# 1 *Toward a Theory of Party Image Change*

WHILE THE IMPORTANCE and study of party identification has been duly noted, the study of party images—individuals' perceptions or stereotypes of political parties—has received significantly less attention. Based on the extant literature, we know the contents of party image (Matthews and Prothro 1964; Trilling 1976; Sanders 1988) and the impact of party image on candidate evaluation (Rahn 1993). Less explored are the conditions under which individuals' party images can be altered. Studies (e.g., B. Campbell 1977; Carmines and Stimson 1989) have observed changes in party behavior and attempted to link them to similar changes in partisan alignment. Scholars, however, have not examined changes in party image at the individual level. More specifically, scholars have not incorporated party activities into models of party image change. As a result, we do not know which party strategies alter party images and what circumstances moderate the strategies' impact. This chapter seeks to develop a theoretical framework for understanding when party images can be reshaped. In particular, I answer the question of whether aesthetic changes unaccompanied by corresponding changes in policy positions can alter voters' perceptions of political parties along a particular dimension. I argue that a party will succeed in reshaping its image when voters perceive the new image as different from the old.

## Party Images

Each of the two major parties[1] is associated with political symbols—policies, candidates, and constituencies—that give meaning to these

1. The discussion of political parties in this project is limited to the behavior of the national organizations.

organizations for members of the U.S. electorate.[2] Sears (2001) explains, "When presented to us, these political symbols rivet our attention and evoke strong emotion. These emotions are dominated by a simple good-bad, like-dislike evaluative dimension" (15). Since affective evaluations of the parties are a function of their symbolic components, political parties manipulate the symbols with which they are connected to gain favorable evaluations and ultimately electoral victory. Parties seek to manipulate not only which symbols get associated with their party but also the meaning individuals assign to these symbols.

The totality of the political symbols one associates with a political party is known as a *party image*. Party images form because at some point, political parties become synonymous with certain policy positions and groups in society. Petrocik (1996) suggests that

> parties have sociologically distinctive constituencies and the linkage between a party's issue agenda and the social characteristics of its supporters is quite strong, even in the United States. It is a completely recursive linkage: groups support a party because it attempts to use government to alter or protect a social or economic status quo which harms or benefits them; the party promotes such policies because it draws supporters, activists, and candidates from the groups. Issue handling reputations emerge from this history, which, by the dynamics of political conflict, is regularly tested and reinforced. (828)

These reputations develop into an individual's party image (the "voter's picture of the party") and guide subsequent evaluations of a party (Matthews and Prothro 1964). Party image is not the same as party identification. While the two concepts are related, party image differs in that "two people may identify with the same party but have very different mental pictures of it and evaluate these pictures in different ways" (Matthews and Prothro 1964, 82). Trilling (1976) argues that "an individual's party image not surprisingly is likely to be related to his party identification, but his party image will consist less of purely psychological, affective components and more of substantive compo-

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2. Borrowing Sears's (2001) definition, a political symbol is "any affectively charged element in a political attitude object" (15). The political attitude object in this study is a political party.

nents" (2).[3] Milne and MacKenzie (1955) describe party images as "symbols; the party is often supported because it is believed to stand for something dear to the elector. It matters little that the 'something' may be an issue no longer of topical importance; the attachment to the symbol, and the party, persists" (130). Symbols in this case denote not simply mascots and insignias but also candidates, issue positions, and historical events that exemplify a political party.

Each element can be categorized as either policy oriented or devoid of policy. For example, an individual can associate the Republican Party with issue positions such as opposition to affirmative action, opposition to big government, or support for capital punishment. Individuals can also link the Republican Party with more symbolic icons such as the GOP elephant, Ronald Reagan, Trent Lott, and George W. Bush. Likewise, the Democratic Party can be represented by the Democratic donkey, the Kennedys, or Jesse Jackson. Issue positions associated with the Democratic Party could include support for affirmative action or support for social spending. Thus, party image consists of all the substantive components a person associates with a given political party.

Moreover, party image incorporates the interpretation individuals assign to these components. According to Elder and Cobb (1983),

> While a symbol references some aspect of reality external to the individual, precisely what is referenced is often unclear and varies from one person to another. When a person responds to a symbol, he is responding not simply to external reality but to his conception or interpretation of that reality. Thus, the meaning he gives to the symbol will be based on information and ideas he has stored away in his mind. To understand how symbols acquire meaning, we must inquire into the kinds of cognitive meanings that a person has available to assign to a symbol. (40–41)

In this sense, two individuals' party images can contain the same symbols but ultimately differ by the meaning these symbols signify. For example, two individuals can associate Trent Lott with the Republican

3. The key difference between party image and party identification is that party image is the foundation on which party identification is built. Essentially, party image provides the basis for liking one party over another. As mentioned earlier, people can have different party images but the same party identification. Party image is how people perceive the party, and party identification is the evaluative outcome of what individuals perceive.

