Perceptions of the Partisan Homogeneity of Social Groups

A Report to the NES Board of Overseers

By

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Abstract

As has been often noted, groups and their alignments with the parties are important points of orientation for citizens' maps of the political world. In the 1997 NES pilot study, respondents were asked about their perceptions of the partisan homogeneity of social and political groups using two different question formats. In this report, we compare these formats. In addition, we examine the origins of perceptions of partisan homogeneity and their consequences for inferences about groups' ideological locations. We find that perceptions of group-party alignment are generally shaped by political knowledge. For certain groups, affect towards the group, in combination with one's own party membership, is also influential. For inferences about a group's ideology, we find that perceptions of partisan homogeneity increase the use of party locations to makes inferences about the group's ideological location.

For the 1997 NES pilot, the planning committee devised a battery of questions to assess the degree to which the electorate stereotypes groups in terms of their partisan political loyalty. For six groups–blacks, whites, men, women, gays and lesbians, and Christian fundamentalists –respondents were first asked to indicate how they thought the group tended to vote in national elections, Democratic, Republican, or evenly split. Whether Democratic or Republican appeared first in the question was randomly assigned. If respondents chose one of the parties, they were then randomly assigned to one of two follow-ups. In the first, and simpler version, they were asked whether "almost all" of the group voted Democratic (or Republican), coded as yes or no. In the second version, they were asked what percentage of the group voted Democratic (or Republican).[1] They were assisted in this task by the following: "If you think all (group) vote Democratic (Republican), then you would say 100 percent. If you think only a few more than half vote Democratic (Republican), you might use a number closer to 50 percent. You can use any percentage between 50 and 100 percent."[2]

In this pilot report, we discuss five things: 1) the impact of order in the stem question; 2) differences in the simple and percentage-estimate follow-ups; 3) whether perceptions of groups' partisanship are accurate; 4) what explains variability in perceptions of partisan stereotypicality; 5) whether these variations matter for making inferences about groups' ideological locations. We close with a recommendation regarding the future use of these types of questions.

I. The impact of party order

Table 1 displays the response categories for the first question by order (Republican first versus Democratic first) and type of group. In no case does the order make a statistically significant difference, although it comes closest for blacks (χ^2=5.8, $p < .06$) and women (χ^2=2.95, $p < .22$).

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[1] The percentage estimate task is modeled after the work of Charles Judd and colleagues. They find that this task is a reliable measure of group stereotypicality, an important component of perceived group variability (Park and Judd 1990). Stereotypicality is "the extent to which the group as a whole is viewed as fitting or differing from the group stereotype" (Park and Judd 1990). The first question on the pilot in effect asks respondents whether or not they think of the group stereotypically; i.e., what is the central tendency of the group. The second question (either in its simple or percentage estimate version) asks people, in effect, *how* stereotypic is the group. As such, the second question (again, in either form) is a measure of stereotype strength (Park and Judd 1990; Sedikides and Ostrom 1992).

[2] Logically, if a respondent thought the correct answer was exactly 50 percent, they should have said "evenly split" to the first question. We should have written the last sentence to read "any percentage between *51* (not 50) and 100," as a few respondents did say 50 percent.

II. Differences in the type of follow-up

In one version of the follow-up question, respondents were asked whether "almost all" of the group votes for the party selected in the stem question. Column two of Table 2 presents the percentage of respondents who, having chosen one party or the other in response to the first question, answered "yes" to this version of the follow-up. In the other version, respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of group x that votes for the selected party. Column three displays the mean percentage. The response pattern for the two versions is very similar; in fact, the correlation between them (n=12) is .69 ($p < .01$), indicating that when a group was seen as more homogeneous in the first version of the follow-up (that is, a larger percentage said "yes"), it was also seen as homogeneous in the second version (that is, the mean is higher). Of course, the second version is more precise, but it comes with a higher price tag in terms of question time. Interestingly, however, it does not appear to produce more missing data, contrary to our initial suspicion that the complexity of the question would prompt more people to bail out.

