

# Pigeonholing Partisans: Stereotypes of Party Supporters and Partisan Polarization

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**Abstract** What comes to mind when people think about rank-and-file party supporters? What stereotypes do people hold regarding ordinary partisans, and are these views politically consequential? We utilize open-ended survey items and structural topic modeling to document stereotypes about rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans. Many subjects report stereotypes consistent with the parties' actual composition, but individual differences in political knowledge, interest, and partisan affiliation predict their specific content. Respondents varied in their tendency to characterize partisans in terms of group memberships, issue preferences, or individual traits, lending support to both ideological and identity-based conceptions of partisanship. Most importantly, we show that partisan stereotype content is politically significant: individuals who think of partisans in a predominantly *trait-based* manner—that is, in a way consistent with partisanship as a social identity—display dramatically higher levels of both affective and ideological polarization.

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## Introduction

Although partisanship may be the single most important construct shaping American political behavior and attitudes, little is known about exactly what comes to mind when ordinary people think about ordinary partisans. Political behavior scholarship, beginning to take up this question, increasingly conceives of partisanship as a social category comparable to race, religion, or gender (e.g., Green et al. 2002; Greene 1999, 2004; Huddy et al. 2015; Theodoridis 2017), and has connected this perspective to mass-level polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Theodoridis 2017). Such social categorization entails trait and behavioral expectancies—that is, stereotypes—which can substantially influence social judgments and behaviors (Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000).

Despite some attention given to views of partisan elites or the party as a unit (e.g., Rahn 1993; Goggin and Theodoridis 2017), comparatively little work has directly explored the content and correlates of stereotypes about *mass-level* partisans. But if partisanship is an important social category in its own right, then how ordinary people think about the parties and their lay members—as a social identity with its own unique set of characteristics versus an instrumental collection of issue positions, ideologies, and other group memberships—may exert a considerable impact on citizens' everyday lives as well as their explicitly political views. In short, do the ways that people think about rank-and-file party supporters inform their own preferences and orientations toward the parties, particularly with regard to partisan polarization?

To answer this question, we document stereotypes of rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans. We measure these ideas across three populations, present analyses to understand the correlates of these stereotypes, and assess how these views relate to partisan polarization. We utilize open-ended survey items, allowing the respondents themselves—rather than typical closed-ended survey items—to guide the research process. In this way we capture an organic picture of partisan stereotypes, free of a priori assumptions regarding their content.

In brief, we find that many individuals report stereotypes of rank-and-file partisans that are broadly consistent with the parties' actual ideological orientations, issue positions, and demographic composition. Views of party supporters varied across subjects, however, with some tending to describe them mainly in terms of social groups or political issues, while others focused more on personality traits and other individual-level descriptors. We find that respondents who describe partisans in individualized terms—that is, in a way consistent with conceptions of partisanship as a social identity—display more extreme ideological leanings, more divergent affective evaluations of the two parties, and greater estimates of the ideological distance between the parties. Our results show that the specific kinds of images that come to mind when people think about ordinary Democrats and

Republicans are politically significant: they matter for polarization independent of the affective evaluations subjects attach to those images. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for studies of partisanship.

## Two Conceptions of Parties

Party affiliation constitutes one of the most central and longest-studied phenomena in political science, and scholars have put forth a number of different views regarding its nature. A growing body of literature in political psychology conceives of partisanship as a social category comparable to race, religion, or gender (e.g., Green et al. 2002; Greene 1999, 2004; Huddy et al. 2015; Theodoridis 2017). Partisan affiliation, in this view, consists mainly of identification with a social group in the manner described by Tajfel's social identity theory—that is, “that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981, p. 255). Such social identification “involves comparing a judgment about oneself with one's perception of a social group. As people reflect on whether they are Democrats or Republicans (or neither), they call to mind some mental image, or stereotype, of what these sorts of people are like and square those images with their own self-conceptions” (Green et al. 2002, p. 8). In other words, the parties function as social groups *in and of themselves*, and affiliation with one party or another constitutes a deeper attachment than mere political evaluations of platforms or performance. Indeed, such partisan identity groups need not be especially programmatic or ideological in their differences, but may nonetheless become polarized in affective terms (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

This perspective departs to a considerable degree from a more traditional view that focuses on how different issue positions, ideological orientations, and social groups connect to the political parties. In this model, feelings about the parties derive from their compatibility with one's pre-existing policy views or group memberships. This view of partisanship has a long history in political science scholarship, going back to some of its most foundational works (e.g., Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Key 1964), and it retains many proponents today. Recent work has confirmed that some people think of the parties in terms of constitutive social groups (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017) as well as political issues and ideology (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2006; Niemi and Jennings 1991). Huddy et al. (2015) label this the “instrumental” conception of partisanship. Through this lens, individuals view their respective parties less as a common, cohesive social group per se and more as a means to pursue narrower interests.

These two views need not be incompatible, and both may simultaneously be “true.” Indeed, some landmark works on partisanship note that both versions may coexist (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012). The question remains, however: how prevalent are these perspectives in the public consciousness when it comes to rank-and-file party supporters? What differences exist between

those who think about partisanship instrumentally and those who approach partisanship as an identity? We posit that whether an individual thinks of mass-level party supporters primarily through an instrumental or social identity lens will have significant political implications and, in particular, will relate to forms of partisan polarization.

