Why Are You a Democrat? Studying the Origins of Party Identification and Partisan Animosity with Open-ended Survey Questions

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Abstract

Is partisanship explained by policy preferences or other factors such as early childhood experiences, parental influence, and group membership? Distinguishing between policy and non-policy explanations is empirically challenging because policy preferences are strongly correlated with other potential explanatory factors. We contribute to this debate by asking open-ended survey questions. Policy is by far the most common reason Americans say that they identify as a Democrat or Republican and feel the way they do about members of the other party. These findings do not vary meaningfully across party, region, gender, race, age, or socioeconomic status. They do, however, differ significantly from the expectations of published scholars of partisanship.

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How do Americans select their preferred political party and why do they feel the way they do about members of the other party? Campbell et al. (1960) largely attribute the origins of party identification to "early politicization" (p. 146), documenting the strong correlation between one's party identification and that of their parents. This has become the dominant view among scholars of American political behavior, although subsequent studies have also discussed the importance of social environment (Klar 2014), group membership (Luttig 2017), group attitudes (Bartels 2018; Robinson and Moskowitz 2019), emotion (Mason 2015), and policy preferences (Bartels 2018; Highton and Kam 2011). Relatedly, accounts of partisan animosity and affective polarization typically argue or assume that attitudes toward parties result from early life experiences, social identities, and group orientations (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018).

Empirically studying partisan origins is difficult because competing theories are often consistent with the same observable phenomena (Fowler 2020). For example, children might have the same partisanship as their parents because they unthinkingly adopt a social identity or because, having carefully considered their values and interests, adopt similar policy preferences. Similarly, partisan animosity is consistent with party identity influencing attitudes toward the other party, disdain for one party causing people to identify with the other, or policy preferences influencing both party identification and attitudes toward the other party (Orr and Huber 2020).

We contribute to the literature on the origins of partisanship by doing something simple, straightforward, and unusual in this literature. Using open-ended survey questions, we ask self-identified Democrats and Republicans why they identify with their party and why they feel the way they do about members of the other party. Policy preferences, values, and ideology are, by far, the most common explanations people give for their party identification. Specifically, when asked why they identify with their party, 88 percent of respondents who gave a meaningful answer mentioned these factors. Fourteen percent of respondents mentioned disdain for the other party. Five percent

mentioned a specific candidate as an explanation for the partisan identification. Three percent mentioned the previous performance of the parties. Only 2 percent mentioned parents, family, peers, childhood experiences, emotions, or a long-standing affiliation with a party. And only 2 percent mentioned their affiliation with a group or their attitudes toward other groups.

By asking people to explain their partisan identities and attitudes, we are wading into thorny questions related to the philosophy of causation. An event or phenomenon typically has many causes (Bueno de Mesquita and Fowler 2021, pp. 42-44). For this reason, we did not restrict the length of our respondents' responses, and we allow multiple categories of explanations to apply to a single response. Furthermore, even in cases where a respondent mentions only one factor, this does not mean that other factors did not also play an important role. For example, suppose that group identities influence policy preferences, which, in turn, influence partisanship. A respondent would be right to say that both their partisanship is caused by or explained by their policy preferences. But they would also be right to say that their partisanship is caused by or explained by their group identities. Nevertheless, by allowing respondents to provide unrestricted, open-ended responses, we learn which explanations are most important and salient to them.

One potential concern with our study is that the classification of open-ended survey responses requires subjective judgment calls. We discuss our classification procedures in more detail below. Classification was highly consistent across coders and typically uncontroversial. For the few potentially ambiguous responses, we attempted to err against our ultimate finding. For example, one respondent who leans toward the Republican party stated that they are "socially more like Republicans." They may have meant to say that they agree more with the Republican Party on social policy, but we decided to assign this response to our category that includes discussion of parents, family, and peers. Our results may therefore understate the extent to which people think about policy when they decide which party they support.