III. The accuracy of party-group stereotypes

To what extent are people's political stereotypes accurate? Until recently, "accurate stereotype" was thought to be an oxymoron, because by many a definition, stereotypes were considered to be inaccurate beliefs, or at least exaggerations of a "kernel of truth" about a group. To a large extent, this view emerged from early research in social cognition which tended to emphasize error, bias, and laziness in information processing. However, more recent research has moved away from this perspective, instead seeing people as more flexible and motivated, and as a consequence, stereotype accuracy has become a legitimate topic of investigation (see Lee, Jussim, and McCauley 1995; Judd, Ryan, and Park 1991; Park and Judd 1993). Both overestimation and *underestimation* of group differences have been detected, but so has substantial accuracy in perceptions.

Assessing accuracy in our particular case has some empirical complications, some stemming from general considerations involved in assessing accuracy (see Judd and Park 1993) and others due to the particulars of the six groups we are studying. In general, in order to determine accuracy, one needs a criterion. In this case, we will use the self-reported presidential vote choices (as measured in the NES) of members of the groups under study except gays and lesbians, as sexual orientation is not assessed. For sex and race, category membership is easily measured. For Christian fundamentalists, on the other hand, defining who is a member of the group is more difficult (see Kellstedt and Smidt 1996). For this group, we use both a beliefs-based definition (those who say that the Bible is "the actual word of God and is to be taken literally") and self-identification, when available. In addition, we will distinguish between blacks and whites within this category.

As the question asks people how various groups tend to vote in national elections, Table 3 presents the percentage Democratic vote for each of the five groups in the last three elections. If we use these figures, an accurate answer to the stem question would be Democratic for blacks,

evenly split for men and whites, and Republican for Christian fundamentalists. For these four groups in which accuracy is easily assessed, substantially more than half of the public gets it right in each case. In the case of women, the correct answer is more ambiguous, but if "correct" is defined as Democratic, the public is less accurate.

What about perceptions of the group's political homogeneity? To assess accuracy here, we focus only on those respondents who were given the percentage estimation task or said "evenly split" to the first question. We created a variable for each group that ranged from 0 (100% Republican) to 100 (100% Democratic). (Respondents who said "evenly split" to the first question were give a score of 50 on this variable). The mean percentage for the six groups is displayed in Table 4.

This analysis reveals that on average, people underestimate blacks' Democratic partisanship by quite a bit, but for the other groups for which accuracy can be judged, average perceptions correspond fairly closely to the reported voting behavior of the groups.

IV. Where do perceptions of partisan stereotypicality come from?

To answer this question, we decided to combine both versions of the follow-up into one variable as follows: If a respondent replied 75% or more to the percentage estimate question, this was treated as equivalent to saying "yes" in the first version of the follow-up. While this 75% rule does not yield exactly the same proportions as the first follow-up, there is enough correspondence between the two in our view to be worth the convenience of combining across the two versions for the purposes of more extensive analysis. (See Table 5).

This new variable is scored -1 (if yes to simple Republican follow-up or 75% or more to the Republican percentage estimate task) to +1 (if yes to simple Democratic follow-up or 75% or more to Democratic percentage estimate task). Respondents who replied "evenly split" to the first question were given a score of 0, as were those who replied 50% to the percentage estimate task (see note 2). Respondents who said "no" in response to the simple follow-up or gave percentage estimates between 51% and 74% were given scores of -.5 or +.5, depending on whether they were given the Republican or Democratic version of the follow-up.

Each group variability variable was regressed on political knowledge, interest in politics, respondent's own partisanship (using only the first party id question), and the feeling thermometer rating for the relevant group. In addition we created an interaction between respondent's partisanship and feeling thermometer rating of the group and an interaction between group membership and respondent's partisanship.[3] The rationale for the first interaction is

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[3] For blacks, whites, gays and lesbians, and Christian fundamentalists we use the feeling thermometer ratings obtained in the 1997 pilot. Sometime after interviewing began, the feeling thermometers for men and women were pulled, leaving only 130 cases for analysis. When the

offered by Brady and Sniderman's (1985) "likeability heuristic." Partisans who like (dislike) a particular group will be more inclined to guess that the group shares (does not share) their partisanship. The second interaction tests the idea that if one is a member of the social group in question, one is more likely to assume that other group members share one's partisanship. For gays and lesbians, group membership cannot be ascertained. For men, women, blacks, whites and Christian fundamentalists, we use *subjective* rather than objective group membership. For men, women, whites and blacks, this is measured by whether one feels "close" to the group in question, as ascertained in the "groups close" battery in the 1996 post. For Christian fundamentalists, group membership is based on the response to the 1996-pre question asking whether fundamentalist best described the respondent's Christianity.