Party but can reach different conclusions about where the Republican Party stands on race depending on whether they view Lott as racially conservative. Thus, party images are subjective and can vary across individuals. Regardless of interpretation, the symbols and the meaning assigned to them by an individual can potentially be used in evaluations of party activity. Consequently, evaluations of a party depend not only on what exists in an individual's party image but also on what is noticeably absent and how the individual makes sense of all this information.

Citizens develop their partisan images (also referred to as partisan stereotypes) through socialization and through (direct and indirect) encounters and experiences with party members (Rahn 1993). Information used to form party images can come from the parties themselves or from competing sources of political information such as the media or other political organizations. The information is filtered through the individual's political predispositions. Interactions with political parties shape not only the political symbols people associate with a given party but also the interpretation people lend to those symbols. Further, an individual's experiential knowledge also guides the affective weight he or she places on those political symbols. The affective valence and the salience of these symbols and the interpretation individuals assign to the symbols (i.e., the frames individuals use to make sense of the symbols) then guide party preferences.

Understanding party images is important because of the role these images play in the political process. Party images shape how individuals perceive political parties and can affect not only how people vote but also whether they choose to engage in the political process at all. As a result, party images can affect who wins and loses elections, which ultimately affects which interests are represented in the political arena.

It is no wonder, then, that political elites often attempt to reshape party images when seeking electoral success. After all, they must keep up with the changing face of the political landscape. First, the nature of political competition changes from election to election. Second, the electorate experiences demographic changes. Finally, issues rise and fall in importance. Thus, political parties must adapt to their changing environment. This includes altering the way different groups in the electorate perceive the political parties.

When attempting to reshape a party's image, however, political elites face a dilemma—they must attract new voters while maintaining their current support base. One way a political party might reshape its

image is by adopting new issue positions. But as scholars note, doing so will likely upset current constituents and confuse potential voters. The alternative is to reshape the party's image in a more cosmetic way. Specifically, a party can use different representational images to convey to voters that the parties have changed without making any substantive changes to the party's platform. But does this strategy work?

## *Altering Party Images*

While the party image literature does not currently address the question of what incites modifications in individuals' party images, we can glean some insight from research on party evaluations in political science and research on stereotypes in social psychology. If we consider a party image a form of stereotype, then social psychology research suggests that party images may be updated in the face of inconsistent information. Partisan stereotypes as well as stereotypes in general can be thought of as a schematic structure. A *schema* is a "a cognitive structure that organizes prior information and experience around a central value or idea, and guides the interpretation of new information and experience" (Zaller 1992, 37). Thus, schemata allow us to interpret what is ambiguous, uncertain, or unknown by applying it to a standing, known framework that exists in our heads. Schemata can be used in making inferences about events, other people, and ourselves. For example, when we encounter new people, we use either ascribed (e.g., age, race, sex) or achieved (e.g., experience or training) characteristics about that person to activate a set of role-based expectations about that person (Fiske and Taylor 1984). Fiske and Taylor (1984) assert that "one way to think about stereotypes is as a particular type of role schema that organizes one's prior knowledge and expectations about other people who fall into certain socially defined categories" (160). Political party stereotypes, then, would be "those cognitive structures that contain citizens' knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about the two major political parties" (Rahn 1993, 474).

Accordingly, when an individual has associated an event, issue, or person with a particular stereotype, he or she then ascribes the stereotypic content to that situation, regardless of how much or how little the situation may actually resemble the stereotype (Fiske and Taylor 1984, 160). "The main principle of schematic memory is that the usual case overrides details of the specific instance" (Fiske and Taylor 1984, 162). For example, when individuals have identified a candidate as a

Democrat, in the absence of additional information they will attribute all the features of what they imagine a Democrat to be to that candidate, regardless of whether that candidate is a moderate or ideologically at the extreme left.

When an individual receives new information, updating the stereotype depends on whether the newly presented information conflicts with existing knowledge. If the information presented in the stimulus is consistent with individuals' existing schematic information, they will encode that information and store it in their memory with the rest of the relevant considerations. Fiske and Taylor (1984) explain that "inconsistent behavior requires explanation, which takes time when the information is encountered—that is, at encoding. If people can attribute inconsistent behavior to situational causes, they can forget the behavior and presumably maintain their schema-based impression" (164).

