

3 Party Image over Time, Contemporary Party Images, and the Prospects for Change

Attachments to partisan labels live long beyond events
that gave them birth.

—V. O. Key Jr., 1949

BASED ON THE HISTORICAL background provided in chapter 2, we know that both the Republican and Democratic Parties have engaged in a range of activities in an attempt to convey to the electorate on which side of the racial divide the parties have stood. From symbolic to legislative strategies, both parties have attempted to attract either African Americans or racially conservative whites. Neither party, however, has permanently stayed on one side of the fence. Teetering back and forth, the Democratic and Republican Parties have adjusted their strategies based on their electoral prospects at any given moment. In light of these historical activities, I now turn to examining how the parties' actions have manifested in people's perceptions.

First, I use the 1948–2002 American National Election Study (ANES) to gauge racial symbolism over time. Since 1952, the ANES has asked a set of open-ended questions designed to assess respondents' perceptions of political parties. I use these responses to ascertain whether individuals believed that a party had positive racial symbolism—that is, that the party was good for blacks and other minorities—or negative racial symbolism. (For a more detailed description of the data and methodology, see the appendix.) To bolster these findings, I also examine perceptions of the two parties on the issue of government aid to blacks and other minorities. This item is the only other question asked in repeated years in which respondents' had to assess the political parties along some racial dimension. Specifically, people were asked to place both parties on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 was “government

should help minorities” and 7 was “minorities should help themselves.” (See the appendix for exact question wording.)

Second, I examine contemporary party images using a series of qualitative focus groups and interviews. Participants in the qualitative study were asked about the Democratic and Republican Parties in general and then asked specifically about the two parties’ ability to handle issues related to race. (See the appendix for details about the qualitative study.) Like the open-ended questions asked by the ANES, the qualitative study allowed respondents to articulate in their own words their perceptions of the two parties. Unlike the survey questions, however, the qualitative interviews and focus groups enabled me to follow up and probe responses in greater detail.

When attempting to reshape their images along a particular dimension, parties will have more success when their existing reputation in that area is not particularly well established in the minds of the members of the electorate. Therefore, this chapter seeks to investigate the obstacles the two major parties must overcome when trying to reshape party images along the dimension of race. Specifically, I answer three questions: (1) Can people recognize differences between the two parties, especially when it comes to race? (2) How salient are these distinctions relative to one another? (3) Do party images vary by race? I demonstrate that perceptions of party images move in predictable ways that correspond to historical events.

Party Images over Time

Figure 3 indicates that racial symbolism has not remained constant over time. The movement in racial symbolism, however, seems to match the historical data. For example, during the 1950s, people perceived both the Democratic and Republican Parties as racially liberal. Both parties had a positive racial symbolism. Perceptions of the Democratic Party during this period probably reflected a carryover effect from the Roosevelt era, when blacks were first drawn into the New Deal coalition, and from Truman’s commitment to a civil rights agenda. Also during this period, citizens witnessed a Republican-led Supreme Court declare school segregation unconstitutional and a (reluctant) Republican president dispatch the U.S. Army to enforce the Court’s decision in Arkansas.

Throughout most of the 1960s, a clear distinction existed between the Democrats and the Republicans, with the Democrats perceived as

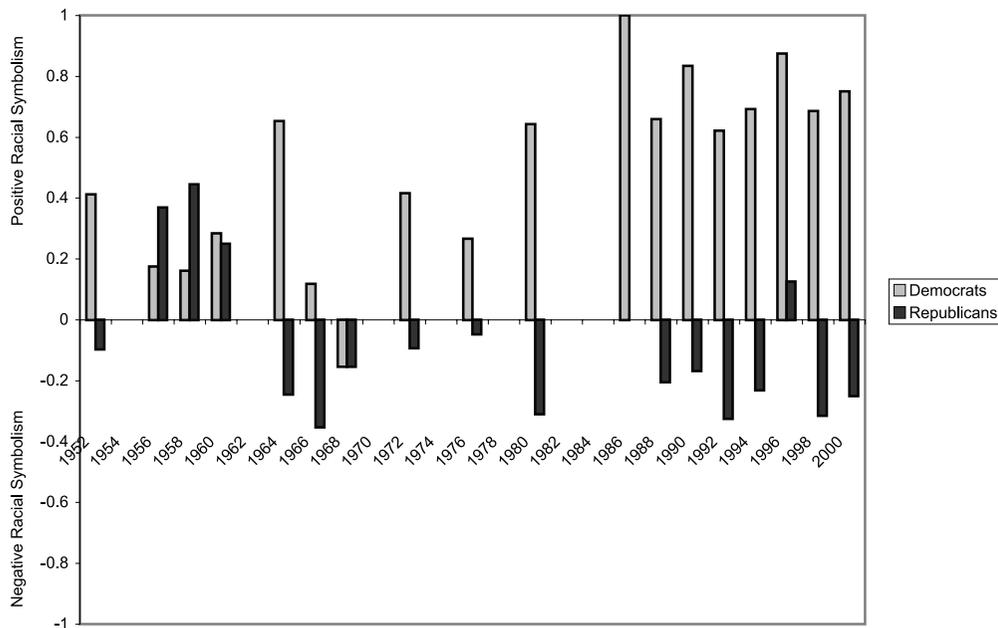


Fig. 3. Perceived Democratic and Republican Party racial symbolism, 1952–2000. (Data from American National Election Study Cumulative File, 1948–2002).