Results of this analysis are displayed in Table 6. First notice that there is a tendency for people to assume that the groups in question do not share their partisanship. For five out of the six groups, the coefficient on respondent's partisanship is negative, and in all but one of these, statistically reliable. Only in the case of perceptions of blacks is this "negative projection" moderated by respondent's group membership. Political knowledge and in two cases, political interest, also shape stereotypicality. Those with more knowledge, for example, are more likely to see blacks as Democratic and Christian fundamentalists as Republican, an unsurprising finding. Finally, liking the group also influences perceptions, depending on one's own partisanship. If a Democrat, for example, feels warmly towards gays and lesbians, s/he is more likely to think the group is generally Democratic. And Republicans who like gays are more likely to see them as Republican-leaning.

The case of Christian fundamentalists is more complex. They are the only group for which attitude toward the group exerts a direct effect on group partisanship. This is modified, however, by the interaction of partisanship and attitude towards the group. Because independents are coded 0, the coefficient on the feeling thermometer is picking up the effects for independents (because the interaction is 0). The more independents like Christian Fundamentalists, the more Democratic they are perceived.

V. Partisan Homogeneity and Ideological Inference

Perceptions of group variability are thought to be important for influencing how people use their stereotypes; more homogeneous perceptions make people more willing to apply their stereotypes to individual members of stereotyped groups. In the present case, this means that people in general should be more willing to assume that any given Christian fundamentalist is a Republican than to assume such category membership for any given man.

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regression is done for these two groups using just these cases, nothing is significant. Therefore, the results for men and women in Table 6 do NOT include either the group feeling thermometer or its interaction with party identification.

There are other potential implications of partisan homogeneity. For example, people who perceive groups to be more homogeneous may feel more threatened by them politically if they do not share the group's dominant partisan orientation. We leave it to those interested in group threat to explore this hypothesis. We focus instead on one potential cognitive implication of partisan homogeneity, the degree to which perceptions of partisan homogeneity influence how party information is put to use to make inferences about the group's political leanings.

In the 1997 pilot, people were asked to place themselves, the parties, and these six social groups on an ideology scale. Our model assumes that when thinking about this question with respect to these groups, people may use both their own position and their perceptions of the parties to make inferences about groups' positions. But each of these heuristics is regulated, the first by whether one is a member of the group in question. If one feels close to women, for example, one may feel more confident about using one's own ideological beliefs as a cue to the group's location. For the second, confidence in using the parties' positions should depend on whether an individual believes the group to be homogeneous or heterogeneous.[4] In addition to these heuristics, one may also use knowledge about politics to judge a group's location.

Table 6 displays the results of this analysis. We note only in passing that ideological self-location, even in conjuction with group membership, does not appear to be a very powerful heuristic. We focus chiefly on the interactions between stereotypicality and perceptions of the parties' locations. Notice that in the case of each group, the interaction with Democratic, but not Republican, location, is significant. Because the stereotypicality measure is coded -1 (very Republican) to +1 (very Democratic), these coefficients indicate that when a group is seen as increasingly Democratic, people *assimilate* the group's position to the Democratic party's. When the group is seen as increasingly Republican (i.e, towards -1), people *contrast* the group away from the Democratic party position. To take an example, suppose a person sees women as very Democratic as a group (that is, a score of 1 on the stereotypicality measure). For this person, the coefficient on Democratic ideological location is .48 (.34+.14). For a person holding exactly opposite perceptions (that is, a score of -1 on the stereotypicality measure), the coefficient is -.20.

We would expect that the coefficient on the interaction with Republican party location to be of opposite sign (i.e., the more Democratic a group is seen, the more it is contrasted away from the Republican position), and for four groups this is true, although only one of these coefficients is significant. This may reflect the strong negative correlation between Democratic and Republican placements on the ideology scale (r=-.48), so the interactions are essentially

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[4] It is possible, of course, that the process works the other way. For example, if Christian fundamentalists are routinely described as conservative and people see them as a highly Republican group, then people may use their perceptions of the group to make an inference about the Republican party's ideological location. In either case, however, it is perceptions of partisan homogeneity that regulate the strength of the inference, which is our central point.

measuring the same thing.

