country (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Bartels 2000; Jacobson 2003; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003). As Kimball and Gross (2007) explain, the 2004 election stands out as the most polarized since the National Election Study began utilizing feeling thermometers in the 1960s. Fischle (2000) explains that partisans are motivated to perceive basic facts in ways that support their party. This is evident by the fact that the Republican Party is seen as more conservative by Democrats than by Republicans.

The social identity theory believes that partisans are more willing to praise their own group, tear down the opposition, and exaggerate the differences between groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). More briefly put, we tend to act as if there is a giant chasm between parties than there actually are. Regardless of claims of moderation, many voters still see their particular party as representing all that is good and the opposition representing all that is bad. In elections, political parties clearly use issues and areas that anger particular party to get them to vote their way, but in doing so, we artificially inflate the degree of perceived polarization within the country.

Wattenberg (1998) argued that Americans have become more polarized with regards to evaluating political figures, but not parties. Kimball and Gross (2007), however, have found that we are truly more polarized when asked about political parties as well. With the resurgence of political parties in recent elections, they have become the main organizing body in American politics. As

such, how individual citizens perceive of parties—and the amount of trust they place in them—becomes a central political issue.

Political trust has been a growing topic of importance throughout political science and public administration (Catterberg and Moreno 2005; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Christensen and Laegreid 2002; Citrin and Green 1986; Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Delhey and Newton 2005; Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh 1995; Hetherington 1998; Hudson 2006; Miller 1974; Miller and Listhaug 1990; Miller and Rose 1997; Mishler and Rose 2001; Newton 2001; Rimic and Stullhofer 2004). Before concerning ourselves with potential determinants of political trust of parties, it is imperative that we begin determining what we mean by 'trust.' Stokes (1962) simply defines trust in a political institution as a basic evaluative orientation towards that particular part of government. Such trust is founded on how well an individual believes a political institution is functioning based on the individual's personal expectations of what the particular institution should be doing (Miller 1974; Hetherington 1998). Political trust, ultimately, comes down to the basic notion that a citizen can place the responsibility in the hands of a particular political institution to do certain things the citizen wants in order to improve her life. With a lack of trust comes a lack of legitimacy for the particular political body.

Breaking down political trust further, we can isolate three necessary components for trust to emerge. First, a citizen must simply be aware that an institution exists. While appearing as a simple, given concept, it is necessary to acknowledge that a citizen must be aware of an institution existing and at least a nebulous sense of what the institution does. Citizens, assumedly, are unwilling to blindly trust governmental institutions. If we return to the previous definitions of political trust, we see that trust involves the transfer of responsibility from citizen to institution; if we fail to be aware of what that responsibility is, it becomes difficult to accurately determine whether or not to trust an institution of government.

The second necessary component is that citizens have to believe that the particular institution is working in their best interest. If the institution is perceived as working against the citizen, trusting the institution would not make logical sense. The final component builds on the idea of the institution being perceived as working to advance a citizen's interests. A presumption that the institution is working fails to be enough to guarantee trust. Instead, the citizen must fully believe that the institution is actually furthering his or her interests. If the citizenry perceives the institution as failing to provide the desired outcomes, the institution will slowly begin losing trust and eventually their support.

Party identification has received intensive use as an independent variable in relation to vote choice and party/candidate favorability (Goren 2005; Meier 1975). As Campbell (1960, 121) asserted in The American Voter:

> Few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns take place…Most Americans have this sense of attachment with one party or the other. And for the individual who does the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior.

However, recently scholars have begun to question the truth of Campbell's claim. Writing in 1988, Hedrick Smith (671) claims that "the most important phenomenon of American politics in the past quarter century has been the rise of independent voters." Introductory textbooks now tell students that "voters no longer strongly identify with one of the major parties" (Wilson and DiIulio 1995, 180). The strongest academic arguments against parties have found that "for over four decades the American public has been drifting away from the two major political parties" (Wattenberg 1996, ix). However, as Larry Bartels shows, this information could not be further from the truth. Not only is party identification as important as it was in 1960, it has actually grown in each successive election since (Bartels 2000, 35; Weisberg 2002, 339). Far from "partisans using their identifications less and less as a cue in voting behavior," Bartels widely accepted research shows that partisan loyalties have

never been stronger across the nation (Wattenberg 1996, 27). This further goes to show the importance of political parties being able to have members trust and believe in their organizations for electoral success.