Both of these conceptions of partisanship qualify as *stereotypes* about the parties—that is, beliefs about their attributes as groups and the attributes of their members (Ashmore and del Boca 1981). Given the variation in how the parties are conceptualized by scholars, stereotypes of party supporters might be expressed predominantly in terms of individual traits (relating to social identity theories of partisanship), on the one hand, versus group membership or key political issues on the other (corresponding to the instrumental view). The more individuals think of partisanship as a social identity, the more they should see the parties (especially the outparty) as homogeneous (Hogg 1992)—and by implication, the more likely they should be to make trait-focused attributions based on partisanship (Hamilton and Sherman 1996).

Previous work has documented the ways individuals express their own partisanship and the consequences of these expressions (e.g., Huddy et al. 2015), but much remains to be uncovered regarding how people view run-of-the-mill party supporters—and by extension, how those perceptions impact partisan conflict. As Green et al. (2002) emphasize, how individuals evaluate the parties and conceive of their own partisanship depends on their stereotypes of partisans at large. Yet little work has explored this relationship directly. Further, no previous study, to our knowledge, has specifically sought to ascertain the relative prevalence of the above-mentioned social identity and instrumental perspectives on party affiliation among the public. We seek to fill this important gap in the literature by asking, as directly as we can, what images come to mind when people think of rank-and-file partisans. Do most people see the parties as social groups in and of themselves with common traits, or as collections of *other* social groups and political interests? Furthermore, do individuals who perceive the parties in these different ways differ in their other political attitudes and beliefs?

## Partisan Stereotypes and Polarization

Stereotypes are “intuitive generalizations that individuals routinely use in their everyday life” that save cognitive resources (Bordalo et al. 2016, 1755). They can be based on real or perceived group differences and typically involve comparing one group to another (Bordalo et al. 2016; Sherman et al. 2009). In the abstract, they are not necessarily positive, negative, accurate, or inaccurate. In practice, stereotypes can exacerbate intergroup conflict while at the same time helping people make sense of a complex political world (Allport 1954; Lippmann 1922), with the potential to change the way group members are compared to one another (Biernat 2003) and to influence the polarization of attitudes towards groups (e.g., Eagly and Mladinic 1989; Glick et al. 1997). Partisan stereotypes may therefore connect to the intense

partisan polarization that characterizes the modern era (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).

Elite and ideological polarization has increased the salience of partisanship among the mass public (Baumer and Gold 2007; Druckman et al. 2013; Hetherington 2001), but it remains unclear how individuals think about partisans, or how their conceptualizations might factor into polarization. While existing work has looked at whether mass polarization is ideological (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006, 2008) versus affective<sup>1</sup> (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2013, 2015), partisan stereotypes themselves have yet to be fully integrated into either of these accounts. It is likely that these stereotypes both respond and contribute to polarization. The content and use of stereotypes tend to reflect cues in one's political and social environment (Bordalo et al. 2016; Josefsen 2000; Rahn and Cramer 1996), and partisan stereotypes may magnify perceptions of issue-based interparty disagreements (Bordalo et al. 2016; Chambers et al. 2006).

We posit that whether an individual primarily thinks of party supporters in social identity-focused or instrumental terms will have a significant relationship with how they evaluate the parties, and thus on different forms and perceptions of partisan polarization. Social identity theory suggests that, in order to maintain a positive self-image and distinctiveness, individuals tend toward more positive evaluations of their ingroup and, importantly, strive to accentuate its differences relative to outgroups (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Thus, thinking of party affiliation as a social identity in and of itself should relate to larger differences in how the parties are perceived, as well as more extreme opinions among mass-level partisans.

## Expectations

Informed by these ideas, our predictions center on two main questions. First, what is the content of partisan stereotypes? Given extant evidence for both social identity (e.g., Green et al. 2002; Huddy et al. 2015) and instrumental (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2006; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017) conceptions of the parties, we expect that stereotypes of party supporters will include a mix of individual traits, political issues, and social groups. Additionally, we predict variation in the complexity and specificity of respondents' stereotypes of partisans: subjects higher in education, political interest, and political knowledge will be more likely to produce substantive responses in any of these domains, as opposed to giving no response or saying "don't know" or similar (H1). Such individuals have more ideas about partisans and are more attuned to messages and information about politics (Lodge and Hamill 1986); as a result, we expect them to more readily provide stereotypes of both parties. Testing this expectation also helps us to evaluate whether our measures of stereotypes behave as existing studies would predict, serving as a face-validity check. Note, however, that we do not predict a relationship between these variables

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<sup>1</sup> By this, we mean based on increased dislike for the opposing party rather than explicit policy or ideological disagreements.

and *accurate* beliefs about partisans themselves; indeed, some prior work suggests that those with higher levels of political interest over-apply partisan stereotypes and thus report *less* accurate beliefs about individual supporters of the parties (Ahler and Sood forthcoming).<sup>2</sup>

Second, we ask whether stereotype content is politically *significant*—in particular, how does thinking about party supporters in specific ways relate to different forms of partisan polarization? Some prior empirical work suggests that thinking about the parties in terms of the social groups that compose them, or the issue stances they take, may increase perceptions of the ideological distance between the parties (Ahler and Sood forthcoming; Westfall et al. 2015). On the other hand, thinking about the parties in terms of essential characteristics or traits—particularly when those traits are especially positive or negative—may be connected to affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2012). Both of these connections seem plausible, but social identity theory gives us reason to lean toward the latter. Individuals seek positive distinctiveness by more strongly differentiating their ingroup from other groups (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Thus, to the degree that people view partisanship as a social identity per se (i.e., think of party supporters in trait-based terms), they will exhibit more divergent views of the parties on a variety of dimensions, which should translate into increased levels of partisan polarization. Specifically, individuals who express more trait-based partisan stereotypes (relative to other kinds of stereotypes) will be more ideologically extreme, their affect toward the two parties will more strongly diverge, and they will perceive greater political differences between the parties (H2).

