

Introduction

Inclusion or Illusion?

I wanna tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that there's not enough troops in the army to force the southern people to break down segregation and admit the nigger race into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes, and into our churches.

—J. Strom Thurmond, 1948

The history of the Republican Party and the NAACP has not been one of regular partnership. But our nation is harmed when we let our differences separate us and divide us. So, while some in my party have avoided the NAACP, and while some in the NAACP have avoided my party, I am proud to be here today.

—George W. Bush, July 10, 2000

I want to say this about my state: when Strom Thurmond ran for President, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either.

—Senator Trent Lott, December 5, 2002

DURING THE 2000 ELECTORAL CYCLE, observers of the political landscape witnessed the emergence of a “new” Republican Party. Characterized by the catchphrase “compassionate conservatism,” the Republican Party reached out to minority voters in ways it had not in recent history. Without making any substantial changes to its platform, the GOP presented itself as a more diverse party that welcomed African Americans and other minority groups into its tent.

For example, George W. Bush became the first Republican presidential candidate in twelve years to address the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at its national convention in Baltimore. During his speech, Bush declared that he was

there because he believed “there is much [the NAACP and the Republican Party] can do together to advance racial harmony and economic opportunity.” He admitted that for the Republican Party, “there’s no escaping the reality that the Party of Lincoln has not always carried the mantle of Lincoln.” Nevertheless, Bush argued that by “recognizing our past and confronting the future with a common vision,” the GOP and the NAACP could “find common ground” (Bush 2000).

This theme of reclaiming the “mantle of Lincoln” and opening up the Republican Party to minority voters would continue throughout the months leading up to Election Day. Perhaps the best example of the Republican Party’s minority outreach occurred during the 2000 Republican National Convention. As Denton (2002) notes, “The Republican convention presented a friendlier, more inclusive, and moderate convention than in 1992 and 1996. Republicans made direct appeals to those of Democratic leanings” (8–9). In addition to its 85 black convention delegates (a 63 percent increase from the 1996 convention), the 2000 Republican convention in Philadelphia featured prime-time appearances by Condoleezza Rice, George W. Bush’s former national security adviser and Secretary of State during his second term; and retired general Colin Powell, former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and secretary of state (Bositis 2000, 2). In fact, during the convention, Powell challenged the Republican Party to bridge racial divides and reclaim the “mantle of Lincoln” by overcoming blacks’ “cynicism and mistrust” toward the Republican Party and reaching out to the African American community (Powell 2000).

Newspaper coverage of the 2000 Republican convention suggested that the GOP’s diversity effort was part of its “search of a new package for its core philosophy.” Republican Party chair Jim Nicholson was quoted as saying that the 2000 convention in Philadelphia was “a different kind of convention, for a different kind of party” (Von Drehle 2000). During the convention, the Republican Party tried to distance itself from its “battered old image” as “a bunch of mean moralizers” while portraying itself as being “a new, happy and inclusive Republican Party that wants to keep the good times rolling” (Dionne 2000).

Two years later, during a 100th birthday celebration for longtime senator J. Strom Thurmond (R-SC), Republican senator Trent Lott publicly remarked that the country would have been better off if Thurmond had been elected president in 1948. Lott’s comment referred to the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948, led by Thurmond, in which many south-

ern Democrats rebelled against the Democratic Party as a result of President Harry S. Truman's extension of civil rights to African Americans. Thurmond's candidacy marked the South's commitment to segregation and white supremacy in spite of the party's changing attitudes toward civil rights. Observers thought that Lott believed that the United States would have been better off if Jim Crow had remained intact.

Lott's remarks eventually incited a media frenzy. He was forced to publicly apologize several times, and ultimately decided to resign as Senate majority leader. Not surprisingly, Lott faced great criticism from the Democratic Party and civil rights leaders. Perhaps more surprising was the political heat Lott took from his own party. Republicans might have forgiven Lott's comments had they not occurred on the heels of the George W. Bush-led Republican campaign to paint itself as the party of racial harmony.

In light of this political chain of events, *Time* reporter Andrew Sullivan wrote an article on "Why Lott's a Menace to His Party." Sullivan claimed that Lott "undermine[d] the inclusive spirit that Bush ha[d] tried to build." Sullivan assumed, however, that the "compassionate conservative" strategy had succeeded in reshaping perceptions of the Republican Party. It is quite possible that even after the Republican Party's attempt to appear more inclusive, voters had not changed their perceptions of the party. After all, the party did not change its position on racial issues such as affirmative action or reparations for slavery.