Demographic features are an important cue for voters when selecting a party. As scholars have noted, every major presidential election in the 1990s has its own gender frame from the year of the woman to the impact of soccer moms and NASCAR dads (Carroll 1997; Norris 1997). Anna Greenberg shows how a distinct gender gap has emerged between men and women, with 54% of women voting for Clinton in 1996 compared to 43% of men. Further, she sees a distinctive split amongst women, with economically vulnerable and minority women forming the base of the Democratic Party and upscale women supporting Republicans. Pollster Celinda Lake goes as far as to claim that "women are Democrats, men are Republicans" (Lawrence 1996). Republican pollster Bill McIntruff tends to agree since women are more interested in Medicare, health care, education, and the environment, which are all issues Republicans tend to struggle on (Lawrence 1996). Moreover, women tend to support activist government on a range of economic issues and this preference can easily be linked to candidate approval (Ladd 1997; Seltzer et al. 1997; Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).

African Americans are the most strongly identified group with the Democratic Party. Dawson (1994) argues that class does not explain black political behavior, but rather African Americans rely on a "black utility heuristic" to understand politics (Tate 1993). Thus, African Americans tend to vote for—and support those who adhere to—their group interests. Not even the fact that African Americans demonstrate the highest religious commitment of any group in the United States can push them to the Republican camp (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

Thus, as we have seen, scholars have found that partisanship as well as ideological and policy considerations, the personal characteristics of the contenders for office, group memberships, and

media imagery have played crucial roles in determining candidate evaluations (Goren 2002; Hetherington and Nelson 2003; Markus 1988; Rapoport 1997; Weisberg 2002).

The basic tenet of issue ownership is that particular parties hold reputations for their ability to handle certain issues (Goren 1997). Such reputations give candidates of a particular party credibility when dealing with these issues. By filling the agenda with issues that are considered their strongholds, candidates for public office can enhance their odds for electoral success. David Damore (2004) has devoted much time to examining the effects of increasing the salience of party-owned issues. He finds that voters typically view Republicans as better able to handle foreign policy issues and government management affairs, whereas Democrats are considered strong on social welfare and civil rights. Assuming these arguments to be valid, thermometer ratings for Bush would likely be higher when voters utilize party-owned issues to make their decision.

Numerous other scholars have examined the impact of party attachments as an important source of policy orientations in the American electorate (Jacoby 1988; Rapoport 1997; Whitely 1988). However, it is important to note that some debate has emerged over the impact of party attachments in a candidate-centered era (Rapoport 1997). Just like the political elites act as a cue for voters, so does party identification. As Jacoby (1988) asserts, the stronger one's attachment to his/her party is, the more likely he/she is to possess the same attitude as the party on any given issue. Individual candidates influence the image of the party in more ways than merely through presenting their ideological leanings, however (Rapoport 1997). Rapoport ultimately finds that candidates have an important influence on partisanship in both the long and short-term. Whiteley (1988) fails to believe the evidence that partisanship causes issue perceptions; he finds the results ambiguous and potentially due to mere affective feelings instead of cognitive judgments. In the end, he prefers the stance that party identification affects the sources of issue attitudes, not the attitudes themselves. If we believe this take, then the relationship between party identification and issue

attitudes are based on a series of spurious correlations. Jacoby (2001) explains that the relationship only exists because Republican perceptions of their party's issue positions are different—significantly in many cases—than Democratic perceptions of their party's own issue positions. Jacoby ultimately concludes that it is quite unclear still how partisanship fits into the voter choice model.

III. Design and Methodology

Having briefly reviewed the literature, it becomes clear that many different factors come into play when a citizen is determining favorability (and trust) of a political party. Given that individuals "trust" each other and "have confidence" in institutions, utilizing a feeling thermometer for each party is an accurate measure of judging trust. Low levels of confidence on a feeling thermometer will correspond to lower levels of trust of the party.

The analysis will begin by examining the ratings of each party grouped by self-identification in 2000, 2004, and 2008. By doing so, we will be able to look at the level of party polarization as it relates to whether a respondent rates a party high or low. Next, we will use an open-ended NES question to begin determining causes of favorability. The NES asks respondents if there is anything they like or dislike about each party. By examining what Democrats and Republicans like about their own party (and the other party), we will be able to begin formulating areas where respondents converge with their thinking of each party. Lastly, we will examine regression analyses of the ratings of each party in 2000, 2004, and 2008 to begin determining which individual-level factors are in fact significant in predicting confidence in political parties.

