

9 *The Final Tally*

Race, Party Image, and the American Voter

It is . . . unintelligent to insist on a single explanation of anything so complex as the American party system, and it is difficult or impossible to assign relative weights to all the factors that must be taken into account in a general explanation.

—E. E. Schattschneider, “United States: The Functional Approach to Party Government”

AT ANY GIVEN TIME, a multitude of interests attempt to exert power on the U.S. political system. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to know with absolute certainty the source of observed political outcomes. Nevertheless, two competing interests in particular have been exploited throughout American history in the quest for political pay-offs—racially conservative whites in the South and African Americans. As both of these groups have sought economic, social, and political benefits, the two major political parties have used this competition to their advantage. As a result, American society possesses a seemingly permanent racial divide. Exploited by political elites, this divide can determine which policies, parties, and candidates the American people support.

Scholars have only just begun to explore the extent to which this divide can be narrowed. Most argue that the key to obliterating the racial divide lies in the laps of political elites (Kinder and Sanders 1996; White 2005). But inasmuch as political elites continue to play the race card, must voters continue to respond? I argue that the answer is no. Citizens possess the ability to resist elite messages, as previous research has shown (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; A. Campbell et al. 1960; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In this book, I have sought to further clarify the circumstances that assist in an individual’s ability to resist elite messages.

Choosing to focus primarily on political parties, I explored whether

party elites can reshape the electorates' party images. Specifically, I answered two central questions related to party images. First, are party images malleable? Second, if party images are malleable, do elites face obstacles in attempting to reshape party images?

The theoretical proposition asserted in this book is that reshaping party images is a continuous journey along which elites face many obstacles. Inherent in this argument is the fact that voters do not exist as *tabulae rasae*. At the start of any given campaign, it is highly likely that voters have already accumulated information about parties through firsthand, informal, and/or mediated experiences with the political system. Individuals amass information from the parties themselves as well as from competing sources of information. The information that ultimately resonates with the electorate is determined by perceived importance, which can be determined by individuals' life experiences or by heightened media attention. When it comes to playing the race card—using racial images and racially coded symbols and words—to reshape party images, the new information being presented to the electorate must outweigh existing information. For some, these superficial gestures are convincing enough to signal change. For others, the use of racial images constitutes no more than smoke and mirrors.

Overview

Battling History

In exploring the boundaries of strategies that seek to reshape party images, I have focused on the part of one's party image that relates to race. People associate the two major parties with a variety of political symbols, which incorporate all candidates, issue positions, and political events that an individual links to a political party. The totality of these symbols represents an individual's party image. Political elites attempt to alter which symbols are associated with their parties as well as the interpretation individuals assign to those symbols to yield positive evaluations and electoral outcomes in their favor. Over the years, political parties have used racialized images and issues to divide the electorate and gain political power. Associating the two parties with different racial symbols helps the electorate distinguish between a party that is racially liberal and one that is racially conservative.

In the past, political parties could win electoral success by being

overtly racially conservative. But in the post-civil-rights era, a shift in racial attitudes prevents political parties and candidates from being explicitly racist. While subtle race cues are still used and the racial divide continues to be exploited, the use of race in campaign communication must appear to adhere to the norm of egalitarianism.

The violation of this norm can have negative political consequences, as the modern-day Republican Party discovered. Conservative candidates such as Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Pat Buchanan coupled with racialized campaigns such as the 1988 Willie Horton ad firmly solidified the Republican Party as the party of racial conservatives. These political symbols associated with the GOP repelled moderate/liberal whites and African Americans. As a result, in 1992 the Republican Party was unable to assemble a winning coalition to sustain the presidency even though the party benefited from an incumbent presidential nominee (Speel 1998).

Chapter 3 examined the extent to which this history resonated with voters. Using survey data collected over the past fifty years, I found that people have distinct perceptions of the parties when it comes to race. The survey data suggest that individuals historically have distinguished the two parties along racial lines that correspond to the state of the times. Prior to 1960, the distinction between the two parties was not as prominent because the parties themselves did not make a substantial distinction. From 1960 to the present, individuals have consistently identified the Democratic Party as more liberal on race than the Republican Party.

The qualitative results echoed the results found in the survey data. Regardless of gender or race, people identified the racially conservative and racially liberal parties. However, the willingness to discuss the parties in terms of race differed for blacks and whites. Specifically, race was much more salient among blacks, whereas the class division between the two parties was more salient among whites. This difference guided perceptions of the two major parties and provided insight into the obstacles that must be overcome to change party images with respect to race. In general, African Americans' perceptions of the Republican Party's racial image were quite fixed and were rooted in the party's position on such racial issues as affirmative action. As a result, African American respondents believed that the Republican Party would have to alter its position on many racialized issues to change its image. In contrast, many white respondents believed that simply recruiting more

African Americans into the party would help reshape images of the Republican Party.