Because people who see the groups as "evenly split" are coded 0 on the stereotypicality measure, the interaction drops out, leaving the coefficients on the party location variables to measure the impact of party positions on group locations for those people who see the group as balanced. Note that for whites and men, both coefficients are positive, indicating that people use both parties' positions to judge where these two groups stand, reflecting, perhaps, that in the aggregate (see Table 4), these groups are viewed as evenly split, and therefore, their ideological location is a mixture.

VI. Summary and Recommendation

We believe that this pilot report has demonstrated that partisan stereotypicality can be measured easily using a two-question branching format. This method of measurement is a much more direct, and in our view, preferable way to assess the strength of association between groups and parties than the alternatives such as factor analysis of group feeling thermometers (Miller and Wlezien 1993; Weisberg, Hayes, and Krosnick 1995) or the group mentions in the open-ended questions (Miller and Wlezien 1993; Baumer and Gold 1995).

We have suggested one way in which partisan stereotypicality might be influential. There are probably other ways in which it matters for feelings and beliefs about the political world, but we leave it up to others to assess these.

Since these questions are simple (particularly if the simple follow-up question is used) and can be adapted easily to fit the context of a given campaign by using different groups, it may be useful to consider using them in an election year study, particularly if one is interested in seeing how perceptions change as a function of campaign rhetoric and media coverage. We might predict, for example, that over the course of the 1996 campaign, women were perceived as increasingly Democratic as the "soccer mom" metaphor infiltrated the consciousness of even less attentive citizens. The same may be true for Christian fundamentalists, as their "takeover" of the Republican party was highly publicized. Linkages forged between groups and parties have implications for the parties' abilities to "own" issues (Petrocik 1996) and their popularity (Miller and Wleizen 1993), and so seem worthwhile to us to measure in election year surveys.

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Table 1–Order of Party Mention		
	Republican First	Democratic First
Blacks		
Republican	4.6%	1.2%
Democratic	70.0	70.4
Evenly split	12.1	14.9
Whites		
Republican	21.5	21.2
Democratic	9.2	8.5
Evenly Split	69.3	70.3
Men		
Republican	27.2	24.2
Democratic	10.9	13.1
Evenly Split	61.3	62.7
Women		
Republican	5.1	3.5
Democratic	43.7	38.1
Evenly Split	51.2	58.4
Christian Fundamentalists		
Republican	55.6	55.6
Democratic	8.7	8.9
Evenly Split	35.7	35.5
Gays and Lesbians		
Republican	5.6	4.4
Democratic	58.3	56.6
Evenly Split	36.1	39.0

Table 2–Correspondence between simple and percentage follow-up		
Blacks	% saying all	$\bar{x}_{\text{percentage}}$
Republican (14)	25.0%	63.0
Democratic (333)	48.5	70.7
Whites		
Republican (45)	22.2	63.2
Democratic (105)	22.7	64.9
Men		
Republican (128)	17.5	63.6
Democratic (59)	13.8	65.1
Women		
Republican (22)	14.3	66.9
Democratic (199)	10.7	64.7
Christian Fundamentalists		
Republican (138)	31.3	75.3
Democratic (34)	22.2	62.3
Gays and Lesbians		
Republican (21)	30.0	67.1
Democratic (136)	50.4	73.3

Note: The number of respondents choosing Republican or Democratic in response to the first question is indicated in parentheses.

Table 3–Percent Democratic Vote (2-party)–NES data								
	Blacks	Whites	Men	Women	Christian Fund. (beliefs) B	W	Christian Fund (self-id) B	W
1988	91.8	41.0	43.5	50.0	90.7	36.6	NA	NA
1992	94.5	53.3	55.0	55.0	91.3	39.1	100	31.2
1996	99.0	53.4	51.1	63.8	100	45.4	100	36.0*

* In the 1997 pilot, Christian fundamentalists were added to the list of groups asked about in one version of the "groups close" battery If we use this form of self-identification to measure membership, the percent Democratic vote among whites in 1996 who feel close to Christian fundamentalists (as measured in 1997) was 24.1.