By examining cross-sections of ANES surveys in 2000, 2004, and 2008, I will be able to examine two main questions at once. First, which factors appear to be significant at each time? And secondly, are the independent variables used for judging favorability of political parties over time consistent or inconsistent? Do voters change their cues? The dependent variable for the study is

the feeling thermometers for the Democratic and Republican parties. It is an interval-level variable running from 0 (signifying strongly disapprove) to 100 (the highest possible value). While feeling thermometers have been widely used in survey research since their inception in the 1964 NES survey, there are some methodological problems they present (Anderson and Granberg 1991; Green 1988; Weisberg and Rusk 1970; Wilcox, Sigelman, and Cook 1989). Thankfully, unlike when asked about politicians by name, respondents do not immediately turn to the polar positions when asked to rate political parties. For George W. Bush in the 2004 NES, for example, 30% of respondents rated him as a either a 0 or 100. With the Democratic Party in the same dataset, however, only a little more than 10% placed the party at one of the poles. Consequently, standard deviations are not as severe when looking at feeling thermometers of political parties.

IV. Results

To begin our analysis, a cursory examination of the feeling thermometers for both the Democratic and Republican parties in 2000, 2004, and 2008 is necessary.
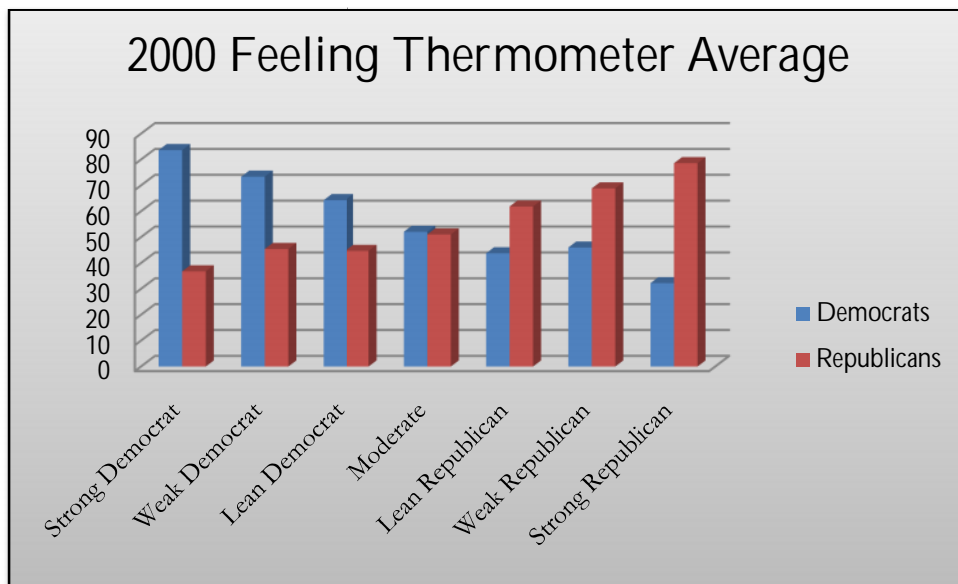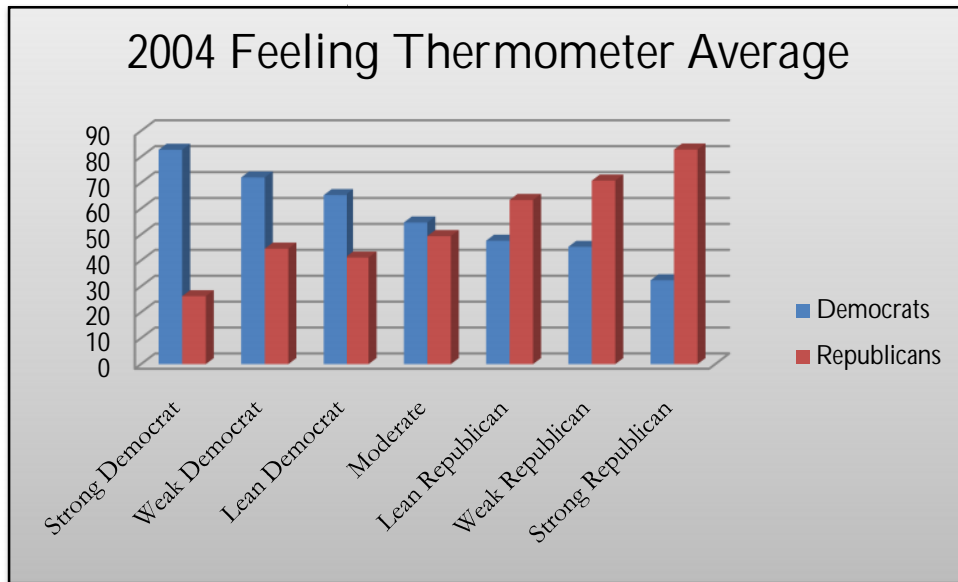
Figure 1