more liberal on the issue of race. This perception was undoubtedly driven by Kennedy’s and later Johnson’s support of civil rights legislation and by Goldwater’s presidential candidacy, in which he declared the Republican Party the party of racial conservatism. In 1968, however, the perceived racial symbolism of the Democratic Party was negative. Perhaps this was driven by the prominence of southern white Dixiecrats and their support for Alabama governor George Wallace.

During the 1970s and 1980s (with the exception of 1980), the racial symbolism of the two major parties was not marked as much by the Republican Party’s racial conservatism as by the Democrats’ racial liberalism. This phenomenon quite possibly resulted from cues sent by Democratic leaders. For example, during his tenure in office, Jimmy Carter “appointed a number of blacks to high-level positions in his administration and to the federal courts, supported affirmative action in the form of the *Bakke* case, and reorganized the civil rights enforcement bureaucracy” (Walton and Smith 2000, 207).

By 1988, a clear divergence appeared between the perceptions of racial symbolism in the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Republicans were clearly perceived as racially conservative and the Democratic Party as racially liberal. Again, looking at signals sent by party leadership, we could reasonably infer that such actions as George H. W. Bush's veto of the 1990 Civil Rights Act drove perceptions of the Republican Party. At the same time, the Democratic Party's reputation for handling racial issues was reinforced by Bill Clinton, who scholars argue "is as free of racist and white supremacist thinking as any white person can be" (Walton and Smith 2000, 210).

I then examined the average placement of the two parties on a racial issue over time. Figure 4 presents the results. The perceptions of the Democratic and Republican Parties on race follow the same pattern. Throughout the thirty-year period, the Democratic Party was perceived to be more liberal than the Republican Party on the issue of government aid to minorities. While neither party, on average, lies at the extreme of the 7-point scale, each year features at least a 1-point difference between the parties. In some years, the size of the difference between the two parties doubled. In 1980, for example, the difference between the Democratic and Republican Parties increased to 1.9 points. This increase makes sense within the historical context. In addition to Carter portraying himself as a racial liberal, Reagan painted the Democratic Party as extremely racially liberal to establish himself as the candidate better able to represent average Americans' needs. Although the placement of the two parties leveled off after 1984, the Democratic Party was perceived as more liberal during the 1990s than it had been during the 1970s.

Figure 5 illustrates the average perceived difference between the two parties by race of the respondent. The figure was created by subtracting the Democratic Party's placement from the Republican Party's placement. Positive values indicate that the Republican Party was more conservative. With the exception of 1994, African Americans recognized a greater distance between the Democratic and Republican Parties on this issue. On average, blacks believed that the Republican Party was more conservative than the Democratic Party on race. Blacks' placement of the Democratic Party on government aid to minorities was almost identical to that of whites. The Republican Party, however, was perceived to be about 2 points more conservative than the Democratic Party, twice the difference perceived by whites. The gap between

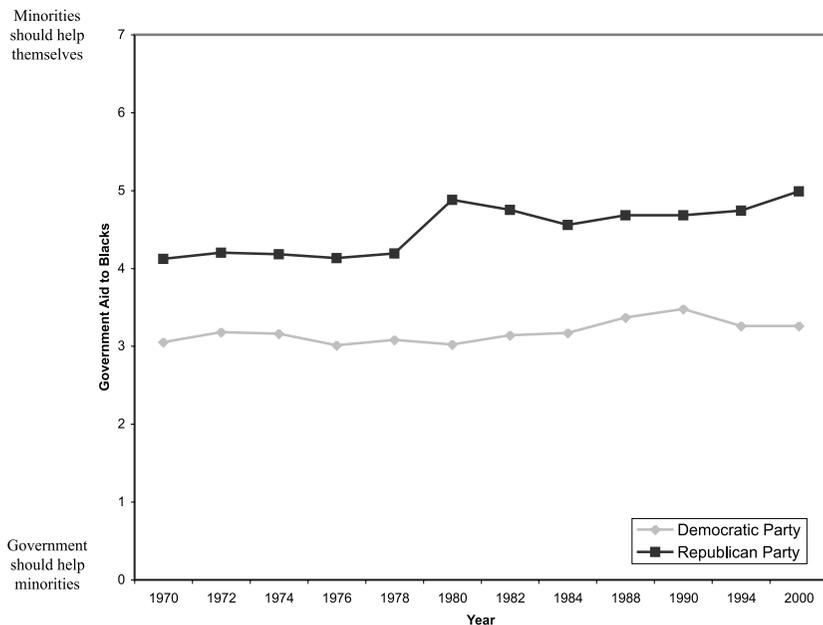


Fig. 4. Perceived positions of Democratic and Republican Parties on government aid to blacks and other minorities, 1970–2000. (Data from American National Election Study Cumulative File, 1948–2002.)