This process of absorbing consistent information more readily than inconsistent information has a reinforcing effect on stereotypes in general (Fiske and Taylor 1984) as well as on partisan stereotypes in particular (Rahn 1993). Partisan stereotypes or images consequently are not easily altered because party images "are not created de novo" (Rapoport 1997, 188) each time voters receive new information about the parties as they would during a campaign. Current party images constitute the starting point from which new evaluations begin (Rapoport 1997, 188). Hence, when individuals encounter inconsistent information, they must weigh that information against all previously received information. In a sense, prior beliefs have an anchoring effect on how people encode new information.

This is not to say that party images or stereotypes cannot be altered. Rahn (1993) examined under what conditions people abandoned their use of party stereotypes when evaluating a candidate. Using an experimental design, Rahn tested to see whether people would incorporate policy information into their candidate evaluations when the policy information associated with a candidate was incongruent with the candidate's party affiliation. Rahn's results show that voters "neglect policy information in reaching evaluation; they use the label rather than policy attributes in drawing inferences; and they are perceptually less responsive to inconsistent information" (492). Furthermore, she found that even when voters faced extreme inconsistency, people still relied on their partisan stereotypes to make candidate evaluations. But

at the same time, she admits that her results are not absolute. For example, Rahn speculates that voters may abandon their partisan stereotypes when the inconsistency is even more extreme or involves an issue that is particularly salient to the voter (487).[4] In other words, stereotypes should break down when people can substitute an equally salient alternative means of categorization (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Hamilton and Sherman 1994).

If we consider party image a form of party evaluation, then the literature suggests that party images shift only when the parties switch positions in salient issue domains. The structure and dynamics of party evaluation have long been debated, with the debate centering on the question of whether party preference (usually measured by party identification) was fixed or malleable. Early studies (e.g., Downs 1957) modeled party preference as a function of an individual's issue positions relative to those of a party's position. This model assumed that voters updated their party preferences when they perceived changes in the platforms of a party or experienced changes in personal policy positions. In the Downsian sense, party evaluation was a continuous process. In contrast, party identification as conceptualized by A. Campbell et al. (1960) posited a view of party preference that was rooted in early childhood socialization and experienced very little alteration in later years. This perspective viewed party identification as a lot less malleable and more stable over time. In other words, party preference had very little to do with the evaluation of a party's activities but rather resulted from a psychological attachment to a party inherited from one's parents.

Subsequent studies have found that party preference lies somewhere between the two extremes. For example, Fiorina (1981) contends that while party identification is updated by changes in political factors, it is still ingrained in past policy preferences. Similarly, Jackson (1975) argues that "voting decisions are largely motivated by evaluations of where the parties are located on different issues relative to the persons' stated positions and to a much lesser extent by party identifications unless people are indifferent between the parties on issues" (183). Jackson contends that party preferences are "motivated by individuals' desires to have public policy reflect their own judgments about what

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4. For additional evidence on the abandoning of partisan stereotypes in connection with issue saliency, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994.

policies should be followed and by the policies each party and its candidates advocate. Parties are important, but only if they constitute policy oriented, politically motivated organizations reflecting the distribution of positions among voters and competing for the support of the electorate" (183–84).

These and other studies show that party preferences are "more than the result of a set of early socializing experiences, possibly reinforced by subsequent social and political activity" (Franklin and Jackson 1983, 968). Rather, support for a political party depends on that party's ability to maintain some congruence between its platform and an individual's issue positions. In this sense, Franklin and Jackson (1983) argue that "although previous partisan attachment acts to restrain change, it is like a sea anchor, which retards drift rather than arrests it entirely. If the tides of policy evaluation are strong enough, conversions can and will take place" (969). And in fact, scholars have found that shifts in partisanship among political elites (Clark et al. 1991; Adams 1997) and among the mass electorate (Carmines and Stimson 1989) occur when parties adopt salient issues that create key distinctions between them and individuals attempt to realign themselves with the parties' positions on this issue.

To summarize, the social psychology and political science literatures suggest that party images will be updated when voters face inconsistent information and attempt to realign the new version of the party with the old. Updating party images, however, will be contingent on the perceived level of inconsistency. More specifically, altering party images is a two-step process. First, the party must project an image of itself that is inconsistent with its existing image. Second, the change must be large enough to meet an individual's threshold for what constitutes real change.

### Meeting the Threshold

To spread the word that they have changed in some way, political parties will usually launch a campaign during the course of an election cycle. As Iyengar (1997) contends, "In the television era, campaigns typically consist of a series of choreographed events—conventions and debates being the most notable—at which the candidates present themselves to the media and the public in a format that sometimes resembles a mass entertainment spectacle" (143). According to Kinder's (1998) definition, campaigns are "deliberate, self-conscious

efforts on the part of elites to influence citizens. Campaigns expend various resources—money, organization, technique and expertise, words, symbols, and arguments—in an attempt to influence what citizens think, what they think about, and ultimately, what they do" (817).