Another potential concern is that people misrepresent their genuine motivations due to demand effects—composing answers to please the researcher—or social desirability bias—wishing to appear, for example, more sophisticated or less prejudiced. Furthermore, people may not know why they support their preferred party, but they may feel compelled to produce an answer. These are general concerns about survey research, and they may be more pronounced when asking people to provide causal explanations for their own behaviors, so we cannot entirely rule out these possibilities. However, respondents were assured that their responses would remain anonymous, and there was no indication in the survey that one kind of answer was more desirable than another. Even if survey respondents cannot or will not fully explain the reasons behind their attitudes, we should understand how feelings are rationalized and we should entertain the possibility that people know something about why they feel the way they do about political parties. Thus, we believe this analysis makes a valuable contribution to this literature.

To situate our findings, we surveyed 68 scholars who have recently published papers on American partisanship in leading political science journals about how they expected survey respondents to answer our questions. Our results differ significantly from their expectations—expectations that likely account for factors, like demand effects, that shape survey responses. Therefore, not only do we show that the vast majority of partisans say that they support their party for policy reasons, but we also show that the prevalence of stated policy motivations is greater than what experts from this literature expected. We also use these scholars' assessments of what they expect respondents to *say* compared to their beliefs about *actual causes* of partisanship (and animosity) to adjust our estimates of actual causes of partisanship (and animosity). Even after adjusting for expected rates of misrepresentation, we continue to find that policy reasons are the dominant explanation for partisan identity.

We also examine the heterogeneity of responses across different types of respondents. In general, the prevalence of different explanations does not vary meaningfully by party, gender, race, age, region, education, or income. Interestingly, we find that respondents who report that they are ideologically extreme are more likely to express disdain for the other party, and ideological extremism is a better predictor of references to out-party disdain than is strong partisanship.

To investigate the origins of partisan animosity and affective polarization, we also asked a different set of survey respondents why they feel the way they do about the other party. Approximately 20 percent of our partisan respondents indicated that they do not hold particularly negative attitudes toward the other party. Among those who do hold negative attitudes, more than two-thirds of them mentioned policy as an explanation.

If we take survey respondents' explanations seriously, policy preferences explain partisanship and partisan animosity more than current scholars expected. While such survey evidence is not dispositive for the multiple reasons outlined above, we think this evidence should not be dismissed out of hand and builds on the long tradition in political science of asking individuals about their own reasons for their policy views (e.g., Hochschild 1981) and identities (e.g., Cramer 2016). Moreover, the self-reported explanations of partisans may help us better understand political attitudes. They also allow us to see how individuals explain and rationalize their partisanship, which may be interesting even to those who find such explanations unreliable.

The Origins of Partisanship and Partisan Animosity

Partisanship is a powerful predictor of vote choice, political attitudes, and participation in American politics. Attachments to U.S. parties tend to be stable over time, and children often share the attachments of their parents (e.g., Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009). But where do party attachments come from? We discuss here the longstanding debate

over the origins of partisanship alongside the more recent debate about reasons for negative feelings between partisan groups. Originally, Campbell and colleagues described partisan identity as a psychological attachment or an affective orientation toward the political parties (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 121). Diverging affective evaluation of one's own party vis-à-vis the opposition, affective polarization, has been analyzed in a way that largely parallels older debates regarding origins of partisanship (Iyengar et al 2019). And yet, despite these longstanding and rich literatures, it remains exceedingly difficult to explain the origins of orientations toward parties.

Chosen partisanship has been described either as a consequence of early childhood socialization and experience with social groups, or less frequently, a reflection of political goals, interests, and experiences with government. Early evidence of partisan stability, ideological instability, and personal stories of social influence on vote choice suggested that the former set of explanations focusing on socialization were more important (e.g., Sears and Funk 1999; Converse 1964; Campbell et al. 1960). But the strong correlations between partisanship, issue positions, and voting behavior led some to conclude that partisanship is, at least in part, a reflection of substantive interests or underlying value commitments (e.g., Franklin and Jackson 1983; Fiorina 1981; Carsey and Layman 2006; Highton and Kam 2011). The increase in negative feelings toward members of the opposite party may similarly reflect either changes in socialization and evaluation of social groups (Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018) or the perception that substantive political conflict increasingly aligns with party divisions (Mason 2015; Webster and Abramowitz 2017).[2] Here we will