blacks and whites narrowed in 1980 because whites placed the Republican Party as more conservative. The difference between blacks and whites also decreased throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. During this period, African Americans believed that the Democratic Party was more conservative than had been the case in previous years. At the same time, whites viewed the Republican Party as more conservative. Nevertheless, both blacks and whites placed the Republican Party to the right of the Democratic Party on race.

In sum, the data suggest that a distinction existed between the two parties on the issue of race. Beginning in the 1970s, the Democratic Party was perceived as the more racially liberal party. The gap between the two parties was even more pronounced in the minds of African Americans. In the next section, I further explore some of the reasons why citizens make these distinctions.

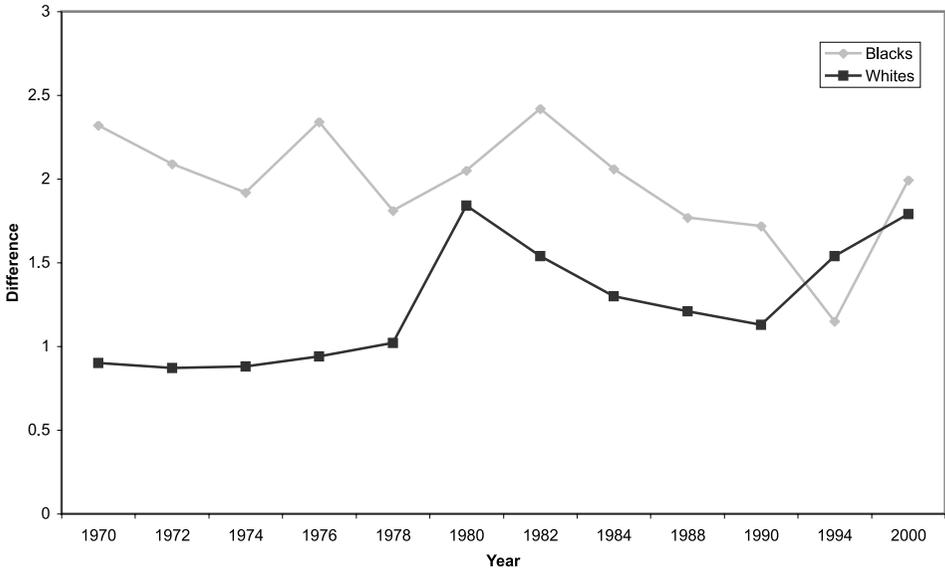


Fig. 5. Perceived difference between Republican and Democratic Parties on government aid to blacks and other minorities by race, 1970–2000. (Data from American National Election Study Cumulative File, 1948–2002.)

Contemporary Party Images

Of course, this analysis is purely speculative. There is no way to determine if individuals indeed based their judgments of the two parties' racial symbolism on historical events. It is possible to determine, however, what information has driven contemporary perceptions and what modern-day party images look like. As Lippmann (1922) argued, “[W]e cannot fully understand the acts of other people, until we know what they think they know, then in order to do justice we have to appraise not only the information which has been at their disposal, but the minds through which they have filtered it (57). Thus, in this section I use qualitative interviews and focus groups to investigate how people describe the two major parties and how these descriptions vary across race and party identification.

First, I examine African American perceptions of the Republican Party. When asked what came to mind when they thought of Republicans, African Americans responded overwhelmingly negatively. For example, several respondents described Republicans as inhumane:

- R1: It's all about hav[ing] money and power, not looking at other people around you. It makes me think, How were you raised and what have you been exposed to? Have you gone out to the inner cities? Have you seen all the crap that minorities have to go through? Do you have colleagues that have expressed issues of discrimination? I mean, where do your values stand? And those are questions that I ask that make me think—okay—Republican—it's all about the money and less about the people.
- R2: Democrats are more liberal . . . and more humane. Republicans are more tangible—emotions, feelings and all that are not that important for the bottom line of what they're going after—what they want to accomplish.
- R3: [The Republicans] would rather have a stealth bomber rocket than help somebody help a school building.

Respondents also described the Republican Party as being “snobbish, fake,” “tied to [racist] special interests [like] the Christian Right and the gun lobby . . . intolerant, rich,” “the party of racists and bigots—either they're naive about race relations or they're prejudiced—they promote big business over [the interests] of the working class and their families.” Thus, African Americans viewed the Republican Party as having negative (or racially conservative) racial symbolism.

These responses seem even more dramatic when compared with the descriptions of Democrats.