As they strive to shape public opinion and behavior during the course of a campaign, elites construct frames, which are "rhetorical weapons created and sharpened by political elites to advance their interests and ideas" (Kinder 1998, 822). Framing is the process by which elites define and construct political issues or events (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Through framing, elites try to shape the meaning or interpretation people assign to events, candidates, and issues. Frames allow elites to influence what information people deem applicable to their evaluations. In other words, frames used within the context of a campaign remind prospective supporters of the relevance of "pre-existing political attitudes and perceptions" (Bartels 1997, 10).

Essentially, elites create frames in an attempt to invoke specific feelings, opinions, and ideas that potentially translate into mobilization and/or support while displacing sentiments that might work to the detriment of the elites' goals. The assumption is that if certain emotions or beliefs can be brought to mind, the outcome of an evaluation can ultimately be altered. As Kinder (1998) explains, frames "spotlight some considerations and neglect others, thereby altering the mix of ingredients that citizens consider as they form their opinions on politics" (822). Frames also "lead a double life" by serving as "cognitive structures that help individual citizens make sense of the issues that animate political life. They provide order and meaning; they make the world beyond direct experience seem natural" (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 164). In this sense, framing "is both a process and an effect in which a common stock of key words, phrases, images, sources, and themes highlight and promote specific facts, interpretations and judgments, making them more salient" (Tucker 1998, 143).

Altering party images is no more than reframing citizens' pictures of a political party. Existing party images are the initial set of emotions, symbols, and beliefs people use to describe a party. When reshaping party images, political elites seek to reconstruct these frames. During a campaign, parties will project a frame or an image of themselves and hope that individuals will adopt the same framing of the party.

Much like partisan stereotypes, the frames people possess come primarily from elite debate. "[P]ublic opinion depends not only on the circumstances and sentiments of individual citizens—their interests, feelings toward social groups, and their political principles—but also on the ongoing debate among elites" (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 163). Nevertheless, individuals can reject the frames they dislike, rework the frames they adopt, or create their own frames (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 165). As Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) argue, "People think for themselves, and media and official versions of problems and events make up only part of their schema for public issues" (112). This point is crucial, because it speaks to individual agency in controlling just what information will apply to any political scenario.

Thus, the key to altering party images is knowing when and why individuals will reject the newly framed version of the party. It is not enough for elites to project a new image; citizens must be willing to accept the new picture of the party. For each party and each issue domain, individuals will set the lower boundary for determining what signifies change when called on to revise their party images. The party's projected image will be incorporated into people's partisan stereotypes when it meets or exceeds the height of the bar for determining what constitutes a new party. This can prove to be somewhat difficult, however. Because the height of the threshold varies across individuals, meeting the threshold is like trying to hit a moving target. Moreover, the political arena includes alternative sources of information that affect whether people believe that parties have met expectations.

Figure 1 depicts the process of changing a party image. The reshaping process begins with the party projecting a new image along some dimension or dimensions. The first hurdle to overcome is the party's existing image. Each political party has long-standing reputations for handling certain issues. On other issues—usually newer or less salient issues—the party may have less known positions or no positions at all. A party will have an easier time reshaping its image on these issues because individuals will require less convincing that the party has changed. Here, the bar is set low because little information is available to contradict the new image of the party. When trying to modify its image in issue domains in which its reputation is more entrenched, however, parties face an uphill battle. Parties have more difficulty convincing the electorate that they have suddenly changed when they have
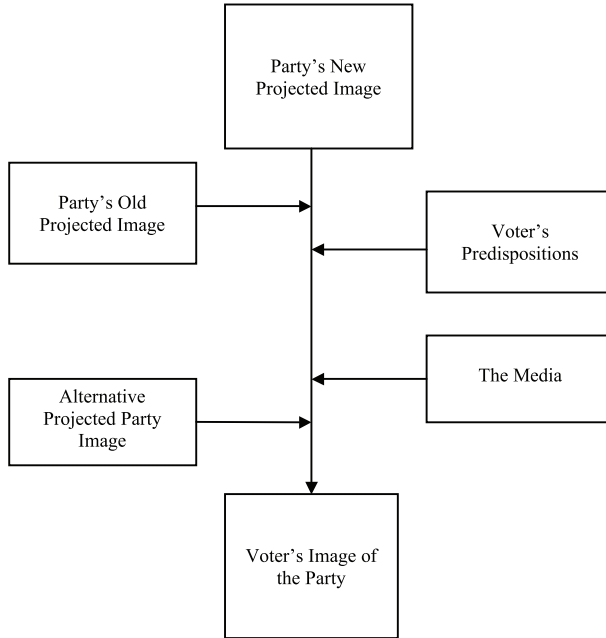
Fig. 1.    Hypothesized process of party image change

spent decades building an image in a particular domain than in starting from scratch to build a reputation with respect to another issue area.

