

The Partisans in our Heads

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Abstract

Which social groups do people associated with the two main political parties? To learn that, we conducted a survey in 2013. We told respondents that we had paired them with two randomly chosen respondents from a recent survey, a Republican and a Democrat. We asked the respondents to guess the economic class, religion, race, gender, age, and union membership status of these (hypothetical) respondents. Since respondents knew nothing about these respondents except for the party, guesses likely reflect what respondents think are the modal groups in the parties. People are much more likely to think that the modal Republican is rich, old, white, male, and non-union member than the modal Democrat.

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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, a Republican and 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 about these individuals except for the party, 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 and 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 with the Democratic party were rejected.

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. Table 1 presents comparison between 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 (incl. leaners) | 55.2% | 49.0% | |
| Republican (incl. 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 2 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

Table 2: Guesses of Modal Traits of 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.

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

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 believe that is substantially higher.

More than a third of the Democrats believe that the hypothetical Republican is rich, while Republicans are far less likely to think so. By contrast, nearly one-fifth of Republicans guess that the hypothetical Democrat is poor. Both groups of respondents are far more likely to be correct about the tendency of members of their own party to identify as middle class than about the same 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-valenced term, the pattern 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 the tendency to extrapolate from (younger) peers.

References

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