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[2] The perception of increased conflict may be important whether that substantive conflict is (Webster and Abramowitz 2017) or is not (Mason 2015) actually increasing.

consider evidence for a few specific causal pathways that have been hypothesized to influence partisanship and feelings toward partisans before turning to partisans' own explanations.[3]

On one side of these debates, partisanship and even affective evaluations of the out party are seen as a consequence of meaningful political and policy conflict. For example, party leaders and the performance of parties in power can shape attachments and interpersonal relationships. Following Fiorina's logic, partisan identity may be influenced by experiences with specific candidates and economic conditions (1981). Interviews before and after a presidential election suggest that political socialization may be driven significantly by experience with candidates and campaigns (Sears and Valentino 1997). The phenomenon of affective polarization is also thought to mirror attitudes toward candidates, in part because common measures of feelings toward parties more closely resemble feelings toward party leaders than feelings toward other members of the public (Druckman and Levendusky 2019).

More fundamentally, core values, ideological preferences, and desire for specific governmental action may lead people to affiliate with political parties while also influencing their feelings toward other partisans. Following Downs (1957), partisanship has long been treated at least partially as a summary of ideological (issue) preferences (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006, Jessee 2009). Some models of over-time changes in partisanship (e.g., MacKuen et al. 1989, Valentino and Sears 2005) and in affective polarization (Bougher 2017) suggest that changes in government performance and substantive political preferences also drive changes in partisanship and affective evaluations. When evaluating how warmly people feel toward Americans with randomly assigned characteristics, survey respondents are estimated to care more about issue agreement than party identity, even when the policy positions are non-partisan (Orr and Huber 2020, Dias and Lelkes

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[3] A comprehensive review of the literature on these two topics would be impossible in this setting. We have attempted to highlight the most influential lines of reasoning.

2022, Orr et al. 2023). And when predicting someone's partisanship, people rely more on ideology and issues positions rather than descriptive identities (Barber and Pope 2022; Myers 2023).

At the same time, there is competing evidence supporting the group- or socially-oriented view of partisanship. Ideological extremity is a weaker predictor of political engagement than is identity strength (Huddy et al. 2015), and ideologically extreme voters are more willing to adopt their preferred candidate's issue positions than moderates (Barber and Pope 2019). In general, partisan identification and feelings toward out-partisans often appear to reflect a team-based orientation (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015). Together, this work points toward an account in which partisanship is a social identity more so than a summary of policy or value commitments.

There are several ways in which a partisan team membership may be established without deep ideological commitments or thoughtfully developed policy preferences. First, early-life influence of friends and family may establish life-long commitments to political parties (Jennings and Niemi 1968, Niemi and Jennings 1991), much as one acquires ties to a favorite childhood baseball team. Second, social group attachments can lead individuals to embrace partisan identity and express hostility to out-partisans. In the mid-20th century, individuals' religious affiliation, union memberships, and socioeconomic status were common explanations for partisan affiliations (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Berelson et al. 1954).[4] Contemporary partisans associate the political parties with different social groups and may use their own group affiliations to determine which party to affiliate with and how to feel about out-partisans (Mason 2015, 2018; Kuo et al. 2017). Third, even if their own group membership doesn't influence their partisanship and affective orientation, attitudes toward social groups that are thought to align with parties may still influence attitudes

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[4] Of course, this pattern can be interpreted as validating either a group-identity (e.g., Union workers are Democrats) or interest-based account (e.g., Union workers are Democrats because of the positions of the Democratic party).

toward parties and partisans, an argument articulated forcefully with regard to race (Tesler 2012; Ahler and Sood 2018; Robison and Moskowitz 2019; Kane et al. 2021).

In general, political scientists continue to debate the extent to which both party identification and affective polarization should be attributed to substantive political conflict, but there is a limit to the parallels between these two debates. For example, political scientists also hypothesize that disdain for out-partisans contributes to political identity, and that political identity can lead directly to negative feelings toward an out-group. People may simply conclude that out-partisans are irreconcilable enemies. Lees and Cikara (2020) find that partisans overestimate the hostility that out-partisans have towards them and observe reductions in affective polarization when these misperceptions about the relative hostility of the outgroup are corrected (also see Moore-Berg et al. 2020). Both perceptions and meta-perceptions may be a consequence of party identification in addition to a cause. But this is also true of ideological disagreement, some social group attachments, and perceptions of candidates and party performance.