- R2: [A hypothetical Democratic candidate] is more down to earth—someone who can talk and be comfortable around middle-class people—someone who can identify with people of lower incomes. I think of a Democrat as someone whose success was self-made and not born into. Not liberal but open-minded—and respectful of diversity—can embrace diversity and respect other opinions.
- R4: [Democrats are] more accepting of new ideas—I think of Democrats as more interested in the arts and more willing to

spend time and money on the arts and also education. I think of the stereotypical Democrat as being interested . . . in the general growth of the human being—and they focus on that more than money.

Most of the black respondents in my sample also better identified with the Democratic Party. As one respondent mused,

R2: When I think of a Democratic candidate, I think of somebody that I can identify with whether they're black or white or whatever. It's somebody who's grown up in a similar background to mine or they can identify with my background—middle-class background, went to public school.

As suggested earlier, favorable evaluations of the Democratic Party were closely tied to the party's symbols, like its candidates and issue positions, which African Americans interpreted as being positive for blacks. One respondent equated the Democrats with Jesse Jackson, someone she thought would "be looking out for minorities in particular, [who would] stand up for injustice when it comes to unfair treatment especially when it comes to race, discrimination, things like that—more liberal, less conservative on issues like abortion, affirmative action definitely." Another respondent supported Al Gore in particular because "he supports affirmative action policies, particularly in higher education, employment, business contracting. So he's sensitive to those issues which are key to African Americans." Finally, one black female respondent noted,

R5: There have been some things the Republican Party has done to benefit people [of color]. And I am from Kansas, a Republican state. But I still am a Democrat and I still believe [Al] Gore will do more things for the programs that I'm interested in. I'm interested in health care, community programs that empower our neighborhoods, and I'm definitely concerned about the number of black males in prison, and I'm concerned about the death sentence, and I'm concerned about a lot of things that have to do with the black community—I need to make myself clear—the things that are important to the black community are really important to America. I mean, there's nothing peculiar about wanting health care and education and good housing and not being forced to go to jail for

peculiar reasons just because of your color. I really think the black platform is an American platform.

Given the evaluations of the Republican Party, especially compared to those of the Democratic Party, I was interested to see how African Americans interpreted racialized campaign appeals and the prevalence of African Americans at the Republican convention. As could be expected, most of the reactions were negative. More specifically, the respondents indicated that the appeals seemed disingenuous.

- R6: I'm not happy with what's going on. I'm not happy with the charade of the election. I'm not happy with the speeches I see on television. I'm not interested in this glitzy media profile. . . . As a matter of fact, I don't watch television because I'm not interested in the charade. When I saw all those racist displays and all those black people standing behind all those people at the Republican convention, I was sick. I'm not interested in the charade. I'm interested in what is the final result.
- R4: I watched parts of the Democratic convention and the Republican convention before. I don't know, I just felt like so much of it was BS, like I couldn't stand watching it. Do you know what I mean? I felt like everything was about getting elected—I'm more interested in the people that come off as really caring, and I think that's what we're trying to get at with the whole Republican candidates—that they don't care as much. And I'd be more interested at this point to go online or read the paper to see what Gore has to say just because there's this intuitive sense that I get about him . . . he's somewhat sincere, and I really don't get that about [George W.] Bush, and I haven't gotten that about a whole lot of Republican candidates.
- R3: I'm glad to see that both parties are trying to appear as if they're inclusive, but when the Republican Party does it, it comes across as bullshit. You know [Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell] are only tokens—it's patronizing—if the Republicans were more inclusive, they would go and do it and not do this staging—go to Harlem, go to Compton—Republicans make it seem that by coming to the NAACP, they make it seem like he's doing us a favor. [Bush is] supposed to do

that—that’s your job as president. You’re suppose to be accountable to all people—that’s what you should be doing. Like Chris Rock said, people always want credit for stuff they’re supposed to do—he gets no cool points for that.

Some respondents, however, had positive reactions to the Republican strategy. One black male replied that these appeals made him feel like the Republican Party had “finally decided to pay attention to me because my vote may count this election.” When I asked if this meant that the respondent would consider voting for a Republican candidate, he replied,

R7: I always consider voting for the GOP candidate and sometimes do, but not in an election where I am a targeted group—because I am a means to an end, not a person who [the candidate] will listen to after the election is over with. I’m just a way to get in office.

In another respondent’s eyes,

R8: It’s actually a sign of progress in a certain way for the Republican Party. I think it’s good that [George W. Bush] actually had black people on his team and that they are actually participants—I don’t think it’s all for show, like some people. But the thing is, it’s going to take more than four or five black people to change the ideological slant of the Republican Party unless those guys can find some way to make the Republicans make some real policy changes that are acceptable to African Americans. If not, their show of diversity is just a show without much substance.