Figure 2

2004 Feeling Thermometer Average

Figure 3

2008 Feeling Thermometer Average
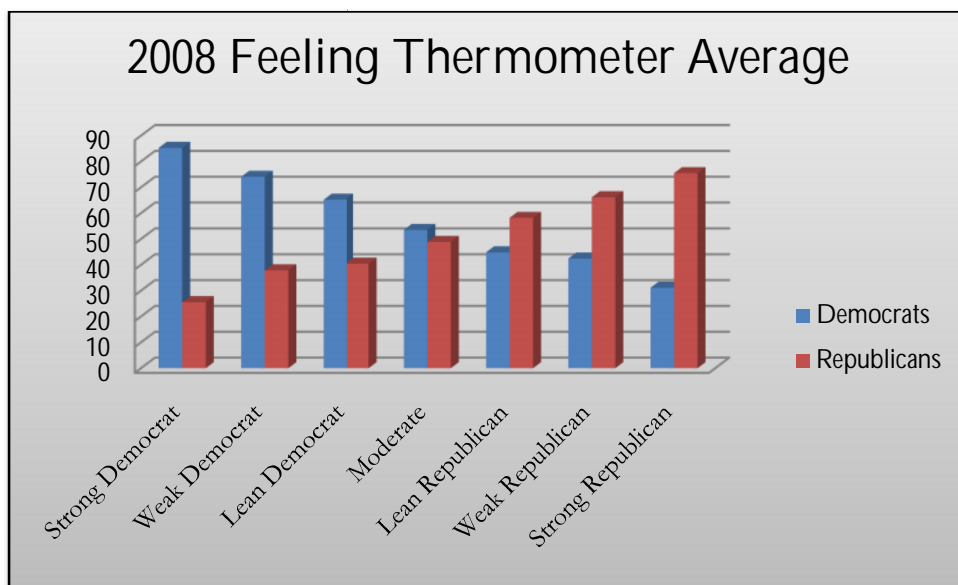
As Figures 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate, as expected, those individuals that identify more strongly with a party subsequently rate that party higher on the feeling thermometer. Party identification clearly dictates ratings of political parties. While the cross-section results are telling with regards to party

identification, an examination of the change over time would also prove fruitful for understanding

the public perception and confidence in the major American political parties.