Battling the Media

In chapter 4, I suspended the examination of public opinion to explore the media's reaction to the 2000 Republican National Convention. This chapter was based on the assumption that in covering political events, the media have the ability to amplify and/or distort political elites' messages. Because many people cannot witness political events firsthand, the media serve as conveyors and interpreters of political information. Thus I examined whether the media recognized the use of race cues at the Republican convention and how they portrayed the use of such cues to the public. By conducting a content analysis of three nationally circulated newspapers, thirteen black newspapers, and two newsmagazines, I revealed that the media recognized the use of race during the 2000 Republican National Convention. Nearly half of all convention coverage discussed some aspect of the Republican race strategy. Nevertheless, the media in some cases also juxtaposed the presence of blacks at the convention with the unchanged issue positions of the Republican Party.

These results suggest that the Republican Party faced some opposition from the media, which did not simply convey the events of the 2000 Republican National Convention as they occurred. Rather, the media provided their own interpretation of the events, including information about the party's platform and history with respect to race that contradicted the Republican Party's projected image and made it more difficult for the GOP to prove to the electorate that it had changed.

A Battle Won?

Using the results of the content analysis, chapter 5 tested the effect of these varying frames by conducting an experiment. Moreover, I tested the generalizability of the experimental results by analyzing survey data collected shortly after the 2000 Republican National Convention. The results generally revealed that watching the convention affected people's perceptions of the Republican Party's image with respect to race. Susceptibility, however, was contingent on the individual's race. Specifically, African Americans' perceptions of the GOP were largely unaffected by watching the 2000 Republican convention. These results were also contingent on which version of the 2000 Republican

National Convention individuals received. When blacks and whites read about the racial outreach featured at the convention and these accounts explicitly stated that the Republican platform had not changed, perceptions of the Republican Party's image with respect to race did not improve.

Chapter 5 also examined the extent to which convention exposure primed the use of the Republican Party's racial symbolism in candidate evaluations. The assumption behind these analyses was that reshaping the Republican Party's image with respect to race should result in more positive evaluations of the party's presidential candidates. These findings suggest that making the GOP's racial symbolism applicable to candidate evaluations was a double-edged sword. Watching a great deal of the convention increased the weight of the GOP's party image with respect to race in both whites' and blacks' candidate evaluations. A problem occurred, however, when the Republican Party failed to prove to the electorate that the party did a good job of reaching out to minorities. Priming the party's racial symbolism among those with negative perceptions of the Republican Party led to negative evaluations of George W. Bush. The opposite was true when the GOP improved its image with respect to race. Thus, when attempting to reshape party images, political parties must simultaneously modify their images on a particular dimension and make this dimension a salient construct in candidate evaluation. Without doing both, a party cannot expect to receive an increase in support for its presidential candidates.

Chapter 8 further explored the idea that in the process of party image change, cosmetic changes to the party's image without corresponding changes to the party's platform will resonate among some citizens better than others. I examined the reverse case of party image change with respect to race by gauging reactions to a fictitious instance where the Democratic Party was attempting to appear more racially conservative. As discussed throughout this book, southern whites and African Americans have competing interests that the political parties have exploited. As a result, southern whites are firmly entrenched within the Republican Party's electoral coalition, while blacks form part of the Democratic Party's electoral base. Similar to blacks' reaction to the Republican Party's effort to appear more inclusive, southern whites resisted a Democratic appeal to conservatives. Chapter 8's results reconfirm that parties have the most difficulty reshaping their

images in a particular issue domain among people with the most crystallized conceptions of the party on that dimension.

Chapter 6 examined the fragility of altering party images by exploring the extent to which the Republican Party suffered as a result of the disputed 2000 presidential election. By employing the 2002 American National Election Study, I found that perceived fairness of the 2000 election constituted a salient piece of information when citizens were asked to evaluate the Republican Party's ability to represent minorities in 2002. Specifically, as perceived fairness of the election decreased, so too did the Republican Party's perceived ability to represent blacks, the poor, and women. However, the election had no impact on whether respondents believed that the Republican Party could represent whites, men, and the rich better than the Democratic Party could. Furthermore, attitudes toward the election affected presidential evaluations. Feelings toward George W. Bush became increasingly colder as the perceived fairness of the 2000 election decreased. These findings suggest that success in the area of improving party image can easily be undone.