This book seeks to provide a means of assessing which image of the Republican Party—the Party of Lincoln or the Party of Trent Lott—pervaded. The injection of race into political discourse is nothing new, of course, and is never more evident than during election cycles. History is saturated with examples of racially framed issues in campaign advertising, including the 1988 Willie Horton ad and the 1990 Jesse Helms "hands" ad. But while Lott's remarks were consistent with positions taken by previous Republican elites, the example of the Republican Party using racial images to signify inclusion deviates from its previous playing of the "race card."¹

More broadly, this book develops a theoretical framework for

1. This is not to say that race-baiting has been purged from the arsenal of campaign tactics. Rather, in addition to the "hands" and Willie Horton ads, the electorate faces a sea of ads that give a new, multicultural face to many of the Republican Party's long-standing policies.

understanding what is needed to change party images in voters' minds. No current theories help to explain how citizens update their perceptions of political parties in light of changes in the parties' projected images. Scholars have noted shifts in partisan alignments when the parties adopt drastically different positions on political issues. But a difference exists between changes in political parties marked by critical realignment on public policies and the much smaller changes parties make from election to election. How, then, do voters respond to these marginal changes? Can a party reshape its image without making substantial changes to its platform? If so, are there limits to this strategy's effectiveness?

This book focuses on answering these questions. I identify some of the constraints that bind political parties when they attempt to expand their electoral bases. Specifically, I examine what happens to an individual's image of a political party when that party repackages its core without making changes to the core itself. I argue that a party will succeed in reshaping its image when voters perceive the new image as different from the old. In other words, when people recognize that a party has changed in some way, they will adjust their perceptions of the party to correspond with the party's projected image. This sounds simple enough; however, parties face several obstacles when proving to the electorate that they have changed.

First, parties must battle their histories. Neither party has entrenched positions on some issues—generally those that are new or less salient, such as stem cell research. Shaping and reshaping party images on these issues should be relatively easy. In contrast, on some issues—such as race, defense, and abortion—the parties have taken clear and long-standing positions. Parties will find it more difficult to reshape their images on such issues. The more history surrounding an issue a party must overcome, the harder it is to reshape its image on that issue.

Second, change means different things to different people. For some people, change means altering the party's policy positions; for others, simple cosmetic changes are enough to signal change. When making superficial changes to its image with respect to a particular issue, a party can expect to succeed only among those for whom the party's actual issue position is less salient.

Finally, when attempting to reshape their images, parties must contest countervailing information found simultaneously in the political

environment. Such information can come from political opponents, the media, or, in the case of Trent Lott, other party members. By highlighting aspects of the party that have not changed or by contradicting the party's projected image, these other information sources can convince citizens that the party has not changed. The greater the presence of competing information, the more difficulty political parties will encounter in altering their images in voters' minds.

In what follows, I empirically test this central proposition. To do so, I focus primarily on the use of racial imagery at the 2000 Republican National Convention, which provides a unique opportunity to explore the current political landscape in areas previously uncharted. First, as I will demonstrate, the theme of inclusiveness that characterized the convention program deviates from previous party activities, making the convention a reasonably timely example of a party attempting to reshape its image. Second, examining the convention allows us to observe how parties try to reshape their images with respect to race and to what extent these efforts succeed. Race is one of those issues on which the parties have developed distinct and enduring reputations. Thus, if we can identify conditions under which a party succeeds in changing the racial component of a party image, we may apply these findings to other less salient issues. With the exception of Spence and Walton (1999), the political science literature has failed to examine African American convention participation. This study provides the first systematic examination of convention attendees beyond delegates and candidates. Finally, this book is one of the only studies to examine a political convention as a form of political communication.

The double entendre in the introduction's title forecasts what is yet to come. The obvious reference is to the analysis of the theme of inclusion presented at the 2000 Republican National Convention. I ask the question, "Inclusion or Illusion?" to gauge voters' evaluations of the GOP's outreach activities. Campaign rhetoric can but does not always substitute for real policy changes when political parties attempt to reshape individuals' perceptions. For certain individuals, the presence of African Americans at the 2000 Republican National Convention signaled a more inclusive Republican Party. For others, the presence of blacks represented a mere illusion that masked the conservative position of the Republican Party on racial issues.

The more obscure reference relates to the broader theme of this book. Here, the question "Inclusion or Illusion?" ascertains whether

citizens revise their party images when presented with new information about political parties. Do people include all or even some of this new information, or do they dismiss the information as nothing more than an illusion? I argue that citizens update their perceptions of political parties to correspond with the parties' projected images. I challenge the notion that short-term political strategies aimed at disrupting existing electoral coalitions simply do not work (Cowden and McDermott 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). While I do not dispute the fact that such approaches do not create major shifts in partisan identifications, I contend that these activities allow political parties to pick up voters at the margins. In light of recent presidential elections in which every vote made a difference, understanding where, when, and how parties can expect modest increases in vote share is imminently important.