These quotes suggest that in the context of a campaign, Republican messages of diversity seem insincere. The last two quotes, however, may indicate that genuine movement on the part of the Republican Party to be more inclusive, without blatantly displaying it as an electoral strategy, may motivate African Americans to at least consider supporting the GOP. But the ability to change African Americans’ perceptions of the racial symbolism associated with the Republican Party ultimately hinges on the party’s willingness to make substantive rather than just cosmetic changes.

No matter how negatively or favorably the respondents evaluated the Republican Party, all those interviewed supported retired general Colin Powell.

R3: If Colin Powell ran, I would strongly consider voting for him—Colin Powell’s opinion on affirmative action is consistent with African Americans’, but it’s not consistent with the Republican Party—I think he’s a good, decent man.

R6: [We need] more Republicans like [Colin Powell]. If we had more Republicans that were open to being real human beings, I think [black] people would accept [the Republican Party] a little bit.

But Powell was not the only exception to the general sentiment toward the Republican Party. One respondent noted,

R4: There are so many counterexamples that it’s ridiculous. You know I’m looking at the governor of New Jersey . . . Christie Todd Whitman, she’s a Republican. But she’s done so much good for our state. You know, she’s increased the budget of the arts and really worked on education and really gone to the cities that needed help and really tried to make a difference.

Again, this finding seems to suggest that African Americans recognize and will support Republican candidates who seem to exhibit the qualities that blacks value in Democrats. Republican candidates need not convert Democratic ideals in every respect, only on a few critical issues such as affirmative action.

The warm feelings that Powell generates within the African American community¹ raise another interesting possibility for where Republicans could gain support from black voters—if Powell (a black Republican) can make African Americans consider voting for a Republican candidate, so too should other black Republican candidates. Hence, I asked my respondents how they felt about black Republicans and if they would ever vote for a black Republican. One respondent really was not sure how to decipher black Republican candidates:

1. The evidence for this positive opinion not only appears in my data but also emerges in opinion polls. For example, in its 2000 National Opinion Poll, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that 70 percent of the black population gave Colin Powell a favorable rating (Bostitis 2000b, 18).

R1: If it's a black Republican candidate, which is unusual, we have to sit and question it because on one side they're black, so obviously we should support them. But at the same time they're Republican. So we're looking at it like, hmm . . .

While most of those interviewed did not rule out the possibility of voting for a black Republican candidate, all indicated that it would depend on the individual.

R2: Well we have some black people that really—they're so into mainstream America, they don't care about blacks that are in lower classes. They are actually trying to escape from them—they're trying to run away from that—they don't even want to associate themselves with that type of lifestyle—the lifestyle of their cousins or whoever, you know what I'm saying. I don't think that they're necessarily going to represent you well. They might full well be Republican—you know there are black Republicans. That doesn't mean that you're against black people, but . . . it just depends on how the person grew up, what values they've constructed through their different situations that they've gone through in life and what it is that they want to give back to their community or to society just in general. And if they are not caring about, if they're more for money.

Respondents commonly compared Powell—someone they perceived to be a good and decent Republican candidate—to J. C. Watts and Clarence Thomas, whom the interviewees perceived as unsavory Republican candidates.

R3: I think you have people like Colin Powell who are good people and whose heart is in the right place who you hope can make a difference, but I don't think they will. And you have people like J. C. Watts, who essentially have to go against everything people stand for to be successful. Maybe he believes that, but he's not serving the interests of black people. He's really a pawn for the Republicans.

In summary, then, African Americans have not completely dismissed the Republican Party as a viable option. Changing blacks' perceptions of the Republican Party's reputation for handling race-related issues,

however, is highly contingent on the party and its candidates addressing those issues important to the African American community. As one respondent stated,

R8: A lot of interests of the Republican Party, blacks are on the other side—unless the Republican candidate can actually make some changes in the ideological platform that are of interest to blacks, they can't represent blacks.

As a result, it is highly unlikely that displaying the blacks in the party (or being a black Republican candidate) is enough to signal to African Americans that the Republican Party will best represent them.

The white respondents' descriptions of both parties provide an interesting contrast to blacks' evaluations of the two parties. When asked about the Republican Party, white respondents converged on the same few issues, including taxes, the military, and social spending. When asked to describe the GOP, one Republican respondent said that members of his party

R9: think of the government more as a business, and they are more for the army, more military than the Democrats are. It seems like the Republicans have a stronger economy than the Democrats and they are more business oriented.

Another Republican respondent added,

R10: I always think of Republicans as for personal accountability—you're your own person, you have your own business. The onus is on you. You pay a little in taxes for stuff we need, but pretty much they aren't going to baby you. It's on you.

In the same vein, a Democratic respondent agreed with the Republican Party's association with tax cuts but had a different take on the issue, pointing out that the Republicans are

R11: usually telling you they're going to reduce the taxes, but it's really reducing the taxes for the rich people and reducing the taxes to big businesses as opposed to reducing my taxes.