For a time-based examination, we can look to Figures 4 and 5.
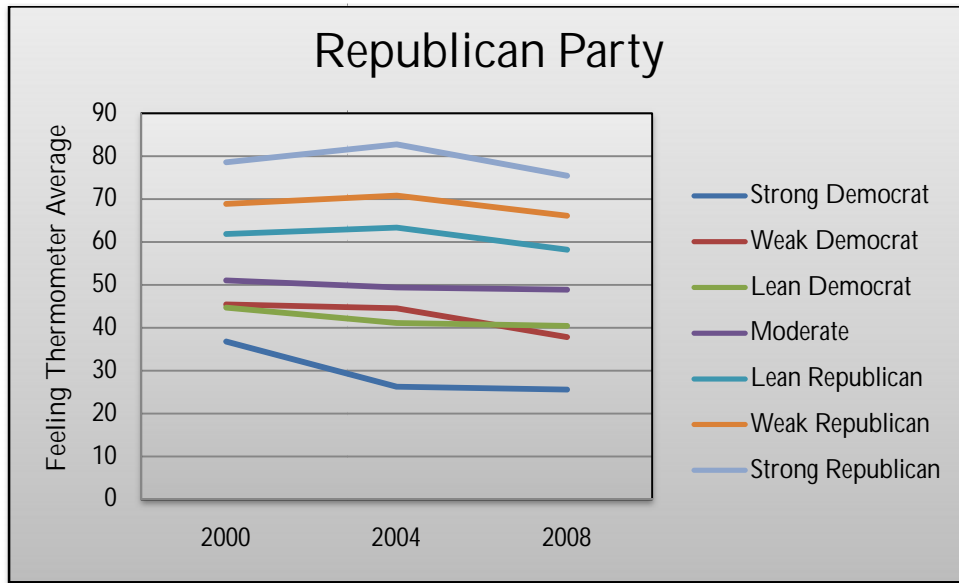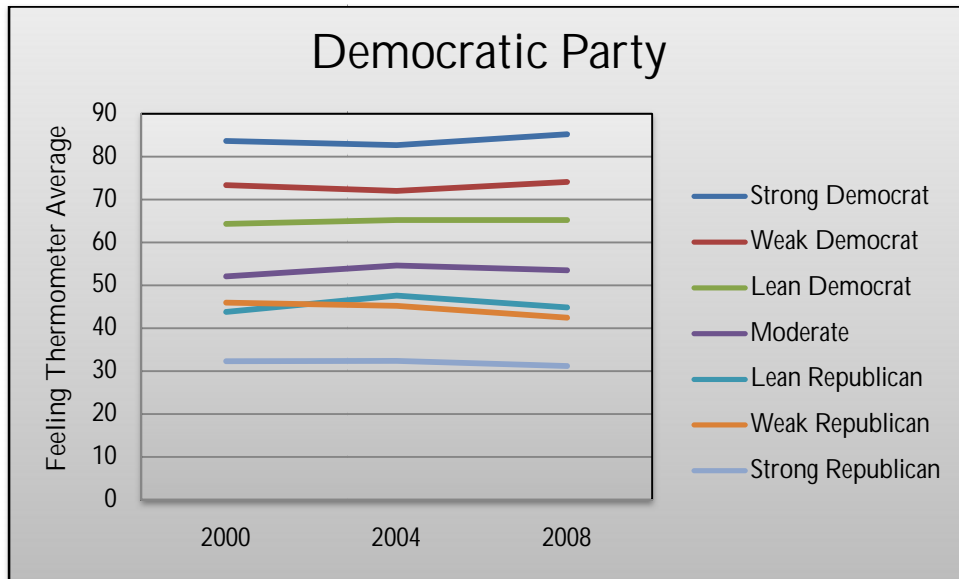
Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 4, focusing on the Republican Party, shows us that in most instances feeling

thermometer ratings have remained about the same between 2000 and 2008 for most levels of

identification. Amongst self-identified Republicans we notice a slight up-tick in thermometer ratings from 2000 to 2004, but a downward turn from 2004 to 2008, ultimately ending below 2000-levels for all three self-identified Republican groupings. Moderates remain consistent from 2000 to 2008 when evaluating the Republican Party. Democrats show a downward trend from 2000 to 2004 and then remain flat for the most part from 2004 to 2008.

On the opposite side, when examining Figure 5, which focuses on the Democratic Party, we find that self-identified Democrats remain level with regards to their party ranking between 2000 and 2004, but show a higher ranking in 2008. Moderates seem to demonstrate a small increase from 2000 to 2004 and a level period in 2008. All Republican-identified respondents suggest a static measure over the eight year period.

What we see between the two figures is a level of consistency. Each identification group within each year remains consistent (except for weak and leaning Democrats who flip-flop on Republicans between 2004 and 2005 and weak and leaning Republicans who flip-flop on Democrats between 2000 and 2004. Overall, strength of partisanship is positively correlated with polarization on thermometer ratings of political parties.

Knowing that this polarization is present, the next step of our analysis will be to utilize open-ended questions on what individuals like and dislike about each party to start teasing out why the polarization exists through respondents' own words. This analysis examines the theory of Tajfel and Turner (1986) that believed partisans are motivated to praise their own group, denigrate the opposition, and exaggerate intergroup differences. The data is available for 2000 and 2004 at the time of this writing.

What Democrats and Republicans like about the Democratic Party

Tables 1 and 2 list out the top five reasons provided by self-identified Democrats regarding what they like about the Democratic Party.

Table 1

2000: What Democrats like about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
The party works for the common man	147
The party works for white collar workers and the middle class	50
The party works for needy and poor people	42
I have always been a Democratic voter	36
The party is more representative of the country	29

Table 2

2004: What Democrats like about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
The party works for the common man	86
The party works for white collar workers and the middle class	30
The party works for needy and poor people	22
I like the party's general ideas and policies	20
The party is liberal	17
I have always been a Democratic voter	17
The party is more representative of the country	17

The results between 2000 and 2004 are fairly consistent. A majority of self-identified Democrats like that their party represents the common man, white collar workers, the middle class, the needy, and the poor. These responses suggest that Democrats appreciate the compassion of their party and their focus on the common man. Other popular responses include that the party is ideologically liberal, that they have always been Democratic voters, and that they believe the party does a better job of representing the nation as a whole.