Table 4–Mean % Democratic by Group	
Group	**Mean Percentage (n)**
Blacks	61% (318)
Whites	49 (430)
Men	49 (405)
Women	53 (384)
Christian fundamentalists	41 (255)
Gays and Lesbians	59 (293)

Table 5–Correspondence between two versions of follow-up question		
Group	**Simple follow-up–% Yes**	**%age estimate (75+)**
Blacks		
Republican	.3%	.6%
Democratic	26.7	23.5
Whites		
Republican	2.8	1.6
Democratic	1.2	.9
Men		
Republican	2.7	2.4
Democratic	1.0	2.2
Women		
Republican	.5	.8
Democratic	2.8	4.5
Christian Fundamentalists		
Republican	26.0	21.6
Democratic	1.3	1.0
Gays and Lesbians		
Republican	1.0	1.0
Democratic	20.5	19.9

Table 6–Origins of Perceptions of Group Partisanship						
	Blacks	Whites	Men	Women	Christian Fund.	Gays/Lesbians
R's partisanship (-1=Rep., 0=Ind,+1=Dem)	-.242** (.093)	-.18* (.08)	-.05* (.02)	.03 (.03)	-.11 (.10)	-.34*** (.06)
R's group membership (1=member, 0=not)	-.02 (.06)	-.001 (.03)	.01 (.04)	-.01 (.03)	.08 (.08)	NA
Political knowledge (0 to 3 correct)	.10*** (.02)	.02 (.03)	-.05* (.02)	.05*** (.02)	-.11*** (.03)	.11*** (.02)
Political Interest (1=most of time, 0=hardly at all)	.21** (.07)	.01 (.05)	-.08 (.06)	.16*** (.05)	-.12 (.09)	.04 (.08)
Group Feeling Thermometer	-.001 (.001)	-.000 (.001)	see note 3	see note 3	.005*** (.001)	-.001 (.001)
R's partisanship x Feeling Ther.	.001 (.001)	.002* (.001)	see note 3	see note 3	.004* (.002)	.005*** (.001)
R's partisanship x Group membership	.20*** (.04)	.02 (.04)	.05 (.05)	.001 (.04)	-.12 (.09)	NA
Constant	.20* (.09)	-.07 (.08)	.08 (.05)	-.01 (.04)	-.33** (.12)	.14* (.07)
Adj. R^2	.12	-.003	.02	.05	.17	.16
N	468	481	493	498	333	411

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *** $p \leq .001$ ** $p \leq .01$ * $p \leq .05$

Table 7–Stereotypicality and Ideological Inferences						
	Blacks	Whites	Men	Women	Christian Fund.	Gays/Lesbians
R's Group Membership	-.23 (.26)	-.29 (.17)	-.23 (.23)	-.56** (.20)	-.35 (.58)	NA
Self Ideological Placement	-.03 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.03 (.04)	-.08* (.04)	.001 (.03)
Group Member x Self Placement	.07 (.07)	.08 (.04)	.08 (.06)	.14** (.05)	.08 (.13)	NA
Dem. Party Location	.09 (.06)	.13** (.04)	.14*** (.04)	.09* (.04)	-.07 (.07)	.10 (.07)
Rep. Party Location	-.17** (.07)	.14** (.05)	.26*** (.05)	-.01 (.05)	.13 (.08)	-.06 (.08)
Political Know-ledge	-.01 (.06)	.05 (.05)	-.06 (.06)	-.13* (.06)	.23** (.08)	-.13 (.07)
Stereotypicality	-1.4* (.68)	.25 (.86)	-.76 (.82)	-2.12* (.93)	-.88 (.95)	-1.43 (.88)
Stereotypicality x Dem. Location	.24** (.08)	.22* (.11)	.29** (.10)	.34** (.11)	.32* (.12)	.39*** (.11)
Stereotypicality x Rep. Location	.02 (.10)	-.26* (.12)	-.10 (.12)	.15 (.14)	-.16 (.14)	-.02 (.13)
Constant	4.2*** (.48)	2.9*** (.36)	2.6*** (.38)	3.8*** (.40)	4.4*** (.63)	3.2*** (.61)
Adj. R^2	.25	.12	.13	.13	.31	.20
N	373	386	381	384	276	322