Similarly, a white female in a different focus group believed that

R12: Republicans like to give [taxes] to the little people. . . . They like to give the good tax rates to businesses and to the

wealthy people—so in a way they’re giving taxes to the more average Americans—better tax breaks go to the wealthier, and I think that if they do give a new tax, it will be more targeted toward things that most of their constituents would not affect.

Respondents also described the Republican Party as “prolife,” “elite,” “conservative, businessmen,” and “middle-aged white males.” Finally, the Republican Party was associated with opposition to gun control:

R10: definitely the Republicans are more the NRA type. They don’t really like people—laws and restrictions against them. The Democrats . . . definitely—would like to see more laws keeping [guns] away from the kids and stuff.

R13: I don’t know if they’d rather see more laws but the laws that are there [enforced]. And the Republicans would rather—because the NRA has a lot of pull in Washington—so they would rather make them happy than think about what actually goes on in the world—I think the military is definitely Republican-leaning. Gun manufacturers and all sorts of things like that are definitely Republican-leaning. And it kind of goes to push the Republican platform to more aggressive behavior. I just see the Democrats as more passive and willing to negotiate and to [do] more peaceful things than to just go bomb a country that’s already—just like bombing a hole to make it bigger. [It] just doesn’t really make sense.

Like African Americans, white respondents described the Democratic Party as socially liberal. One white female described the Democratic Party as being interested in

R12: environmental, social issues like social welfare, health concerns, health insurance, helping the people, helping the individual as opposed to helping big business.

A white male in the same focus group added that the Democratic Party reminded him of education. A white female in a different focus group believed that the Democratic Party represented “campaign finance [and] welfare—not so much welfare but the preservation of the ideas that go along with it.” Comparing the Democrats to the Republicans, a female respondent indicated that the “Democrats tend to be more in trouble with their personal lives and Republicans are a little lousier on

their ethics in relation to what they actually do.” Finally, one Republican woman talked about

R14: the running joke in my family because my mom is a Democrat and my dad is a Republican. My mom votes for schools, my dad votes for prisons. Republicans are more about crime. And Democrats want to build it up and Republicans, you know, want to tear it down. They cancel each other’s votes.

Respondents were also asked what sorts of people were associated with the two parties. Overwhelmingly, respondents associated the Democratic Party with minorities and the Republican Party with white males. Members of the all-Republican focus group associated the Democratic Party with “upper 40s, lower 50s females,” “more minorities, a lot of college kids,” and generally with a larger variety of people. When asked to expand on this response, one man indicated that he believed that the Democratic Party was “younger, maybe more idealistic at times. They’re more hip, for lack of a better word. ‘Hey, I’m cool, I’m young, I’m a Democrat.’ They’re diverse, so everybody wants to get in on it.”

Democratic respondents agreed, associating the Democratic Party with women and with minorities in general, including Arab Americans, Jewish Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Those interviewed also included unions and people with lower incomes in groups associated with the Democratic Party. When asked why, the Democratic respondents answered that the party believed in

R12: equality . . . for all them—I’d say, for like the lower incomes, like welfare, financial aid, all those things apply and are important—things like unions that hire workers—all those things are usually better represented by Democrats, and I think richer white Americans are more concerned with finances and how it’s going to affect them and what tax bracket, and traditionally I think most Republicans are older, so their views are different and more conservative to go along with Republicans.

R11: What I’ve heard Republicans say is that they believe in supporting big business because it will have a trickle-down effect. That supposedly the theory is they try to help big businesses because they say big businesses are going to employ those

poor people, you know, and all those minorities and everything. But I just don't see that works. I don't think enough of the benefits and the money really does trickle down. A lot of it just gets sucked up by the people at the top.

In all of the focus groups, the white respondents believed that the difference between the Republican and Democratic Parties were becoming less distinct.

R11: I think they are moving together . . . and it's harder to draw the line and say "You will be a Republican and this person will be Democrat," just looking at . . . you just wrote down a simple bio and someone would decide what they would be. I think it goes a lot deeper than that. And unless you have a very specific issue that comes to national attention and gets written into the platform, I think it's hard to vote along party lines. You have to actually know candidates because there's a lot of Republicans that if you read their records they look like Democrats, and vice versa.

R15: I think it's definitely becoming harder to vote along party lines. I think pretty soon there's going to be an ultra-business-conservative guy but he's going to be very antiabortion or something like that . . . people are going to have to start voting on the actual candidate more than just party lines.

Following a more general discussion of the two parties, respondents were specifically asked about the representation of African Americans. For the most part, all of the respondents indicated that the Democratic Party would better represent African Americans. One male Republican believed that "based on the platforms alone, I think they'd be inclined to go for the Democrats." Another male in the same focus group added, "And that's the way most African Americans do go. With Detroit being mostly African American, it's a strongly Democratic city." When asked why, he responded that the Democrats "specifically they want to improve inner-city schools where most African Americans tend to go. Stuff like that." The other two respondents in this focus group explained that Democrats better represent blacks because of

R9: the whole affirmative action issue. It's a pretty clear line, most Democrats in favor, most Republicans against it—I mean they're not against diversity or anything like that! . . .