Tables 3 and 4 examine what Republicans admit to liking about the Democratic Party.

Table 3

2000: What Republicans like about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
The party works for the common man	32
The party works to protect the environment	14
The party is compassionate	12
The party is for government activity and social programs	11
The party works for needy and poor people	11

Table 4

2004: What Republicans like about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
The party works for the common man	23
The party is compassionate	11
The economy is better under their party	8
The party is pro-abortion reform	8
I like other political figures of their party	7
The party favors social change	7
The party works for needy and poor people	7

Self-identified Republicans largely like the same things about the Democratic Party as Democrats do. They value that the party looks out for the common man and displays compassion. Some Republicans go as far as to use the word compassion to describe the Democratic Party. Other answers include that Democrats look out for the environment, support social programs, are willing to consider abortion reform, handle the economy better, and that they in general like other political figures of the Democratic Party.

What Democrats and Republicans dislike about the Democratic Party

Having examined what each side likes about the Democratic Party, we will now turn to examine what people dislike about the party. Tables 5 and 6 present what Democrats dislike about their own party.

Table 5

2000: What Democrats dislike about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
I can't trust the party	21
The party is for big government and spending	16
The party is too liberal	13
The party lacks a definite philosophy	12
The party is poorly organized	10
The party is inefficient and bureaucratic	10
The party spends too much	10

Table 6

2004: What Democrats dislike about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
I can't trust the party	20
The party lacks a definite philosophy	19
The party is poorly organized	11
The party is too liberal	11
I dislike the whole party ticket	10

These tables show that self-identified Democrats mainly believe that they cannot trust their party. Clearly, political trust is an issue of major concern. They also point out that their party lacks a definite philosophy and can be too liberal in some areas. Some complain of the party organization and that the party favors big government and excess spending.

Tables 7 and 8 show what attacks Republicans levy at the opposition party.

Table 7

2000: What Republicans dislike about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
The party is for big government and spending	66
The party is too liberal	44
The party is for higher taxes	26
Bill Clinton	23
I can't trust the party	22
The party would spend more	22

Table 8

2004: What Republicans dislike about the Democratic Party

	Frequency
The party is too liberal	35
The party is for big government and spending	33
The party uses too much money in campaigns and slings mud	16
I can't trust the party	15
The party is pro-abortion reform	13

Republicans have two major complaints that register as the majority in both 2000 and 2004: the Democratic Party is too liberal and favors big government and excess spending. Likewise, the party cannot be trusted, supports higher taxes, and is pro-abortion reform. Of interest in these tables is that in 2000 23 Republicans identified Bill Clinton as something they dislike about the Democratic Party (showing the true partisan nature of the Clinton impeachment) and in 2004 16 Republicans accused the Democrats of slinging mud in campaigns.

What Republicans and Democrats like about the Republican Party

Switching to analyze sentiments toward the Republican Party, we begin with tables 9 and 10, which look at what Republicans like about their party.

Table 9

2000: What Republicans like about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party is conservative	77
The party is against government activity	55
The party is in favor of lower taxes	31
The party is more efficient	20
The party believes in people working hard to get ahead	20

Table 10

2004: What Republicans like about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party is conservative	33
The party is against government activity	24
I like the party's general ideas and policies	21
The party believes in people working hard to get ahead	18
The party is in favor of lower taxes	16
The party is anti-abortion reform	16

Republicans first identify ideological reasons for liking their party. Building on the ideological argument, the second most popular response is that the party is against government activity. In a general assessment, respondents point to the party being more efficient and believing in a work ethic for people to get ahead in life. More specifically, respondents point to the party's commitment to lower taxes and anti-abortion reform as reasons to like the Republican Party.

Tables 11 and 12 present what self-identified Democrats like about the Republican Party.