Finally, chapter 7 presented the upside of party image change. Once again relying on experimental data, I examined what happened when individuals encountered a party projecting a new image and were informed that the new image constituted part of a sustained strategy that had begun in a previous election cycle. I found that exposure to a description of the 2004 Republican National Convention where the GOP once again reached out to black voters—a group unmoved by the 2000 strategy—reshaped blacks' perceptions of the Republican Party's racial symbolism. The results in this chapter suggest that maintaining a consistent message lends a sense of legitimacy to a party's attempt to reshape its image.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The discussion of party image in this book has been limited to the discussion of blacks and whites, but there is no reason that the theory and approach cannot be transported to other societal groups. I have demonstrated that the ability to change one's party image with respect to race becomes more difficult (1) as race becomes more important to an individual and (2) as the parties' previous race-related activities become more entrenched in an individual's existing party image. At one end of the spectrum are African Americans, a group that often uses

race as a lens through which to view the political world and that has a long history with the two parties. At the other end are whites, who do not necessarily place high levels of importance on race. While whites have knowledge of the political parties, the race-related activities in which the parties engage are not salient pieces of whites' party images. In between these two groups are individuals who may hold race salient but who lack the same historical relationship with the two parties that African Americans possess.

One such group of voters is Latinos, who currently constitute roughly 12.5 percent of the U.S. population. In 2000, Latinos surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States, and census estimates show that by 2050, Hispanics will constitute nearly a quarter of the U.S. population. Furthermore, relatively large Latino populations—15 percent or more of the total population—are present in such politically significant states as New York, Florida, Texas, and California.

Political strategists recognize the political importance of this group. As Lionel Sosa, a media consultant for George W. Bush in 2000, argued,

Hispanic voting power is huge. There are more Hispanics in the United States than there are Canadians in Canada, about 35 million. If you were to take the U.S. Hispanic population and consider it a Latin American country, it would be the fourth largest. And it would be the richest. Period. Hispanics are becoming more involved in the political process, more educated, and more aware of their power. It is a voter group that's becoming so large that the Democrats can no longer take the group for granted and the Republicans can no longer ignore it. (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 155–56)

As with African Americans, the Republican Party has targeted Latino voters in recent presidential elections. Republican strategists believe that many Latinos are “natural” Republicans. Republican Frank Guerra, producer of Spanish-language ads for the Bush campaign, believes that the Latino voter

is somebody who has left their country. They've traveled far away to try to earn money, so that they can support their families. And when they earn that paycheck, they want to keep as much of it as

they can. And depending on where they're from, sometimes there's a fundamental mistrust of government. And that's very Republican. (McChesney 2004)

Thus, the Republican Party has targeted both older Latino voters, who may be more conservative, as well as newly immigrated Latino voters. The 2000 Republican National Convention featured many Latino leaders and entertainers, including George P. Bush, nephew of George W. Bush. Because of a demographic shift in the Hispanic community, "fully 50 percent of today's Hispanic voters have Spanish as their primary language" (McChesney 2004). As a result, Bush strategists "produced thirteen spots for the 2000 campaign in both English and Spanish, and also a Hispanic video for the convention" (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 159). Early in 2004, Bush spent more than \$1 million on ads targeting Latino voters (McChesney 2004).

Evidence suggests that Republican appeals have met with marginally more success among Hispanics than among African Americans. According to exit polls conducted by the Voter News Service, Republicans experienced the most dramatic increase in votes from the Latino community. In 1996, Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole received 18 percent of the Latino vote; four years later, George W. Bush received 35 percent of the Latino vote. According to Sosa,

In the end, Bush got 1½ million more Hispanic votes than Dole got four years ago; 850,000 more votes than Clinton/Gore got four years ago; and 6,500 more Latino votes in Florida than Gore did. Without the Latino vote in Florida, Bush would have surely lost the state, and thus the presidency. All with no recounts. (Jamieson and Waldman 2001, 163)

But as scholars recognize, understanding the political behavior of Latinos is more complex than may at first appear to be the case. First, "the one voter subsegment that goes into Election Day by the largest margin undecided is the Hispanic voter" (McChesney 2004). More importantly, Latinos include many different ethnic groups—Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, among others—all of which have different political histories. Moreover, each of these ethnicities encompasses various generations: some Latinos are recent immigrants, while others are third-generation U.S. citizens. All of these factors influence how Latinos are socialized into the U.S. political environment and the extent to

which they have contact with the two major parties (Hero 1992; DeSipio 1996).