Also, in big urban cities like Detroit, there's a lot of African Americans who work for the auto industry, and maybe their union supports the Democrats. There's also a lot more poorer neighborhoods, so they're probably attracted to the Democrats with welfare programs and stuff like that.

R14: Well, I don't want to stereotype and say [that all African Americans need] welfare, but you know, a lot of people in inner cities need more social programs. . . . There's a lot of different things, not just welfare, medical stuff, too.

In addition, one Republican respondent believed that blacks believed that the Democratic Party better represented black interests based on the Democratic Party's affiliation with certain leaders.

R10: Something else is the people they look up to. Everybody admired Martin Luther King [Jr.] during the civil rights movement. Now Jesse Jackson has kind of assumed that, and he's very strongly for the Democrats. Also Al Sharpton—in fact, Al Sharpton is running for president as a Democrat. They probably think that if they agree with the Democrats and I agree with them, then I must agree with the Democrats—the people they hold in esteem.

Respondents were then asked how well they believed black Republicans could represent African American interests. Most white Democrats agreed that the answer would depend on the candidate. Some of those interviewed mentioned that a black Republican would do a better job than a white Republican. For the most part, however, the Democratic respondents remained skeptical. One woman argued that “if there was an African American Republican running, it might make [African American voters] look more at everyone running. It might make them get more involved, but not necessarily more Republican.” In other words, she believed that the presence of black Republicans would have a mobilizing effect but that it would not necessarily operate in favor of the Republican Party.

The Republican respondents, however, were more optimistic. Said one man,

R10: I think [Republicans] can even represent [African Americans] better than black Democrats. Because they can't take them for granted. They won't get 90 percent of the black

vote in their district. Because it will be like, “We took a chance voting on this black Republican. If he doesn’t do it, then we’ll go back to the Democrats.”

The conversation then shifted to specific black Republican figures such as Clarence Thomas, Condoleezza Rice, and Colin Powell. Although a few Democratic respondents believed that some blacks would vote for Rice or Powell if they were to run for office simply because they were black, most indicated that the candidates’ stance on issues would deter African American support. Republican respondents generally agreed, although they believed that Rice would have a better chance than Powell or Thomas. According to members of the Republican focus group,

R9: I don’t think [Powell would attract African American voters], because Colin Powell has some Republican beliefs. Like he’s against affirmative action, I think. Clarence Thomas is the same way . . . and the whole thing with personal accountability. [Republicans] are strong into that and I’m not saying all [African Americans] aren’t, but maybe some, a few here and there, might like that they can work but that the government will help them out too. . . . There might also be feeling that like Clarence Thomas and Colin Powell, some might think, “Whoa, what are you doing? Why are you turning your back on us?” They might feel kind of upset, not betrayed but upset. It’s not coming across right.

R10: I would agree that like with Colin Powell, maybe people don’t see him as being on the same level as them. . . . Colin Powell has a different set of ideals. He conforms with the Republicans a lot . . . whereas Jesse Jackson is not. It’s complete opposite ends of the spectrum. And, it just seems that—it’s that you see Jesse Jackson active in the community, talking, going to schools, reaching out to people. You never see Colin Powell do that. . . . Jesse Jackson reaches out more to the community, so people trust him.

R14: Jesse Jackson to me is more of an emphatic leader. He rallies everyone together . . . African Americans especially. Colin Powell doesn’t seem to be like that. He’s more of just military. If there was someone who was going to come talk to me and it seemed like he had good ideas, well, I’d probably follow him too.

Following this exchange, respondents were asked to talk more about Rice. As mentioned earlier, Republican respondents believed that Rice would be better than Powell at attracting blacks. One female believed that Rice would attract some African Americans but not an overwhelming majority. The males in the focus group believed that Rice would have the most impact on young black women.

R9: Maybe Colin Powell won't [attract blacks] because people see him as going through the military and people see blacks as being—not forced—but there's a large number of blacks in the military, and there might be some resentment about that. But with Condoleezza Rice, she's incredibly powerful, and there might be a lot of young African American women who say, "Where's that in the Democratic Party?" They've got none of that. They've got Donna Brazile, but she lost. They might see Condoleezza Rice as the new face of African American women in the Republican Party.

R10: I don't know. It's—I'd say Condoleezza Rice has more tendency to bring in blacks than Colin Powell just for the fact that she is a woman. All these children can be like, "Wow, look at her." I don't necessarily think that more blacks will come in. With Condoleezza Rice they should.

Respondents were then asked about the 2000 Republican National Convention. The Democratic respondents agreed with the African American respondents. One woman described the convention as a "joke" and then continued,

R11: I watched the whole thing and it was just ridiculous. There were just these minuscule people within the framework of the Republican Party and they were paraded around. . . . I don't think I would've ever felt comfortable being those people because they were such—like they really have anything to do with the Republican Party. They know they are such a minority. And they were like showpieces. . . . There were a lot of people that were higher up and had a lot more to do with what actually goes on in the Republican Party, and they didn't get a chance to speak just to show a black face or an Asian face or whatever.