## Data and Methods

To answer the above questions, we conducted a unique survey soliciting open-ended responses concerning stereotypes about the two parties. We administered a version of this survey to three different samples: undergraduates at a large Midwestern university (N = 548), MTurk workers (N = 954), and a nationally diverse non-probability sample collected through Research Now (N = 861). Table A.1 in the Online Appendix provides some demographic information about these different samples.<sup>3</sup>

We measured respondents' perceptions of the parties with open-ended survey questions. Specifically, respondents were asked to list their general stereotypes of mass partisans (i.e., “words that typically describe people who support the [Democratic/Republican] party”), and were prompted to provide four words or phrases for each party. Such open-ended questions provide a fairly direct view into respondents' thoughts (Iyengar 1996; Roberts et al. 2014), and they avoid making assumptions about the possible range of stereotype content, instead simply asking

<sup>2</sup> In addition, for many of the ideas our subjects report, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess accuracy. For that reason, we do not directly explore accuracy.

<sup>3</sup> The undergraduate sample was collected between March and April 2016, the MTurk sample was collected in April 2016, and the national sample was collected in early August 2016.

respondents to list the attributes they believe characterize a given group (see, e.g., Devine 1989; Eagly and Mladinic 1989). We also asked respondents to rate on a 1–7 scale the positivity/negativity for each of their free responses (on a new page after they provided all of their words/phrases). We adapt this overall technique in large part from work in social psychology by Eagly and Mladinic (1989).

We additionally measure partisanship (traditional measures of affiliation and strength), ideology, political interest, a four-item political knowledge battery, and demographic characteristics. We assess attitudes toward the parties themselves in the form of feeling thermometers, as well as perceptions of the parties' ideological and political extremity with respect to both mass partisans and elites. We ask this last set of items in order to gauge polarization in a number of ways, rather than focusing exclusively on ideological or affective polarization. Question wordings for all of these items can be found in the Online Appendix.

Our analysis proceeds in several stages and follows an approach similar to that of Bauer et al. (2017). We first take subjects' open-ended responses at face value, focusing on the most frequently recurring terms and highlighting commonalities across samples and subgroups. We next utilize machine learning to discover sets of words that tend to occur together, or *topics*, among subjects' responses. We relate subjects' individual characteristics to topic use, and examine the relationships among stereotype content and variables related to partisan polarization. Finally, we support our findings with robustness checks that do not rely on topic modeling.

We employ structural topic models (STMs) to obtain a detailed understanding of partisan stereotype content.<sup>4</sup> At a basic level, an STM, using a form of machine learning, organizes the words from a set of documents—here, the combined open-ended responses provided by each of our respondents<sup>5</sup>—into topics based on the co-occurrence of individual words within those documents. In other words, an STM provides a descriptive account of which words appear together across respondents. These co-occurring words form topics, which are then available for researchers to perform more detailed analyses. Structural topic modeling thus allows researchers to “discover topics from the data, rather than assume them” (Roberts et al. 2014, 3). Given the relative paucity of work on stereotypes about mass-level partisans, such an approach suits our objectives well. Moreover, generating topics as lists of interrelated terms fits the nature of stereotypes themselves: social cognition research suggests that mental representations of social groups—or, indeed, any complex concept—consist of multiple elements or features that relate to each other in a structured way (Murphy and Medin 1985; Stangor and Lange 1994). This analytic method thus allows us to explore the interrelated thoughts individuals have about partisanship without imposing our assumptions on these models. Our topic models organized stereotypes about Democrats and Republicans into 10 topics for each party, described in detail below. More details on the STM package, as well as the topic modeling process we followed, can be found in the Online Appendix.

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<sup>4</sup> We use the “stm” package in R for all such analyses (Roberts et al. 2017). For guidance in using this package, we have relied heavily on the information provided by Roberts et al. (2014) and Roberts et al. (2016).

<sup>5</sup> In our case, each participant's responses are combined into a single document, and the STM then enables us to make sense of those responses taken as a whole.

Finally, we investigate variables associated with the use of topics gleaned from these models. After classifying each of the 20 topics as referring predominantly to traits (a social identity view), predominantly to issues or groups (an instrumental view), or to a mix of both, we calculate the expected proportion of each subject's responses that appears in each of these general topic types.<sup>6</sup> From there, we examine the respondent characteristics that correlate with topic use, as well as the associations between topic use and variables such as affect toward the parties and perceptions of their extremity.

## Stereotype Content

We begin our exploration of partisan stereotype content with an examination of the most frequently recurring words across samples and subgroups. Table 1 shows the most common words given for Democrats and Republicans, pooled across all three samples.<sup>7</sup>