Table 11

2000: What Democrats like about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party is more efficient	18
The party is conservative	18
The party is in favor of lower taxes	13
The party favors big business	12
The party is well-organized and united	11
I like the party's general ideas and policies	11

Table 12

2004: What Democrats like about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party is conservative	11
The party has a well-defined set of beliefs	9
The party favors a strong military position	9
The party favors big business	8
The party believes in a balanced budget	7
The party handles terrorism better	7

Democrats, like Republicans, appear to appreciate the conservative ideology of the party. On the general front, respondents identify the Republican Party as efficient, well-organized, united, and as having a well-defined set of beliefs. Looking at specific policies, Democrats acknowledge liking that the party favors lower taxes and big business. Likewise, they believe the Republican Party is better equipped to handle terrorism.

What Republicans and Democrats dislike about the Republican Party

Beginning with a reflective light, tables 13 and 14 present what Republicans say they dislike about the Republican Party.

Table 13

2000: What Republicans dislike about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party favors big business	48
The party uses too much money in campaigns and slings mud	16
The party has a poorly defined set of beliefs	16
The party's stance on abortion and birth control	15
The party is poorly organized	13

Table 14

2004: What Republicans dislike about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party favors big business	23
The party is inefficient and bureaucratic	16
The party is anti-abortion reform	14
The party is negative	7
The party is too conservative	7

The most popular response in both years shows that Republicans dislike that their party favors big business. With regard to general traits, respondents identify that the party has a poorly defined set of beliefs, is poorly organizes, is inefficient and bureaucratic, and is too negative. With regards to specific policy issues, we find that the party's stance on abortion and birth control impacts how it is perceived by self-identified Republicans.

Tables 15 and 16 present what Democrats dislike about the Republican Party.

Table 15

2000: What Democrats dislike about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party favors big business	174
The party is too conservative	30
The party is anti-abortion reform	20
The party is anti-common man	16
The party cannot be trusted	14

Table 16

2004: What Democrats dislike about the Republican Party

	Frequency
The party favors big business	107
The party is negative	12
The party is too conservative	12
I dislike the party's general ideas and policies	11
The party is anti-healthcare reform	11

Democrats clearly identify the Republican Party's perceived favoritism of big business as the main negative attribute. They also point to the party being too ideological and conservative. They believe the party works against the common man, cannot be trusted, and is ultimately too negative. With regards to actual policies, they take issue with the anti-abortion and anti-healthcare reform stances of the party.

Bringing it Together

Ultimately, what we see in both the positive traits identified by both Democratic and Republican respondents of the Democratic Party is that both sides see the Democrats as a compassionate party that takes care of the less well off. When examining the dislikes, however, both sides agree on Democratic support of big government and spending to be potentially problematic, but on the other explanations we find self-identified Democrats looking towards party structure as a cause for dislike (no definite philosophy, poorly organized, inefficient, and bureaucratic) while Republicans instead look at specific policy issues (higher taxes, slings mud in campaigns, pro-abortion reform, and Bill Clinton).

When putting everything together how the Republican Party is viewed, we find agreement on the fact that the party is ideologically conservative and favors lower taxes. Likewise, most respondents seem to find that the party is efficient with a well-defined set of beliefs. On the negative side, Democrats and some Republicans alike do not favor the Republican Party's favoritism of big business. Both Democratic and Republican respondents mention disliking the party's stance on abortion reform, consequently suggesting that this is truly a splintering issue within the Republican Party.

It should be noted that these responses only came from those individuals that claimed to like or dislike something about either party. As would be expected, more Democrats had things they liked about their party and disliked about the Republican Party (and the same is true for Republican

respondents). However, the important take-away from this analysis is that largely, the parties like the same things about each other; on the same token, they acknowledge largely the same faults within their ranks that other parties see. While polarization is without question present, there appears to be some common ground. The social identity theory posited earlier, in this sense, may be overstated.

In the final piece of analysis, I will present regression analyses for feeling thermometer rankings of the Democratic and Republican Parties in 2000, 2004, and 2008 to examine what factors influence ratings. Variables are included to account for: national news watching, sociotropic economic situation, egocentric economic situation, ideology, party identification, age, marital status, education, unemployment, union membership, income, being African-American, and gender. Individual issues were not included due to lack of congruence within the NES survey in all three time points of interest. Fully expecting, based on our earlier results, to see party identification and ideology serve as the most significant predictors does open our model up to questions of endogeneity, however the key piece to this regression is to examine what other variables emerge as significant with party identification being accounted for. After all, voters are unlikely, based on previously reported data, to forget their party identification when determining the ratings for each party. Tables 17 and 18 present the findings from the regression analyses.