A male in the same focus group agreed.

R15: They were almost just throwing black people up there just hoping that black people will see a black presence and say, “I’ll vote Republican,” instead of maybe getting up there, even a white person, and saying how they would help black people. . . . They were just parading around people instead of really doing anything with meaning.

The Republican respondents were less cynical about the convention, viewing the Republican outreach as sincere. Only one Republican respondent questioned the convention activities.

R14: Instead of showcasing entertainers or athletes, they just need to encourage African Americans in general to vote and to be educated about their choices. They don’t know. They’re just like, . . . ‘Maybe they’ll vote because they see Michael Jordan supporting this guy,’ but . . . statistics show that minorities don’t vote, and not that many people vote in America anyway, but you know if you want to change something about it like the school system or whatever, get people educated about it so they will vote and then they get to use their choices.

Finally, respondents were asked what the Republican Party would have to do to attract more African Americans. Again, Republican and Democratic respondents disagreed. Democratic respondents believed that the Republican Party would have to change its platform.

R11: I think the only way the Republicans can get more African Americans in their party is by changing their party . . . by actually listening to the African Americans’ concerns and actually having part of their platform addressing their concerns. And say you had a well-known African American who’s a Democrat who switched parties and said, “I’m now a Republican.” Let’s say Jesse Jackson became a Republican. But the only reason they would do that is if the party changed and was more responsive to them.

R15: I don’t really think that blacks are ever going to become as a group Republican. They just don’t offer [African Americans] what they need. . . . Being a Democrat just has more of an advantage for them. . . . There are a lot of black people living in poverty that don’t have a lot of money that I think the

Republicans almost don't always look to help as much as the rich white people. The Democrats are . . . always trying, I think, to help with programs like food stamps and stuff like that.

In contrast, the Republican respondents did not believe that changing the Republican platform was the answer. One male respondent argued, "I don't think they could change their platform that much, but still even if they did, people feel loyalty. Even though some people might change their views, most won't." Another male in the same focus group said, "I think there might be some gratitude, but I don't think most people think about the 1960s when they go in the voting booth." This respondent indicated that he believed that change would occur slowly because of a connection with the civil rights movement.

R9: I think it might take a generation when our generation takes over the leadership role. The tumultuous 1960s and '70s was a big experience with the civil rights movement. Our generation doesn't have that big uniting thing. So I think in 20 or 25 years there might be more diversity [in the Republican Party].

The female in this focus group believed that "unless more African Americans run as Republicans, I don't think they'll get more support from minorities."

Although the white respondents talked about the two parties in terms of race and racial groups, they only did so after much prompting. The black respondents, in contrast, freely and spontaneously discussed both parties in terms of race. These results suggest that differences between black and white perceptions of the two major parties are driven not just by the information contained in their party images but by the relative salience of this information. For African Americans, race is very salient; for white respondents, however, class seemed to be the most salient division between the two parties.

Conclusion

People have distinct perceptions of the two major parties that are rooted in issue positions, historical events, and group interests, especially with respect to race. The survey data suggest that individuals historically have distinguished the two parties along racial lines that cor-

respond to the state of the times. Prior to 1960, the distinction between the two parties was not as prominent because the parties themselves were not making a substantial distinction. From 1960 to the present, individuals have consistently placed the Democratic Party as more liberal on race than Republicans. Moreover, the survey data indicate that blacks recognize a greater distance between the Democratic Party and Republican Party on the issue of race.

Unpacking the survey results with qualitative data revealed that at least contemporary party images align with party activities. Whereas the survey data link party behavior with individual perceptions post hoc, the qualitative data allow respondents to describe in their own words the origins of their perceptions of the two major parties. Many African American respondents offered the Republican Party's positions on affirmative action and education as reasons for believing that the party was racially conservative.

These perceptions became especially important when exploring the prospect of reshaping party images with respect to race, although more so for African Americans than whites. All of the African American respondents as well as several of the white respondents believed that the Republican Party would have to alter its position on many racial issues. In contrast, many white respondents believed that simply recruiting more African Americans into the party would help reshape images of the Republican Party. Moreover, all of the respondents agreed that while recruiting blacks into the Republican Party might not improve perceptions of the party on race, specific figures could. The respondents disagreed on which public figures would be particularly effective.

The results from this chapter provide the necessary backdrop for exploring the limitations of reshaping party images. First, these data reveal the relative weight blacks and whites place on race and race-related issues. Second, the results illustrate that differences of opinion exist regarding how the Republican Party can overcome its current reputation on race. I will test the relationship between race and party image in chapter 5. In the next chapter, however, I will explore how the media responded to the 2000 Republican National Convention as a way of determining whether media coverage of the convention played a role in the reshaping of party images.