First, we note that respondents tended to correctly associate Democrats and Republicans with the appropriate ideological orientations (“liberal” and “progressive” for Democrats, “conservative” for Republicans) and social groups (e.g., “young,” “urban,” “minorities” for Democrats; “old,” “southern,” “white” for Republicans). Furthermore, as the Online Appendix tables illustrate, we observe a substantial degree of consistency in these stereotypes even across three distinct samples, suggesting that a good deal of partisan stereotype content is common among different segments of the national population. Likewise, we observe considerable consistency across parties. Altogether, six to eight of the top ten terms used to describe Democrats and Republicans appear across samples (i.e., the student, MTurk, and national samples), and four of the top ten terms for each party appear across partisan subgroups (i.e., Democrats, independents, and Republicans; see Tables A.2 through A.5 in the Online Appendix). The top responses across the board are “liberal” for Democrats and “conservative” for Republicans. All three subgroups frequently associate Democrats with minorities and the poor; similarly, each subgroup associates Republicans with whites, the religious, and the rich. We also see some differences, however: respondents more often ascribe positive stereotypes to their inparty and negative stereotypes to the outparty, as one might expect. Democrats describe copartisans as “caring” and “open minded,” for example, while labeling Republicans as “prejudiced” and “closed minded.” Republicans see supporters of their party as “honest” and “individualist,” while

<sup>6</sup> We note that, because these calculations occur outside of the STM package (due to limitations on the analyses in STM), this procedure introduces additional uncertainty into the succeeding analyses. This suggests that caution should be taken when interpreting results on the edges of conventional levels of significance.

<sup>7</sup> Before constructing the summary tables that appear below and in the Online Appendix, we first recoded the free responses to group together synonyms and words with highly similar or related meanings (e.g., “rich” and “wealthy” were combined into a single category). More details on this process can be found in the Online Appendix. While we used recoded data in the following Tables (1, A.2, A.3, A.4, A.5) for presentational purposes, all analyses after this section were conducted using raw, non-recoded data.



**Table 1** Most common stereotypes of Democrats and Republicans, pooled samples

	Stereotypes of Democrats	Stereotypes of Republicans
Most frequent response	Liberal	Conservative
2nd	Open minded	Rich
3rd	Caring	White
4th	Youth	Prejudiced
5th	Smart	Senior citizens
6th	Poor	Ignorant
7th	Equality	Self-interested
8th	Educated	Religious
9th	Minorities	Tradition
10th	Ignorant	Closed minded

describing Democrats as “lazy” and “unrealistic.” Also of note, identifiers with both parties describe fellow partisans as “smart” and “educated,” but describe outpartisans as “ignorant.”

Of course, such a surface-level inspection of partisan stereotypes is insufficiently systematic. To further minimize our a priori assumptions, we evaluate subjects’ responses using structural topic modeling as mentioned previously. We generate stereotype topics for each party based on the responses across our entire pooled sample.<sup>8</sup> Because the two parties evince substantial qualitative differences from each other—perceptions of which, as we observe above, appear to be shared across partisan groups—generating topics along other lines such as “inparty” and “outparty” stereotypes would likely mask important variation in content.

As a result of balancing co-occurrence of words with minimizing overlapping terms, our structural topic model suggests the presence of 10 coherent topics for both Democrats and Republicans in the terms respondents provided.<sup>9</sup> We present the results of the topic models in Tables 2 and 3, below.<sup>10</sup> Several things

<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of our convenience samples in addition to our nationally diverse sample jibes with prior work on stereotype content, which makes frequent use of student samples (Katz and Braly 1933; Devine and Elliot 1995; Madon et al. 2001), MTurk samples (Scherer et al. 2015), and other convenience samples (Graham et al. 2012). We also note that research on these kinds of convenience samples demonstrates the utility of both student (Druckman and Kam 2011) and MTurk samples (Mullinix et al. 2015; Levay et al. 2016) for making generalizable inferences. Furthermore, the STM procedures explicitly incorporate differences between samples when generating topics, allowing people from different samples to use the topics in different amounts. What this means in practical terms is, for example, if our national sample uses a particular topic frequently but the student sample does not (or vice versa), that topic will still appear in the final output.

<sup>9</sup> While the appropriate number of topics cannot be objectively determined by the structural topic model, it provides a number of metrics that researchers may use to determine a sensible body of topics. See Roberts et al. (2014) and the Online Appendix of this paper for more details.

<sup>10</sup> Instead of reporting the most frequent vocabulary terms found in each topic, we follow Roberts et al. (2014) in reporting words with the simplified frequency-exclusivity (FREX) scores. FREX words are summarized using the harmonic mean of the semantic coherence and exclusivity of a word within a given topic. Additionally, note that the words in these tables have been stemmed—that is, trailing characters (such as -ing or -ed) have been removed. This procedure is standard in any kind of textual analysis.

**Table 2** Democratic stereotype topics

Topic number	FREX words <sup>a</sup>
1	poor, minor, left, wing, govern, liber, opinion
2	young, open, concern, forward, younger, passion, big
3	care, educ, intellig, generous, empathet, peopl, women
4	progress, urban, accept, right, liber, inclus, idealist
5	class, middl, divers, liber, think, free, american
6	blank, know, dont, none, concern, younger, forward
7	pro, choic, blue, union, collar, non, worker
8	smart, fair, equal, kind, support, help, compassion
9	lazi, liar, socialist, entitl, dishonest, self, black
10	mind, social, work, liber, open, justic, concern

<sup>a</sup>Words in this column are listed in descending order of the harmonic mean of semantic coherence and exclusivity

**Table 3** Republican stereotype topics

Topic name	FREX words
1	blank, none, dont, know, money, self, fiscal
2	right, wing, trump, red, peopl, loud, money
3	white, southern, religi, uneduc, angri, money, fiscal
4	old, bigot, gun, fashion, anti, govern, know
5	busi, educ, wealthi, conserv, respons, male, valu
6	honest, patriot, strong, smart, work, independ, intellig
7	racist, rich, stupid, dumb, crazi, rude, sexist
8	close, mind, selfish, greed, narrow, ignor, stubborn
9	conserv, tradit, money, fiscal, self, men, angri
10	pro, life, christian, class, older, middl, rural

immediately stand out. As expected, topics for both parties exhibit a combination of terms referring to traits, social groups, and political issues. Many of the topics that emerge—for both Democrats and Republicans—suggest that respondents attend to both the composition of the parties and elite-level cues. Not only do subjects tend to associate social groups and ideological labels with the appropriate party, they also get the issues correct. For instance, Democratic topics frequently mention groups such as minorities, women, and unions, while Republican topics include whites, Southerners, and Christians (interestingly, “middle class” appears under both parties). Also of note, topics for both parties include a mix of positive and negative terms. In sum, a number of distinct themes emerge among the topics, with regard to the types of characteristics they include as well as those terms’ apparent valence.