The second impediment to party image change is transcending the predispositions of voters. As is evident from prior work on campaign effects, susceptibility to elite discourse is not universal (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; A. Campbell et al. 1960; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Brannon 1993). Individuals' willingness to adopt the frames they receive from elites (including candidates, party strategists, and the media) depends largely on individuals' predispositions and attentiveness to the message (Zaller 1992). Adopting Zaller's (1992) definition, predispositions encompass the "variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept—or alternatively, their resolve to resist—persuasive influences" (22). This definition implies that while predispositions may manifest themselves as some attitudinal dimension (e.g., egalitarianism, party identification, racial prejudice), predispositions are made of information gathered through direct and indirect encounters with the political

and social world that give meaning to the predisposition. In other words, an individual's preference for one party over another is not simply guided by some hollow liking for that party. Rather, an individual's preference for one party over another is based on the political symbols that give meaning to the party for that individual.

Predispositions affect the process of party image change by determining what information becomes encoded into party images. Predispositions predict whether individuals will accept the cosmetic changes made by a party or demand changes to the party's platform before altering existing party images. As noted earlier, individuals can have the same party image but have different party identification. Conversely, people can have the same party identification but have drastically different partisan stereotypes. It is quite possible to be a strong partisan because of a party's position on one issue but to place little value on the party's position in other issue domains. Therefore, when a party tries to reshape its image along a particular dimension in which it has a well-established position, the party will make the most headway among those individuals who place relatively little importance on that issue. Under these circumstances, the threshold for change will be lower, regardless of party identification. Party identification may explain some but not all responses to a party's attempt to reshape its image.

Finally, the success of a campaign is affected by what other information is available to the campaign's targeted audience. The success or failure of a campaign can hinge on whether the information is one-sided or if competing frames exist. For example, Zaller (1992) argues that "the most important source of resistance to dominant campaigns . . . is countervailing information carried within the overall stream of political information" (253). He finds that when "people are exposed to two competing sets of electoral information, they are generally able to choose among them on the basis of their partisanship and values. . . . But when individuals are exposed to a one-sided communication flow . . . their capacity for critical resistance appears quite limited" (253). Thus, the presence of conflicting information can prohibit political parties from meeting the threshold for change. With respect to reshaping partisan stereotypes, two important sources of information include the media and alternative projections of the party's image.

Because political information is usually filtered through the media, they play an important role in the process of party image change. In attempting to reach a large audience, political parties must rely on the

media. But the media do not passively participate in the political process. They have the ability to present as much or as little of a party's campaign message as they choose. The media also have the capacity to put their own spin on the message a party is attempting to convey to voters. When a party projects a new image, the media can decide not to highlight the change or can remind voters that the new image does not differ substantially from the old. In this case, parties will find it hard to meet the threshold of change in voters' minds.

In addition, to convince citizens that a party has changed, it must project a consistent image. Political campaigns are undermined when party members engage in activities that otherwise contradict the new image of the party. The incongruity confuses voters. Because the party bears the burden of proof of change, voters are more likely to keep their existing images than to modify them.

### Racial Symbolism

The remaining chapters will empirically test the proposed process of party image change. While party images can have many components, I focus only on the part of a party image that relates to race. One of the most (if not the most) persistent cleavages between the two major parties has been race. As Carmines and Stimson (1986) put it,

> Race has deep symbolic meaning in American political history and has touched a raw nerve in the body politic. It has also been an issue on which the parties have taken relatively clear and distinct stands, at least since the mid-1960s. Finally, the issue has had a long political life cycle. It has been a recurring theme in American politics as long as there has been an American politics and conflict over race has been especially intense since the New Deal. (903)

In fact, scholars have posited race as the underlying determinant of partisan division (B. Campbell 1977; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Frymer 1999; Valentino and Sears 2005). Because of the highly salient cleavages surrounding race, the subject provides an interesting backdrop for the examination of how elites can use symbolic images to reshape party images. Moreover, if we can identify conditions under which a party succeeds in changing the racial component of its image and the meaning assigned to that component, we may also apply this information to other less salient issues.

