

The Partisans in our Heads*

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To measure people’s perceptions of how various groups are represented in the parties, we conducted a survey in 2013. We told respondents that we had paired them with two randomly chosen respondents from a recent survey, and that one of the individuals was a Republican and another a Democrat. We asked the respondents to guess the economic class, religion, race, gender, age, and union membership status of these hypothetical individuals. Since respondents knew nothing aside from the party to which these individuals belonged, guesses reflect what respondents think are the most common groups within the parties. For instance, if respondents think that atheists are the most common group among Democrats, they are liable to pick “atheist/agnostic” when guessing the Democratic respondent’s religion.

Data

In November 2013, we recruited 403 American adults through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to take part in the study. To better reflect the population at large, we instituted quotas for gender, race/ethnicity, party identification, geographic region, and age using Dynamic Demographic Filtering (Mitts 2014). Potential respondents were given a small amount of money to provide their demographic characteristics. Using this information, we instituted quotas for marginal distribution of each variable. As soon as the quota for one characteristic, e.g. “Democratic identifier”, was filled, respondents who identified as Democratic were rejected.

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While the procedure improved representativeness on the observables on which we filtered—race, gender, party ID, census region, and age—we were unable to fill all the quotas. The table below compares marginal distribution of demographic variables we instituted quotas for to distributions from higher quality surveys.

Table 1: Sample Demographics Compared to Benchmarks

	Sample	2012 ANES	2010 Census
Age			
18-29	24.6%		19.2%
30-49	39.5%		31.7%
50+	33.8%		49.2%
Gender			
Male	51.3%		49.1%
Female	48.7%		50.9%
Race/Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic White/Caucasian	83.7%		63.7%
Black/African-American	4.8%		12.2%
Asian/PI	4.1%		4.8%
Hispanic/Latino	6.0%		16.4%
Native American	0.8%		1.1%
Other/more than one	2.8%		6.2%
Education			
Less than HS degree	0.3%		8.9%
High school/GED	11.7%		31.0%
Some college/2-year degree	38.2%		28.0%
4-year college degree	37.7%		18.0%
Graduate/professional degree	9.9%		9.3%
Party Identification			
Democratic (inc. leaners)	55.2%	49.0%	
Republican (inc. leaners)	30.6%	39.0%	
No party preference/Other	14.2%	11.9%	
Census Region			
Midwest	23.2%		21.7%
Northeast	16.8%		23.3%
South	37.2%		37.1%
West	22.9%		17.9%

Measures

We asked respondents: “We recently conducted a representative survey of Americans. We have randomly paired you with two respondents from that survey (one Democrat and one Republican). We would like you to give us your best guess about the backgrounds of the two respondents. We will first ask you about Respondent (randomly generated number), who is a (Democrat/Republican).” (Order of targets was randomized.)

We then asked respondents about their perceptions of Respondent (randomly generated number) on the characteristics given in Table 1 in the paper.

Results

According to the 2012 ANES, the actual modal categories for Democrats are: middle class (self-identified), mainline (“other”) Protestant, White, female, aged 50 and over, and not a union member. For Republicans, they are: middle class, mainline (“other”) Protestant, white, male, aged 50 and over, and not a union member.

We start by describing people’s perceptions of the modal racial group in the parties. An overwhelming majority of respondents guessed that the hypothetical Republican was white (the modal category among Republicans); over 97% of both Democrats and Republicans thought that the Republican to whom they were paired was white (see Table 2). However, although 60% of Democrats are non-Hispanic white, and just 22% black (Newport 2013), roughly one-fifth of Democrats and nearly a quarter of Republicans guessed that the paired Democratic respondent was black. The finding is consistent with past research. When asked which groups come to mind when you think about Democrats, 40% of respondents in a 1997 Roper survey said “minorities” (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002).

A similar pattern appears in perceptions of modal religious group in the parties. Although fewer than 10% of Democratic supporters are atheists or agnostics, roughly one-quarter of both Democrats and Republicans guess that the hypothetical Democrat is one. On the other hand, perceptions of modal religious group within the Republican Party are more heterogenous. Large

Table 2: Respondents Deviate From Modal Categories in Guesses About Democrats and Republicans.

	Guesses About Democrats		Guesses About Republicans	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Economic class				
Poor	8.9%	18.9%	6.3%	4.7%
<i>Middle class</i>	89.1%	69.9%	57.3%	81.1%
Rich	2.1%	11.3%	36.5%	14.2%
Religion				
Atheist/agnostic	25.0%	24.5%	1.6%	2.8%
Catholic	19.8%	17.0%	26.1%	19.8%
Evangelical	8.3%	7.6%	42.2%	21.7%
<i>Other Protestant</i>	37.0%	31.1%	27.1%	50.9%
Jewish	4.2%	6.6%	0.5%	1.9%
Other	5.7%	13.2%	2.6%	2.8%
Race				
<i>White</i>	80.2%	73.6%	97.4%	98.1%
Black	18.2%	24.5%	1.0%	1.9%
Asian	1.6%	1.9%	1.6%	0%
Gender				
Male ^R	54.2%	48.1%	93.2%	86.8%
Female ^D	45.8%	51.9%	6.8%	13.2%
Age				
18-35	47.9%	39.6%	8.9%	11.3%
36-50	44.8%	48.1%	59.9%	64.2%
50+	7.3%	12.3%	31.3%	24.5%
Union Membership				
Union member	30.7%	42.5%	7.8%	14.2%
<i>Not a union member</i>	69.3%	57.6%	92.2%	85.9%
<i>n</i>	192	106	192	106

Notes. Modal categories are in italics except for gender, where modal categories differ across parties. For gender, the superscripted initial indicates the party.

proportions of both Democrats and Republicans think that the modal Republican is evangelical, though Democrats are far more likely to think so. Democrats guessed that the hypothetical Republican was evangelical more often than any other category (42%). But just one-fifth of Republicans identified their hypothetical co-partisan as evangelical rather than the modal mainline Protestant.

Moving to socioeconomic categories, a large proportion of both Democrats and Republicans identified the hypothetical Democrat as belonging to a union despite union membership being quite

rare among Democrats. The proportion of Republicans who incorrectly believed that to be case was substantially higher. However, more Republicans also identified the hypothetical co-partisan as belonging to a union than not belonging to one.

In terms of social class, more than a third of Democrats believed the hypothetical Republican to be rich, while Republicans were far less likely to do so. By contrast, nearly one-fifth of Republicans guessed that the hypothetical Democrat was poor. Both groups of respondents were far more likely to be correct about the tendency of members of their own party to identify as middle class than about that tendency among out-party supporters. This may reflect greater reliance on prototypes when thinking about the out-party. Or, given “middle class” is a positively-loaded term, these results may reflect partisans’ desire to apply positively-valenced attributes to their own party.

Similar perceptual errors appear for age, although we are hesitant to read too much into these results. Although we used dynamic filtering to improve representativeness on age, older respondents proved difficult to recruit. Thus, these results on age may reflect misperceptions, or the tendency to extrapolate from their (younger) peers.

References

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