Because our expectations concern thinking about the parties in trait-based versus group- or issue-based ways, we next categorize each topic as (1) predominantly about traits, (2) predominantly about groups/issues, or (3) ambiguous. We do so by

examining the co-occurring words within each topic<sup>11</sup>—if no less than five of the top seven terms in a topic clearly deal with traits or groups/issues, we label the topic accordingly. Otherwise, we label the topic as ambiguous. We reinforce these decisions by looking at the 10 documents most highly associated with each topic (provided in the online replication files), which offer further insight into respondent intent and the context in which certain terms are being used. This procedure yields six trait topics, three group/issue topics, and nine ambiguous topics, plus the “don’t know” topic for each party. Such coding practices follow the guidance of Roberts et al. (2014), who suggest that the substantive interpretation of topics falls ultimately to the researchers. Table 4 summarizes these topic groupings, which we employ for the remainder of our analyses.<sup>12</sup>

## Correlates of Topic Use

We next describe the aggregate frequency of trait, group/issue, and ambiguous topics across all responses in our data (see Table 5). Trait-based topics prove considerably more common than those centered around groups or issues; this holds across our different samples as well as partisan groups.<sup>13</sup> Although people of all party affiliations prove more likely to mention traits than groups/issues, this seems especially true for Democrats, whose use of terms from the trait topics outweighs that from the groups/issues topics by more than a factor of two. Notably, however, words from ambiguous topics consistently outnumber those from the other categories, emphasizing that it is fairly uncommon for respondents to think of party supporters in only one way or another.<sup>14</sup> Finally, terms from the “don’t know” topics occupy a large proportion as well, with independents substantially more likely to give such responses than partisans.

To gain a more precise sense of what respondent characteristics relate to the use of each of these categories, we perform a series of OLS regressions using respondents’ predicted topic proportions as our outcomes.<sup>15</sup> In this way, we can see how the use of our four broad topic categories, relative to one another, varies with

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<sup>11</sup> Here again we refer to FREX words.

<sup>12</sup> We use strict topic categorization standards, erring on the side of labeling a topic ambiguous any time the appropriate placement seemed unclear. As a robustness check, we also noted whether each ambiguous topic “leaned” toward traits or groups/issues; if we group these topics with the corresponding “unambiguous” topics when performing the analyses that follow, our substantive results remain largely unchanged.

<sup>13</sup> Note that frequency is not simply a function of the number of topics in each categorization. There was a great amount of variation in the usage of each topic, and a higher number of topics in one category (i.e., traits vs. issues and groups) does not necessarily imply a higher usage by subjects.

<sup>14</sup> Another way to consider this point is to look at the correlation between the trait topics and the issues/groups topics. If subjects used only one or the other, we would expect a correlation near to -1. However, what we observe in our data is a correlation of -0.07 ( $p=0.02$ ) using our strict topic groupings, 0.22 ( $p=0.000$ ) using broader groupings.

<sup>15</sup> In these models, we include sample fixed effects (that is, dummy variables for each data collection) in order to account for baseline differences between our samples. The OLS results presented here are also robust to alternative specifications (most notably, beta regression), but we prefer OLS owing to its simplicity of interpretation and general familiarity. Results from alternative models are available from the authors upon request.

**Table 4** Topic categorization

	Traits topics	Issues and groups topics	Ambiguous topics
	Dem 2	Dem 1	Dem 4
	Dem 3	Dem 7	Dem 5
	Dem 8	Rep 10	Dem 9
	Rep 6		Dem 10
	Rep 7		Rep 2
	Rep 8		Rep 3
			Rep 4
			Rep 5
			Rep 9
“Don’t Know” topics are not categorized	Total: 6	Total: 3	Total: 9

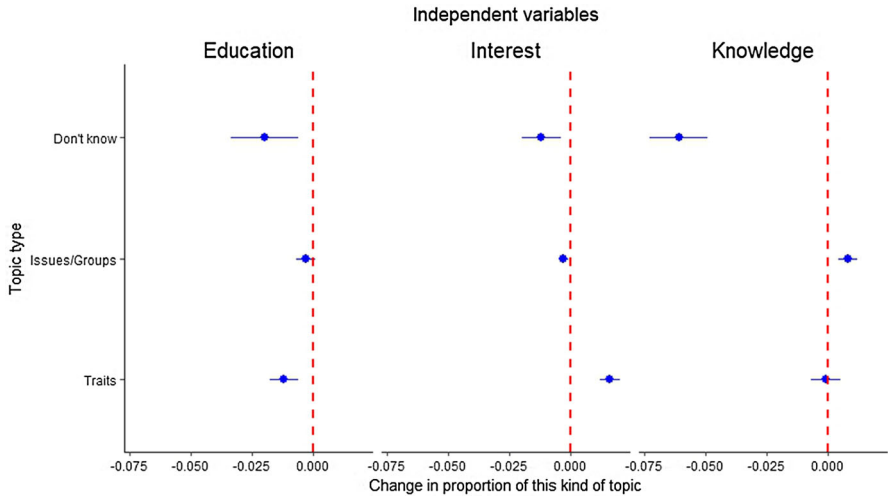
**Table 5** Proportions of kinds of stereotypes