If claims about the role of race in party politics are correct, citizens

support political parties in large part (although not necessarily exclusively) based on perceptions of the parties' racial symbolism or reputation with respect to race. *Racial symbolism,* as it is used in this study, is the interpretation an individual assigns to a political party's activities based on all of the racial, political, and social symbols that have come to be associated with that party. It is the frame individuals use to give meaning to a party's race-related activities. Racial symbolism is the product of the symbols in a party's image, the racial valence of those symbols, and the weight of each symbol. To be included in an individual's perception of the racial symbolism of a political party, a political symbol must receive a racial valence. It must also have an affective tag (whether the individual likes or dislikes the symbol) and a weight (importance). Thus, as figure 2 illustrates, the interpretation of a party's race related activities depends on the political symbols associated with the party, whether these symbols are racialized, the affective evaluation of the symbol, and that symbol's importance to the individual.

For example, if the political symbol in figure 2 were Jesse Jackson, for him to be included in an individual's perception of the racial symbolism associated with the Democratic Party, the individual would first have to recognize Jackson as a racialized figure. Second, the individual would have to place some importance on Jackson. If Jackson was not salient to the individual, Jackson would not factor into the individual's calculus. Finally, the individual must have an affective evaluation of Jackson—that is, view him as either a positive or negative figure. If all three conditions are met, Jackson could then be used to evaluate the Democratic Party's racial symbolism. As an important, positive, racialized symbol, Jackson would yield a positive racial symbolism associated with the Democratic Party. The opposite would be true if he were a negative figure.

As a subsection of one's party image, racial symbolism can then be used to make subsequent evaluations of a party. Provided that a political party's race-related activities are salient to people, they can make more global evaluations of a party based solely on the party's racial symbolism. For example, when asked whether they like a political party, people can recall the racial symbolism of the party and answer based on this information rather than draw on a totality of information about the party stored in their memories. If a political party is perceived to have a positive racial symbolism and an individual values this
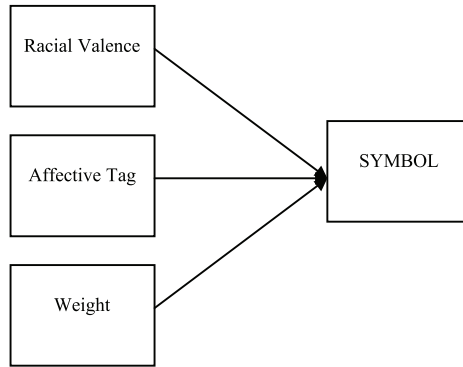
Fig. 2.   Racial symbols

criterion, then the individual will give the party a positive affective evaluation. Similarly, if an individual is racially conservative and associates a political party with a negative racial symbolism, that individual will have a positive affective evaluation of the party.

When attempting to revise their racial symbolism without altering their policy positions, the two major parties have to find representational images that convey change. For the Republican Party, this means using images that convey racial liberalism. Likewise, the Democratic Party must link itself with images that evoke racial conservatism. More specifically, the Republican Party must update its image from the one described earlier to the Big Tent, which incorporates icons such as Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and the Rock into the party ranks while maintaining the same policy orientation. The Democratic Party now reverts back to the party of Strom Thurmond and George Wallace while keeping its liberal position on affirmative action and social spending.

Is increasing the presence of African Americans or racial conservatives enough to alter the racial symbolism associated with a political party? According to Sears (1993), a "group represents an attitude object like any other and therefore evokes affective responses in the same manner. Groups may behave like other political symbols, mainly evoking symbolic predispositions (as in patriotism or nationalism or class solidarity)" (127)—or, in this case, as in racial conservatism or racial liberalism.

What about the other images associated with the party's racial sym-

bolism? The ability to overshadow the other political images associated with a party's racial symbolism depends on the importance of the other symbols. When the (unchanged) policy-oriented symbols are more important, images will not be enough.

## Improving Party Evaluations by Altering Party Images

The underlying assumption behind the theory of party image change is that altering party images should lead to electoral gain. In other words, if the parties reshape their images, these changes should lead to a subsequent improvement in individuals' affective evaluations of the parties. Affective evaluations of the parties are a function of the affective evaluations of their symbolic components. As Sears (1993) explains, "[M]ost attitude objects contain multiple symbols. In the symbolic politics view, each such symbol should evoke the specific evaluation associated with it, with overall evaluation of the full attitude object being some simple function of those individual evaluations" (125). For example, if the negative racial symbolism associated with the GOP resulted in negative evaluations of the party, replacing this racial symbolism with a new framing of the party should improve overall affective evaluations.

The challenge to this proposition is that political elites must make the racial symbolism of the party applicable to more general evaluations. People possess multiple bits of information that may affect their understanding of a given concept. For example, thinking about the Republican Party may bring to an individual's mind a host of considerations, including specific candidates associated with the party, the party's ideology, or particular policies and issues owned by the party. This point is critical because, as Zaller (1992) notes, "[I]ndividuals do not typically possess 'just one opinion' toward issues [or in this case parties], but multiple potential opinions" (38). The considerations used to form an opinion or make an evaluation are cued or signaled by an individual's environment. How might this process work?