Table 17

Dependent Variable-Feeling Thermometer—Democratic Party

Independent Variables	2000 Coef.	2004 Coef.	2008 Coef.
National news	.022	.009	-.017
Sociotropic	-.094***	-.067**	-.050
Egocentric	.003	.008	.045
Ideology	.079**	.081**	.091**
Party ID	-.584***	-.622***	-.598***
Age	.042	.030	-.032
Marital status	-.068**	-.029	.015
Education	.014	.059**	.106***
Unemployment	.029	.018	-.007
Union membership	.030	.052**	-.021
Income	-.026	-.033	-.076
African-American	.101***	.072***	.107***
Gender	-.032	-.003	-.021
N	665	953	478
Adjusted R Square	.517	.503	.525
Std. Error of the Estimate	17.341	17.104	17.602
F	55.707	75.088	44.997
Sig.	.000	.000	.000

Note: Figures are standardized coefficients.

Table 18

Dependent Variable-Feeling Thermometer—Republican Party

Independent Variables	2000 Coef.	2004 Coef.	2008 Coef.
National news	-.026	.057**	-.048
Sociotropic	.048	.150***	.123***
Egocentric	-.052	.088***	-.007
Ideology	-.097**	-.111***	-.169***
Party ID	.550***	.551***	.496***
Age	.031	.003	.061
Marital status	.000	.066**	.067
Education	-.089**	-.084***	-.140***
Unemployment	.018	-.027	-.003
Union membership	-.010	-.008	-.083**
Income	.029	-.045	-.020
African-American	-.021	.044	-.012
Gender	-.037	-.027	-.029
N	664	952	478
Adjusted R Square	.357	.524	.476
Std. Error of the Estimate	18.122	18.325	17.726
F	29.353	81.600	37.223
Sig.	.000	.000	.000

Note: Figures are standardized coefficients.

What these results demonstrate are largely what we expect from the literature. Party identification and ideology are consistently strong predictors across both models, regardless of the party in question. These factors lead most clearly to trust of political parties. On the Democratic side, we also see that concerns about the state of the economy at large play a significant role, as does being African-American. For Republicans, lower educated individuals appear statistically more likely to trust the party. While other variables appear as significant in certain years, our main goal in this analysis was to look at what drives trust in political parties consistently across time and as predicted party identification fits the bill.

V. Conclusions and Discussion

In a nation as polarized as America, political parties need to assure that their members are satisfied and trust that the organization is working to further their interests. While strong Democrats will most likely not become disenchanted and wake up one morning Republicans, they may very well separate themselves from the party mainstream and stop financially supporting the party. They may even choose not to vote. We live in a politically-charged era where a president is booed for receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and one party cheers as the Olympics fail to land in the Midwest. With Democrats and Republicans so divide, it is essential for each party to assure that their supporters trust in their work.

For Republicans, in particular, we are witnessing a potential splintering. Michael Steele and Rush Limbaugh both speak independently for separate spheres of the party. As messages clash and seemingly refute one another, we see exactly where trust becomes a key issue. Once citizens lose faith in a political party, it is not a quick process to reassimilate them. Low levels of trust undermine legitimacy. If individuals do not trust or approve of the political party that they belong to, the party will have a more difficult time maintaining consistency in message, persuading individuals to donate money, and ultimately voting on party lines.

This paper began with a discussion of political trust and what factors potentially could lead to the shaping of political trust. However, party identification was largely assumed to be the key component. Our analysis clearly demonstrated that this assumption was correct. Logically consistent, if one chooses to identify as a member of a particular party, one is more likely to rate it highly when asked to on a feeling thermometer. Also following the assumed pattern, the more strongly one identifies with a party, the higher she will rate her party and the lower she will rate the opposition.

When looking at merely the thermometer ratings, such a finding seems to pay homage to the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner. Partisans seem to be more willing to praise their own group, tear down the opposition, and exaggerate their differences. However, when we examine the open-response questions that ask individuals what they like or dislike about a political party, an unexpected congruence emerges. What other parties identify as weaknesses or dislikes of the opposition party, many of that party agree. While Democrats largely chastise the Republican Party for being pro-big business, many Republicans said the same thing. There is more similarity here then Tajfel and Turner would ultimately expect or predict. When given the opportunity to tear down the opposition, respondents take the opportunity, but do so in a fairly constructive manner. Such a discovery suggests that perhaps the American public is polarized, but in a far more civil manner than some of our elected officials.

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