	All three samples				National sample only			
	All	D’s	R’s	I’s <sup>a</sup>	All	D’s	R’s	I’s
<b>Strict coding</b>								
Issues/groups	0.134	0.126	0.144	0.144	0.134	0.129	0.142	0.133
Traits	0.270	0.316	0.217	0.192	0.230	0.288	0.199	0.148
Ambiguous	0.480	0.476	0.521	0.404	0.402	0.384	0.468	0.309
<b>Broad coding</b>								
Issues/groups	0.259	0.281	0.223	0.245	0.231	0.258	0.206	0.213
Traits	0.519	0.533	0.547	0.397	0.440	0.448	0.499	0.296
Ambiguous	0.105	0.104	0.111	0.097	0.096	0.095	0.104	0.081
<b>Blank</b>								
Blank(R)	0.114	0.084	0.108	0.254	0.226	0.202	0.173	0.400
Blank(D)	0.119	0.080	0.129	0.266	0.241	0.197	0.208	0.421
Blank(both)	0.117	0.082	0.119	0.260	0.233	0.199	0.190	0.410

<sup>a</sup>I’s are pure independents only; leaners are grouped with partisans

different individual-level variables. We present the full model results in Table A.6 in the Online Appendix, highlighting what strike us as the most relevant results here in Fig. 1.<sup>16</sup> First, in accordance with our first formal hypothesis, political interest, political knowledge, and education all show a negative relationship with the use of “don’t know” topics. Of the three, knowledge proves the most strongly related:

<sup>16</sup> In Fig. 1, we only include traits, issues/groups, and “don’t know” topics as dependent variables, omitting results for ambiguous topics. This is due to the fact that we did not have prior expectations about the ambiguous topics - a parallel figure containing these results can be found in Fig. A.1 of the Online Appendix. We also include parallel analyses predicting use of each individual topic within the STM package, but here we have little theoretical guidance on what to expect. These can be found in Table A.7, which reports when various respondent characteristics are related to specific topics. In Table A.6 and Table A.7, all independent and dependent variables are rescaled from 0-1 for ease of interpretation.



**Fig. 1** Correlates of stereotype topic use

relative to the least knowledgeable respondent, the most knowledgeable respondents’ expected proportion of responses from the blank topics drops by about 0.06. Interest and education show similar but smaller relationships. This comports with previous work on partisan schemata showing that political sophisticates can more easily call to mind coherent images of the parties (e.g., Baumer and Gold 1995, 2007; Lodge and Hamill 1986). Second, these findings offer support for the validity of our measurement approach—that we find these differences suggests individuals are truly drawing on their available knowledge and beliefs about the parties when making their responses.

Though we made no specific predictions along these lines, we note that political knowledge is positively associated with responses from issue- or group-based topics (albeit weakly) while political interest relates to the use of words from trait-based topics (and negatively correlates with using group/issue topics to a very small degree). Education, on the other hand, has a negative relationship with trait-based topics. These variables thus appear to be associated with the content of partisan stereotypes, though in different ways. We additionally observe that age is negatively related to trait-based thinking (see Table A.6 in the Online Appendix), perhaps due to the recency of extreme partisan polarization. Lastly, we note that more dominant social groups (e.g., men and whites; see Table A.6 in the Online Appendix) tend to think of partisans in a more trait-based manner, which accords with psychological theory that predicts more of this kind of thinking among privileged groups (Yzerbyt et al. 1997).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In addition to the model in Table A.6 depicting the relationships between these characteristics and use of different broad categories of topics, Table A.7 in the Online Appendix summarizes significant correlations with the use of specific topics.

## Political Correlates of Stereotype Content

Finally, does partisan stereotype content relate to politically important attitudes and behaviors? Does it *matter* what kinds of things come to mind when people think about rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans? Here, we consider the relationship of partisan stereotype content to perceptions of ideological distance between the parties, as well as ideological and affective polarization among respondents themselves. Because these items were only asked in the nationally diverse data collection, models here are restricted to that subgroup of respondents. We regress our variables of interest on the topic proportions to relate those beliefs and attitudes to holding certain stereotypes of ordinary Democrats and Republicans. In this section, we use the aggregate frequency of trait, group/issue, and ambiguous topics as regressors. In addition to the figure and summaries presented in the section below, all of the detailed statistical models used in these analyses can be found in the Online Appendix. Figure 2 graphically presents the main results, comparing the regression coefficients of trait and group/issue topics.<sup>18</sup>