The human mind, at least in terms of information processing, can be divided into two components: the long-term memory and the working memory. The long-term memory can be described as "a library of information whose main property is the more or less permanent storage of vast amounts of data" (Lodge et al. 1991, 1358). Similarly, long-term memory has been conceptualized as a "knowledge store" that contains "a network of constructs including information about

social objects and their attributes (OA); goals, values, and motivations (GVM); and affective or emotional states (AS)" (Price and Tewksbury 1997, 24). These networks of constructs, analogous to schemata, hold together potentially associated bits of information. The knowledge store contains the full range of stereotypic considerations associated with any given concept.

An individual does not draw on all of this information when making a judgment, however. In instances where people need to make an assessment, only the information in working memory is used. Working or active memory is "where information is consciously attended to and actively processed" (Lodge et al. 1991, 1359). At any given moment, only a fraction of the knowledge store moves into the working memory. Further, the constructs that become activated tend to be the most accessible, defined by recency or frequency of use. The more a construct has been repeatedly or recently used, the more accessible or salient that construct is.

Activation occurs when an actor receives a stimulus from an external source—in this case, a campaign message. The individual's activated schemata guide the way the information presented in the campaign message is encoded. The activated schemata then provide a framework for interpreting the meaning of the campaign message and will influence what information from the campaign message the perceiver stores (Cohen 1981, 50). When an individual tries to retrieve the previously stored information about the campaign message, the relevant schemata will be reactivated to fill in what is unknown or forgotten about the stimulus (Cohen 1981, 50). After information has been activated—that is, transferred from the long-term to the working memory—actors must conduct their evaluation, whether voting or answering a survey question, by "averaging across accessible considerations" (Zaller 1992, 49).[5]

During the course of a campaign, political elites attempt to activate particular constructs to be transferred into working memory. The goal

5. This model of information retrieval is consistent with both memory-based and impression-driven or online processing. The memory-based model assumes that the evaluation is based on some mix of pro and con evidence, while the online model assumes the existence of a "judgment tally" that is updated as new information is introduced. Either way, when presented with a stimulus, some form of existing knowledge must be retrieved. Furthermore, evidence suggests that "people sometimes rely on their memory of likes and dislikes to inform an opinion, while at other times they can simply retrieve their on-line judgments" (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989, 401).

of the stimulus is to define what considerations are applicable to the situation. "A construct is deemed applicable, and is likely to be activated, when its key features correspond to the salient features of the stimulus" (Price and Tewksbury 1997, 31). Referring back to the Republican Party's racial symbolism, by displaying the party's racial diversity and invoking the name of Abraham Lincoln, the campaign message should prime people to link thoughts of racial inclusiveness with the Republican Party. As Price and Tewksbury (1997) note, however, success in priming particular considerations for activation for evaluation depends on the overlap between the existing stored constructs (and their accessibility) and the information presented in the stimulus. If the stimulus presents individuals with an undefined concept or a consideration that does not currently exist in their long-term memories, they may add a new construct that can be used in future evaluations.

The weighting process is a function not just of how much information is balanced against the new information but also of how salient the prior constructs are. When certain constructs are repeatedly activated, they become chronically salient. If this occurs, the chronically accessible considerations tend to be activated when making relevant decisions, regardless of the intentional or unintentional priming of other constructs by environmental stimuli. For example, when making presidential evaluations, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that differences in the susceptibility to certain primes occurred among individuals along partisan lines. Specifically, they found that "priming is strengthened among Democrats for problems that are prominent on the agenda of the Democratic Party, among Republicans for problems that are prominent on the agenda of the Republican Party" (96). The authors conclude that priming effects are reduced among individuals who are predisposed to reject the prime.

In sum, the same campaign that catalyzes the process of party image change with respect to a particular issue domain can also prime the use of that section of party image in affective evaluations of the party. Because of the recency and salience of the construct, it should be front and center in voters' working memories, ready for use in their political decision making. Reshaping party images along a particular dimension, however, does not necessarily guarantee a subsequent improvement in overall evaluations of the parties and their candidates. Citizens have some autonomy in the priming process and can substitute another

aspect of party image that is more salient to their daily lives. In this case, individuals will revise their party image but not apply the new framing of the party to more macro evaluations of the party.

### *From Theory to Practice*

Testing the central proposition that aesthetic changes unaccompanied by corresponding changes in policy positions alter voters' perceptions of political parties when voters perceive the new image as different from the old requires identifying an instance when such a strategy was employed. As discussed in the introduction, the 2000 Republican National Convention offers an excellent test case. The Republican convention can be thought of as a campaign. Beginning in the early 1950s, a series of reforms shifted the selection of presidential nominees from the conventions to state-level primaries and caucuses. As a result, the convention has become less a "deliberative body" and more an "extended, four-day infomercial" (Karabell 1998, 7). During conventions, the parties present the unifying themes of that election cycle.