These intragroup differences have political ramifications. National origins and levels of cultural identity affect support for public policies (Newton 2000; Bedolla 2003), ideology and partisanship (McClain and Stewart 1999), and turnout (Stokes 2003). Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans, for example, tend to be more conservative than Mexican Americans (de la Garza et al. 1992). In terms of partisanship, Latinos in general strongly support the Democratic Party, but not to the extent that blacks do (McClain and Stewart 1999). And again, such support varies across national origin. Sixteen percent of Mexican Americans and 14 percent of Puerto Ricans identify themselves as Republicans, compared to 64 percent of Cuban Americans (de la Garza et al. 1992).

Given the variations among the different Latino subgroups, Latinos' relative size as a minority group, and recent efforts to mobilize their votes, examining elites' ability to reshape Hispanics' party images seems like a logical next step. Doing so requires identifying the salient political symbols that give meaning to political parties for Latinos. Furthermore, scholars must determine the extent to which these symbols vary across ethnicities. Keeping with the theoretical framework outlined in earlier chapters of this book, elites should have the most success in changing the party images of Latinos who have recently immigrated to the United States and who lack crystallized perceptions of the political parties. As with blacks, altering party images with respect to race should become more difficult as perceived levels of economic, social, and political discrimination increase and as individuals come to perceive one party as better able to eradicate those conditions.

The theory and framework presented in this book can also be applied to another important cleavage in American politics, the gender gap. Although not a racial or ethnic group, women and their party images seem like a promising avenue for future research. Unlike blacks and to some extent Latinos, women do not behave as a politically cohesive group (Gurin 1985). However, a consistent but modest gap has existed between men's and women's preferences for political parties and support for presidential candidates (Frankovic 1982; Wirls 1986; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Norrander 1999a, b). As Kaufmann and Petrocik (1999) argue, this cleavage "cuts across every demographic characteristic except for race" (870). Specifically, more

women than men identify with the Democratic Party, and more men than women identify with the Republican Party (Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999). The source of the gap is disputed—the disparity is said to result from anything from attitudes toward the use of military force (Frankovic 1982; Gilens 1988; Conover and Sapiro 1993) to support for social welfare issues (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Chaney, Alvarez, and Nagler 1998; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999; Norrander 1999b).

Most recently, scholars have identified partisan racial appeals as another source of the gender gap (Hutchings et al. 2004). Hutchings et al. cite a number of reasons why race seems a likely culprit. First, as noted earlier, the use of race in political campaigns is widespread (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Gilens 1999; Mendelberg 2001). Second, women tend to be more liberal than men on racial issues (Schuman et al. 1997; Norrander 1999b). Finally, the gender gap emerged as the parties diverged considerably on the issue of race and as white males defected from the Democratic Party (W. Miller and Shanks 1996; Norrander 1999a). As in this volume, Hutchings et al. examine the impact of positive racial appeals in 2000 on evaluation of George W. Bush, finding that women exposed to the “compassionate conservative” strategy were more likely to believe that Bush was more compassionate and better able to handle race relations. As a result, women were more likely to support him.

Given the success of such appeals, future research should examine whether these effects translated into fundamental changes in the perception of the Republican Party or if the effects were candidate-specific. Such studies would have to account for the heterogeneity of women. The ability to change women’s racial symbolism would depend on the salience of race to each woman as well as the crystallization of her existing party images.

Beyond racial symbolism, exploring women’s party images provides an excellent opportunity to test whether gendered appeals carry the same weight as racial appeals. The 2000 Republican National Convention featured a number of female speakers and entertainers, but the party did not change its position on gendered issues such as abortion. In this instance, women who value the presence of other women in the ranks of the Republican Party may believe that the GOP is the party for women. Conversely, women who believe that abortion is a salient issue and who do not agree with the Republican Party’s position on this issue will not be affected by the presence of women at the convention.

Conclusion

As Trilling (1976) has offered, the study of party image is relevant because it allows us to explore the extent to which political parties “continue to have meaning for voters and continue to arouse interest and concern among them” (4). Furthermore, party image is an intricate link to understanding political behavior and partisan loyalties (Matthews and Prothro 1964; Trilling 1976). Inasmuch as people engage in limited information processing, party images allow them to compensate by using previously stored knowledge to reach judgments and make decisions.