For that reason, chapter 1 reintroduces the question at hand: Can aesthetic changes unaccompanied by corresponding changes in policy positions alter voters' perceptions of political parties along a particular dimension? This chapter brings together the relevant literatures in political science, psychology, and communication studies to establish the importance of this question and develops a general theoretical framework for answering it. I argue that a party's ability to change its image with respect to a particular issue domain depends on its history on that issue, the presence of competing information, and individuals' standards for what it means to be a changed party. In this chapter, I also explain how the general framework applies to the test case, the use of racial images at the 2000 Republican National Convention.

Chapter 2 establishes the historical context for understanding the contemporary role of race in American party politics. Specifically, this chapter describes how the two major parties have dealt with African Americans and issues of race over the years. This chapter illustrates the magnitude of the obstacle faced when the two parties try to reshape their images with respect to race, given their existing reputations on this issue.

With the historical foundation thus established, chapter 3 examines how party activities have resonated in the minds of the American public. I employ survey data collected over the past fifty years by the American National Election Study as well as data obtained from focus groups and qualitative interviews. Chapter 3 provides a baseline assessment of party images. The findings from these analyses demonstrate

that people have clear pictures of the parties that correspond and move with their positions on race. Currently, individuals overwhelmingly perceive the Democratic Party as more racially liberal than the Republican Party.

In chapter 4, I include a discussion of the news media's role in facilitating the response to the 2000 Republican National Convention. I include a chapter on the media because most people obtain information about political events through the media rather than through first-hand experience. Using data drawn from three nationally circulated newspapers (the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*) and thirteen African American newspapers, I examine how the media framed the convention. This chapter seeks primarily to determine the level and scope of countervailing information in the campaign environment at the time of the convention. The content analysis reveals that substantial variance occurred in the coverage of the convention and that individuals had the opportunity to encounter information that competed with the Republican Party's new projected image.

Using both survey and experimental data, chapter 5 explores whether the Republican Party's racial appeals affected individuals' perceptions of the party. First, I use secondary analysis of the Gallup Organization's Post-GOP Convention Poll to show that those who watched the convention were more likely to believe that the Republican Party did a good job reaching out to minorities. Further, the results indicate that the effect of convention watching depended largely on the viewer's race.

While the results of the polling data provide insight into how the Republicans' use of racial appeals resonated with the general electorate, the polling results by themselves do not answer the research question sufficiently because they cannot isolate the causal relationship between convention exposure and perceptions of the Republican Party. To establish causality, the research design used in this book incorporates several experiments. This method is ideal for testing the argument that competing information found in the campaign environment undermined the Republican Party's attempt to appear more inclusive. Consequently, I use an experiment in chapter 5 to demonstrate that subtle variation in the media's conveyance of convention events significantly affected the effectiveness of the GOP's strategy. Again, these effects were moderated by the race of the perceiver.

Chapter 6 further explores the effect of countervailing information by examining what happens when the party's activities contradict its new projected image. In particular, chapter 6 examines how much of the headway gained as a result of the convention was undone by the dispute over the 2000 election results. First, I examine how the print news media discussed the Republican Party from Election Day until Al Gore conceded the election. I find that most of the coverage focused on the Florida recount. In addition, the media devoted a fraction of this coverage to discussing the recount in conjunction with the impact on minority groups and how the Republican Party's actions undermined the spirit of "compassionate conservatism." Using the 2002 American National Election Study, I find a link between the media coverage and public opinion. That is, I find that believing that George W. Bush was unfairly elected president in 2000 negatively correlated with perceptions of the Republican Party's ability to represent minority groups.

While the preceding chapters discuss the impediments encountered in the process of party image change, chapter 7 discusses a strategy for overcoming these obstacles. Specifically, I consider how repeated attempts to reshape citizens' party images can minimize the presence of countervailing information and increase the strategy's success. To do so, I revisit the compassionate conservative strategy by examining the 2004 Republican National Convention. Although on a smaller scale, the 2004 electoral cycle was once again marked by the Republican Party's concerted effort to reach out to minority groups. Analyses of experimental data reveal that the recurring effort at the 2004 convention allowed the Republican Party to make inroads among African Americans, a group unaffected by the 2000 Republican National Convention.

Although this book focuses primarily on the Republican Party, the approach used to examine party image change applies to political parties in general, as chapter 8 illustrates. I test the boundaries of the theoretical framework developed in chapter 1 by applying it to the Democratic Party. Specifically, I explore the party's limitations if it tried to reshape its image with respect to race. The results reveal that the Democratic Party would have to overcome the same obstacles when trying to prove to the electorate that it was more racially conservative than the Republican Party had to overcome in trying to appear more racially liberal.

Finally, chapter 9 concludes the discussion of the politics and process of party image change by summarizing the findings and discussing their implications. In this chapter, I speculate about the future of race and party politics. As the U.S. electorate continues to grow and change in racial/ethnic composition, I contemplate how political parties will respond. I also theorize about how this project's framework can be applied to the study of other issues and groups in U.S. politics. Chapter 9 closes with a discussion of potential avenues for future research.