The 2000 Republican National Convention was no exception. The slogan integrated throughout the convention program, "Renewing America's Purpose. Together," characterized the goals of the Republican Party for the 2000 election cycle. These objectives included making the party more attractive to minority voters:

> We offer not only a new agenda, but also a new approach—a vision of a welcoming society in which all have a place. To all Americans, particularly immigrants and minorities, we send a clear message: this is the party of freedom and progress, and it is your home. ("Republican Platform 2000")

To achieve this goal, the convention featured notable minority Republican leaders and supporters. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate that the party did not alter its position on racial issues such as affirmative action. How, then, did the use of racial images resonate among those exposed to the convention? Applying the theorized process of party image change, I argue that the impact of the convention is a function of the Republican Party's historical reputation for handling race, how much of this history citizens find relevant, the media's willingness to convey the party's message undistorted, and party members' ability to commit to the theme and avoid engaging in activities that would contradict its new projected image.

First, to have an impact, the display of diversity had to have been inconsistent with voters' existing pictures of the party. This was indeed the case. Six months prior to the convention, 79.0 percent of blacks and 49.2 percent of whites believed that the Democratic Party better represented the interests of blacks. In contrast, only 12.3 percent of whites and 4.2 percent of blacks believed that the Republican Party better represented African Americans. Moreover, 72.5 percent of blacks and 48.6 percent of whites believed that the Democratic Party was better able to improve race relations, while 18.9 percent of whites and 6.5 percent of blacks believed the Republican Party would do a better job.[6] These figures indicate that shortly before the convention, the Republican Party was not perceived as racially liberal, at least relative to the Democratic Party. Given the contradictory nature of the 2000 Republican National Convention, I hypothesize that exposure to the convention will improve perceptions of the GOP's racial symbolism.

Second, when attempting to reshape party images, we also know that a balancing act takes place between what individuals already know and the new information being presented. The stronger the existing information, the harder it will be to incorporate new information. In the case of the 2000 Republican National Convention, I expect African Americans to be the most resistant to the use of diverse racial images to signal change since African Americans place a higher premium on the parties' policy positions. National survey data provide support for this claim.

Table 1 presents summary statistics from the 1996 American National Election Study and shows that prior to the 2000 election cycle, African Americans were more likely than whites to believe that racial issues such as social spending and government aid to blacks were extremely important. African Americans were also more likely than whites to see a difference between themselves and the Republican Party on the same issues. Because of the importance blacks place on racial issues and the relative distance from the GOP on these issues, exposure to the 2000 Republican National Convention will have less of an impact on blacks.

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6. These figures were estimated using the CBS News Monthly Poll #1, February 2000, obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (available at www.icpsr.umich.edu).

TABLE 1.   **Importance of and Placement on Racial Issues, by Race (in percentages)**

|  | Importance of Racial Issues | |
|---|---|---|
|  | Social Spending | Government Aid to Blacks |
| African Americans | 36 | 53 |
| Whites | 25 | 18 |

|  | Placement on Racial Issues Relative to the Republican Party | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Social Spending | | Government Aid to Blacks | |
|  | No Difference | More Liberal | No Difference | More Liberal |
| African Americans | 23 | 75 | 17 | 62 |
| Whites | 40 | 50 | 28 | 25 |

*Source:* 1996 American National Election Study.

Third, regardless of the individual's race, the impact of convention exposure will be moderated by alternative projections of the party. When people are exposed to versions of the convention in which the party's racial outreach is not highlighted or when the race strategy is discussed in conjunction with other aspects of the party that have not changed, the magnitude of the effect of convention exposure will be minimized. Likewise, framing the Republican Party as illegitimately winning the presidency will have negative consequences for people's perceptions of the GOP's racial symbolism, undermining any headway made during the convention. Conversely, the Republican Party will have more success in reshaping its party image when citizens are informed that in 2004, the party repeated the effort initiated during the 2000 election cycle as a sustained commitment to racial diversity.

## Conclusion

As political parties seek additional votes at the margins, they make small, superficial changes to their images. Voters' receptivity to these changes depends on a number of political and social factors often outside the party's control. This book primarily delineates some of these elements. In what follows, I will show that for some voters, cosmetic changes are enough to change perceptions of political parties. For others, however, the issue-relevant elements of a party image are more important. For this second set of voters, their image of a party will change only if the party changes its policies—aesthetic modifications will not be enough.