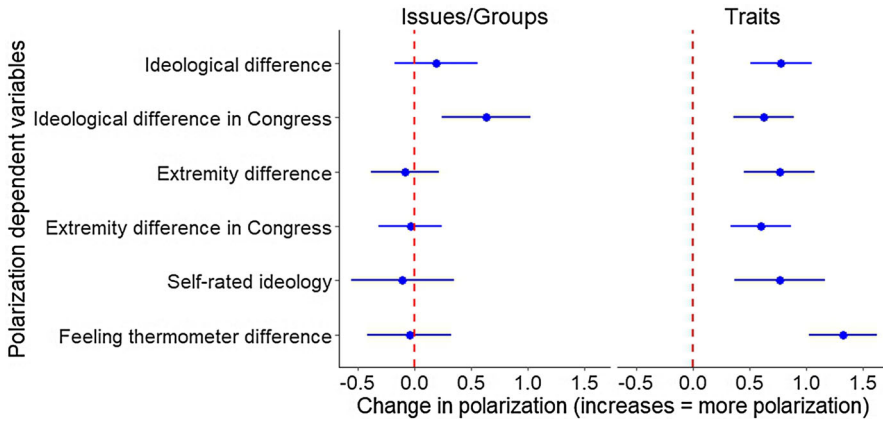
We first consider the correlation of stereotype content with perceptions of party ideology and extremity. Specifically, we assess subjects' views of the parties' extremity and ideological positioning, with respect to both mass partisans and members of Congress. The key dependent variables are the *differences* between respondents' views of the parties in terms of perceived ideology and extremity of political beliefs. We examine perceptions of both the partisans in general and members of Congress.<sup>19</sup> By and large, we find that thinking about the parties in terms of issues or social groups *does not* significantly relate to perceptions of ideological distance between the parties (the sole exception here being perceived ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans in Congress). However, thinking about members of the parties in terms of *traits* relates to a substantial and significant increase in perceived ideological distance between the parties at both the mass and the elite level. That is, thinking about the parties in this way correlates strongly with *greater* perceived ideological polarization. Moreover, respondents who express larger proportions of terms from trait-based topics tend to be those who are themselves more ideologically extreme (as measured with a folded version of the traditional 7-point ideology scale).<sup>20</sup>

We also consider the relationship between stereotype content and *affective* polarization, which we operationalize here as the absolute difference between feeling thermometer evaluations of the parties (in keeping with prior work, e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2015). As with ideological polarization, we find that thinking about members of the parties in terms of their traits is associated with

<sup>18</sup> In the interest of graphical clarity, we do not report coefficients for the ambiguous topics in Fig. 2. These (largely non-significant) results can be found in the Online Appendix.

<sup>19</sup> In each case, we use the absolute value of the difference between these items.

<sup>20</sup> We note that the proportion of ambiguous topics also relates to stronger respondent ideology, as well as greater perceived ideological distance between party supporters and between congresspersons. If we use a less stringent standard for designating predominantly trait-based and group/issue-based topics, the association with ambiguous topics disappears—but the consistent effect of using trait-dominant topics on all of our outcomes remains.



**Fig. 2** Polarization and topic use

greater affective polarization—the coefficient for trait topic proportion is both highly significant and quite large.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, thinking about the parties in terms of political issues or social groups has no such relationship (and, in fact, the coefficient on these terms is negative, though shy of statistical significance).<sup>22</sup> We note, importantly, that these results are not contingent on use of the STM package but rather are robust to alternative procedures: when we coded subjects’ responses outside of STM and analyzed topic proportions generated in this way, we observed the same pattern of results described above.<sup>23</sup>

In all of these regression models, we control for the average valence respondents attached to the terms they listed for supporters of each party. In other words, we effectively separate out the affective charge of the terms subjects reported from the content itself. However, we find that valence alone does not have a significant relationship with the attitudes of interest when placed alongside measures of

<sup>21</sup> We obtain similar results when including subjects from our student sample. Unfortunately, we lack these outcome measures for the Mechanical Turk sample.

<sup>22</sup> The possibility remains that these results are an artifact of the particular way we chose to categorize our topics. Given the apparent convergence of partisanship with other identities (see Mason 2016), it may be appropriate to put trait- and group-based topics together, with issue-based topics standing alone. We explored an alternative grouping of stereotype topics along these lines. In that case, the use of trait/group topics positively relates to all the forms of ideological and affective polarization described previously. The use of issue topics positively correlates with only one of these variables: perceptions of ideological differences in Congress. Thus, however we choose to place stereotypes based on social groups—with political issues or with traits—the relationship between trait-based stereotyping and various forms of polarization holds.

<sup>23</sup> To conduct this robustness check, we recoded the individual words provided by subjects as either traits, issues/groups, or other/ambiguous, and used the proportion of each as regressors. For this recoding procedure, we relied on lists of political issues, social groups associated with the parties, and personality traits generated by subjects themselves in another portion of our data collection (not reported here) as our recoding dictionaries. In brief, we obtain results that accord with those shown above: only *traits* consistently exerted a statistically significant impact on these measures of polarization (with the sole exception being perceived ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans in Congress); in each case, the effect was large and positive.

stereotype content.<sup>24</sup> The substantive nature of people's images of the parties, and therefore *how* people think of partisanship in general, seems to matter far more than the simple positivity or negativity attached to these images. Notably, given the nature of our data, we cannot speak to the causal ordering of these relationships. Thinking about party supporters primarily in terms of traits may lead to increased polarization; on the other hand, it may be the case that those whose views are more polarized in the first place are more prone to think of partisans in those terms. Future work will be needed to pin down the psychological processes in play here.

## Discussion

In sum, we first note that many individuals report stereotypes of rank-and-file partisans that are broadly consistent with the parties' actual ideological orientations, issue positions, and demographic composition. With fairly minimal prompting, most respondents put forth clear ideas about party supporters and their attributes. We also see a fair amount of consistency among the most common responses across samples and subgroups, but observe diversity in terms of the primary emphasis of individual responses, which ranges from social groups, to key political issues, to personality traits, to more symbolic ideological terms. Such a breadth of partisan images also reflects, in accordance with Sniderman and Stiglitz's (2012) mixed model of partisanship, theories about partisanship as a social identity (e.g., Green et al. 2002) as well as the more classic instrumental or ideological view of parties (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2006; Key 1964). That being said, we also see a not-insubstantial amount of non-response, suggesting not everyone can easily call to mind stereotypical images of partisans. We find that higher levels of political knowledge, political interest, and education increase the likelihood that subjects will report partisan stereotypes (as opposed to non-response).

