Partisanship in the Trump Era

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“Today’s Republican Party is split in two—between a Trump Party and your more traditional GOP.”

—NBC News, September 2017

“I’ll tell you what—honestly, the Republicans are very, very well united.”

—Donald Trump, October 2017
“Many of the [Democratic Party’s] current conflicts enlarge upon the ideological divisions that dominated the 2016 presidential primaries, with Hillary Clinton representing the centrist wing and Bernie Sanders the progressive wing.”


“The success of Sanders’s campaign was no fluke, proving that the Democratic Party had moved decisively to the left.”

—Graham Vyse, *New Republic*, October 2017
Data from **November 2017** YouGov survey. (2,000 respondents originally interviewed in 2015, July 2016, and post-election.)

Remarkable partisan stability from 2015 through the first year of Trump’s presidency:

- **72%** of respondents in exactly the same spot on the 7-point party identification scale.
- **2%** Democrat (or “leaning”) to Republican (or “leaning”)—mostly Trump enthusiasts.
- **2%** Republican (or “leaning”) to Democrat (or “leaning”)—mostly women and pro-Clinton, *not* anti-Trump.
Public perceptions of Donald Trump in July 2016 and November 2017

- Moral: July 2016 (30), November 2017 (35)
- Inspiring: July 2016 (35), November 2017 (40)
- Knowledgeable: July 2016 (40), November 2017 (45)
- Strong leader: July 2016 (40), November 2017 (45)
- Intelligent: July 2016 (45), November 2017 (50)

Average rating
Largely stable perceptions of Trump among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats

Average rating, November 2017 vs. Average rating, July 2016

- Republicans (△)
- Independents (●)
- Democrats (◆)

Attributes:
- Strong leader
- Intelligent
- Inspiring
- Moral
- Knowledgeable

Largely stable perceptions of Trump among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats.
The partisan landscape
Republicans and Democrats have very different attitudes toward a wide variety of social groups—including the NRA, Black Lives Matter, journalists, and college professors.
Key attitudes and values: Limited Government

Government should reduce differences in income between rich and poor people (−)

Government paying necessary medical costs for every American citizen (−)

Raising the federal minimum wage (−)

Increasing taxes on individuals who make more than $200,000 a year (−)

Government should help families pay for child care and college (−)

Government should make sure that everyone has access to good health care (−)

Stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment from climate change (−)

Feelings toward labor unions (−)
Key attitudes and values: *Cultural Conservatism*

Favor building a wall along the Mexican border

People who disrespect the American flag don’t belong in this country

Provide a legal way for illegal immigrants already in the United States to become U.S. citizens (−)

Discrimination against whites is as big a problem today as discrimination against blacks and other minorities

Allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally (−)

Feelings toward National Rifle Association

Feelings toward Muslims (−)

Feelings toward Fox News

Feelings toward gays and lesbians (−)

Feelings toward Black Lives Matter (−)
Support for *Limited Government* and *Cultural Conservatism* by party
“Pure” independents (19% of the public) are scattered over the political landscape, not concentrated at the political “center”
Two parties talking past each other
The most ardent Republicans’ enthusiasm for their party hinges almost entirely on *Cultural Conservatism* …
... while the most ardent Democrats' enthusiasm for their party hinges almost entirely on (opposition to) *Limited Government*
Internal party divisions
It’s Trump’s Republican Party—but mostly by default

*When Donald Trump disagrees with Republicans in Congress, who do you think is more likely to be right?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Republicans</th>
<th>Midterm voters</th>
<th>“Strong” identifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>64.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans in Congress</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither; unsure</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It’s Trump’s Republican Party—but mostly by default

Please indicate where you would put each of the following political leaders and groups on a scale ranging from 0 (for extremely unfavorable feelings) to 10 (for extremely favorable feelings). Average ratings:

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<th>All Republicans</th>
<th>Midterm voters</th>
<th>“Strong” identifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>7.61</td>
<td>8.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>7.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Party</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>7.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>5.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Ryan</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitt Romney</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch McConnell</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 738, 416, 334
Democratic divisions—an illusion of ideology

Ordinary least squares regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses). Differences in feelings toward leaders range from −10 to +10.

**Bernie Sanders vs. Hillary Clinton**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited Government</td>
<td>−0.189</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Conservatism</td>
<td>−0.218</td>
<td>0.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.401</td>
<td>0.163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard error of regression 3.33

Adjusted $R^2$ 0.00

$N$ 900
Democrats’ divisions “are reflections of social identities, symbolic commitments and partisan loyalties.” Sanders “is a sort of anti-Clinton—a political maverick from lily-white Vermont whose main claim to fame has been his insistence on calling himself an independent, a socialist, anything but a Democrat. That history has made him a convenient vessel for antipathy to Mrs. Clinton, the Democratic establishment and some of the party’s key constituencies. But it is a mistake to assume that voters who support Mr. Sanders because he is not Mrs. Clinton necessarily favor his left-leaning policy views.”

Prospects for partisan change
Limited Government—rather modest generational change (and very little evidence of a progressive shift among young Democrats)
Cultural Conservatism—substantial generational liberalization, with modest convergence in views between partisan groups
Some conclusions
- Republicans are relatively *united* (and energized) by cultural conservatism.
- Enthusiasm for Trump (such as it is) among rank and file Republicans is closely tied to their enthusiasm for cultural conservatism.
- Republicans are less united on the role of government, with about 22% closer to the average Democrat than to the average member of their own party.
Conversely, Democrats are relatively *united* (and energized) by enthusiasm for an active government—but more divided on cultural values, with 16% closer to the average Republican than to the average member of their own party.

Democrats are generally more enthusiastic about their party and its leaders than Republicans are.

Divisions between Sanders supporters and other Democrats are grounded in social attachments and identities, *not* ideology.
In the short run, significant partisan change seems unlikely. Both partisanship and views about Trump have been remarkably stable since the summer of 2016, with only about 4% of Americans having changed parties.

Generational change will eventually produce significant cultural liberalization. But in the meantime, it is by no means clear whether the activation of white identity and related cultural concerns will advantage the party of the “future” or the party of the “past.”