According to Lippmann (1922),

Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and we can imagine. (53)

Lippmann (1922) also argued that we compensate for our lack of knowledge by picking recognizable signs out of our environment that proxy for ideas and use these ideas to fill out “our stock of images” (58–59). In other words, in times when “there is neither time nor opportunity for intimate acquaintance” we use “a trait which marks a well known type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of the stereotypes we carry about in our heads” (Lippmann 1922, 59). Thus, drawing on one’s party image allows an individual to interpret the actions of a political party even though that individual may have limited information about the party or the activity in which it is engaging.

If such is indeed the case, then it is important to explore the factors that facilitate or impede party elites’ ability to change the meaning of their parties. This book takes up this task. Knowing when it is possible to change one’s party image may help to predict when party elites can induce deviations in voting behavior and partisan loyalties. Discovering instances where people do not update their party images helps explain why overall party preferences tend to remain quite stable. Furthermore, such nonfindings have implications for the success of the strategies and tactics employed by political parties in recruiting new supporters.

This study sought to examine the circumstances that moderated party image modification. In other words, I explored the politics and

process of altering the meaning individuals assign to political parties. In general, I found that a cosmetic makeover unaccompanied by platform modifications can reshape party images. As long as people perceive the newly projected image of the party as different from the old, they will update their pictures of the party to correspond with the party's new image. Political elites, however, must be aware that some citizens have differing notions of what constitutes real change. When trying to convey to voters that the party has changed in some way, elites must realize that some aspects of a party image are easier to change than others. Finally, party image change is also contingent on what other information people possess at the time they are asked to update their perceptions of the political party.

To relate this finding to the issue of race, when parties seek to reshape their racial symbolism without changing their positions on issues such as affirmative action and reparations for slavery, the parties can expect some success, but not among those to whom the policies are most important. These findings help explain why the Republican Party has failed to attract more African Americans even in the face of greater heterogeneity in income and education among that group. In addition, the Republican Party not only had to overcome the importance that blacks already placed on policy positions on racialized issues but also encountered opposition from the media, which further highlighted the fact that the party had not completely changed. Media opposition served as a barrier to change among blacks and whites. Finally, the findings suggest that success can be temporary. Political elites' ability to make lasting changes in party images relies on their ability to sustain these projected changes. The Republican Party made substantial headway among blacks when they read that the Republicans' attempts to reach out to blacks constituted an ongoing effort. Furthermore, elite strategies that seek to alter party images will work only to the extent that they do not contradict themselves, as was the case with the dispute over the 2000 election.

By focusing on the section of party image associated with race-related activities, this book furthers scholars' knowledge of race, political communication, and party politics in three previously ignored areas. First, this book focuses on positive rather than inflammatory racialized images. Most of the examinations of racialized campaigns focus on negative, stereotypical images. The few exceptions include Valentino, Hutchings, and White (2002) and Peffley, Hurwitz, and

Sniderman (1997), who have examined whether counterstereotypical racial images prime white racial attitudes when evaluating African Americans. These studies, however, have not empirically examined whether these images can alter the meaning of political parties, candidates, and issues. Thus, this project begins to fill this void by examining the impact of positive racial images on perceptions and evaluations of political parties and their candidates.

Second, this book focuses on both African American and white public opinion when discussing race and campaign communication. To date, examinations of the impact of racialized campaigns have neglected black public opinion, thereby painting an incomplete picture of how the injection of race in campaigns affects all voters. Discussing black public opinion is an important inclusion because images of African Americans racialize campaigns. Incorporating a discussion of black public opinion helps to explain why African Americans often feel alienated from and distrustful of the American political system.

Third, I demonstrate that examining campaign communication in isolation does not wholly explain the impact of the campaign. After all, elections do not occur in vacuums. Thus, this book included a discussion of how competing sources of information in the campaign environment created opposition to a party's ultimate goals. Specifically, I demonstrate that parties must battle the media as well as party history when attempting to reshape reputations for handling racial issues. Unlike previous studies, this project contextualizes the use of racial images within electoral discourse as a means of gaining a better understanding of the campaign's impact. Doing so not only helps us understand whether a campaign will reach its goal but also why it does or does not achieve its intended impact.

In the end, however, this book is not just a story about race and party image. It is a story about politics and how parties adapt to changing political environments. This book discerns how political parties attempt to assemble winning coalitions and when and why they will succeed. As the demographic makeup of the United States shifts and incorporates more and different voters into the electorate, parties will have to adapt to the changing political landscape. The future composition of party coalitions depends on whether different groups of voters will include political parties' outreach efforts in their decision-making calculus or whether these voters will dismiss this information as illusionary.