Most importantly, holding these various stereotypes about rank-and-file party supporters proves politically meaningful, particularly when it comes to partisan polarization. Although the general salience of partisanship among the public has increased (Hetherington 2001), extant work on affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2013, 2015) suggests that partisans in recent decades have become more polarized in *social* but not necessarily ideological or issue-based terms. Our findings seem to complicate this story: Thinking about members of the parties in terms of their belonging to other social groups or the issues they support appears largely unrelated to affective polarization, perceptions of ideological polarization between the parties, differentials in their perceived extremity, and self-rated ideological extremity. Conversely, thinking of

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<sup>24</sup> We also examined the possibility that an interaction between stereotype content and valence relates to our polarization variables. However, interacting the use of trait-based topics with outparty valence reveals little evidence of such a relationship; the positive correlation between trait content and polarization remains constant across all our dependent variables, except for the extremity of respondents' self-rated ideology. In that case, as outparty valence increases, the relationship between trait content and more extreme ideology diminishes as outparty valence becomes more positive. We find no evidence of an interaction between the use of group/issue topics and outparty valence.



partisans in terms of *traits* connects to all of these outcomes to a substantial and highly significant degree. This accords with previous research showing that as affective polarization has increased, people have become more likely to attribute positive personality traits to members of their own party and negative traits to the outparty (Iyengar et al. 2012). We show that when respondents conceive their images of what partisans “are like” (Green et al. 2002) in such trait-based terms, they tend to perceive a greater degree of polarization and to be more polarized themselves, aligning with work in social psychology on stereotype endorsement and intergroup behavior (Bastian and Haslam 2006; Levy et al. 1998; Levy et al. 2001). These observations also cohere with social identity theory (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel and Turner 1979) more broadly, as individuals who think of partisanship as an identity in itself appear driven to accentuate interparty differences on a number of dimensions. This pattern may further indicate that ideological and affective forms of polarization are not so distinct as researchers sometimes suppose, as both display links to trait-based images of the parties.

It may be the tendency to conceive of partisans in identity- or trait-based terms itself, rather than the positivity or negativity associated with those terms, that is more closely connected with partisan polarization. In line with Green et al.’s (2002) conception of partisanship as a social identity, our findings highlight the relevance of specific stereotype content, independent of general affect. When we account for stereotype content as described above, the general valence of one’s partisan stereotypes has no apparent relationship with affective polarization or perceptions of ideological polarization. The specific images that come to mind when one thinks about the parties—not simply how positively or negatively one feels about them—matter.

## Conclusion

Given researchers’ increasing focus on partisanship as a social identity, the gap in the literature regarding the content of partisan stereotypes—that is, what comes to mind when people think about ordinary Democrats and Republicans—is a puzzling one. We have begun to fill that gap by eliciting people’s stereotypes of the parties via open-ended survey items and elucidating those responses through structural topic modeling. Moreover, we have established some of the correlates of these stereotypes and have shown that the specific content of partisan stereotypes may be politically consequential, particularly with regard to polarization.

In general, we find that individuals can construct images in their heads of ordinary Democrats and Republicans. For the most part, these stereotypes exhibit consistency across samples and subgroups and largely comport with the parties’ actual composition. At the same time, we also observe diversity in the emphasis of subjects’ responses, with some individuals predominantly referencing political issues or social groups, and others referring mainly to traits. The precise nature of individuals’ stereotypes of rank-and-file partisans depends at least partly on individual characteristics such as political knowledge, political interest, and education (and, of course, partisan affiliation).

Most significantly, we find evidence that partisan stereotypes matter at least as much for polarization as how positive or negative people feel about the stereotypes' constitutive components. We observe a substantial difference between those who tend to think about the parties in terms of their group composition or issue stances, on the one hand, and those who tend to think about them in terms of traits on the other—with the latter reporting greater perceived ideological distance between the parties, a larger gap in affective evaluations of the parties, and more polarized views themselves. These findings not only grant additional credence to social identity approaches to partisan identification, they also suggest strong connections between partisan social identity, trait-based thinking, and mass-level polarization. Furthermore, they hint at the possibility that views of ordinary Democrats and Republicans—members of the party-in-the-electorate that we are likely to come across in everyday life—may be just as politically significant as views of party elites or elected officials.

Although our findings have taken us several steps closer to understanding the content, causes, and consequences of partisan stereotypes—and, more broadly, how people experience and relate to the parties—areas for future research remain. First, our results stand to be replicated across additional populations (particularly, a probabilistic national sample) and over time. Second, these measures should be put in context: for example, how do correlates of stereotype content compare across stereotypes of different kinds of social groups? What about patterns of non-response? Third, can the results of our open-ended survey be fruitfully adapted as a closed-item instrument, and if so, would we observe the same set of effects on polarization using this kind of measure? Fourth, what broader contextual factors encourage or discourage thinking of everyday partisans in social identity-based terms? Finally, and most significantly, future work should attempt to pin down the nature of the relationship between polarization and stereotype content: Does thinking about partisans in trait-based terms tend to increase polarization, or does polarization tend to increase trait-based thinking?

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### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Ethical approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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