The debates thus remain unsettled. The processes thought to cause partisanship and feelings toward partisans are rife with potential feedback loops and are generally complicated. Cross-sectional survey analyses have been essential in documenting correlations that are predicted by different theoretical models but struggle to definitively identify causal orderings. Experimental interventions into socialization, experience with social groups, and experience with politics are impossible on a scale that would allow us to differentiate between theoretical models. Panel data has been helpful in establishing the nature of trends in partisanship and affective polarization (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers 2009; Highton and Kam 2011; Már 2020), but ultimately don't exist on a scale that would be necessary to track long-term social developments and are also no panacea for distinguishing among alternative causal accounts. Our analysis is also not designed to settle these debates, but it is notable that despite survey analysts using correlations of responses to different

survey items to evaluate competing theories, little contemporary attention has been given to how members of the mass public explain their partisan identities and feelings about the parties. We believe that partisan members of the general public should have a chance to weigh in and use open ended survey responses to let them do so.

Of course, we do not propose interpreting every response as a thorough and accurate assessment of the reasons for a partisan affiliation or affective evaluation. In the context of simple psychological experiments, self-assessments of the causal effect of stimuli often differ greatly from estimated effects (Wilson and Nisbett 1978). Multiple-choice questions about the causal impact of information on attitudes also fail to capture true effects (Graham and Coppock 2021). And even in open-ended questions, many respondents may attempt to rationalize their feelings even if they do not know or will not admit the true causes.

But despite these limitations, direct interrogation of how individuals think about politics is a powerful and regularly used tool for understanding many important political phenomena. For example, Lane（1962） interviewed 15 men with similar backgrounds to explore the contents, sources, and impacts of political ideals that ordinary people hold. Berelson et al.'s (1954) canonical work on voting choices in the 1948 presidential election (often characterized as emphasizing the sociological basis of voting) found that Democrats who understood the election in class terms were less likely to defect to the Republicans, showing how differences in understandings of the stakes of a partisan conflict affected vote choice. More generally, some of our best evidence about how people understand political choices and policies comes from members of the public offering their own explanations for their beliefs and actions (e.g., Cramer 2016 [rural consciousness], Hochschild 1981 [views about fairness and redistribution], Schildkraut 2007 [variation in support for and reasons about restrictive language policies], and Williamson 2017 [views about the tax policy fairness]).

While we do not adopt the same interview-intensive process used in some of that work, our analysis of open-ended survey questions provides some of the same advantages provided by those works because we allow individuals to speak in their words without the constraint of predefined survey response categories. In addition to qualitative work, quantitative analysis of open-ended questions using quantitative text analysis models is increasingly important in understanding public opinion (Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart 2022). Scholars rely on open-ended survey questions to understand partisan stereotypes (Rothschild et al. 2019; Busby, Howat, and Myers 2023), group identities and political values (Zollinger 2024), moral belief (Kraft 2018), and identification as political Independents (Allamong et al., forthcoming). We chose not to automate our text analysis, instead pursuing a strategy of close reading and discussion to resolve disagreements in interpretation. The key advantage of this approach is that we can experience and interpret any reasoning that people share.

Mass Survey

We surveyed approximately 2,500 voting-age Americans in July of 2022 recruited through Prolific.[5] Respondents were asked the traditional two-part branching questions used to construct the

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[5] This is survey was deemed exempt by the IRB at Yale University. Although the sample is intended to be nationally representative, Democrats and educated people are overrepresented. Specifically, 62 percent of respondents identify as Democrats, 21 percent as Republicans, and 16 percent as independents. The median age is 36. Fifty-one percent of our respondents are women, 77 percent are white, 8 percent are Black, and 59 percent report having a college degree. However, this is likely inconsequential for our results because, as we show in Table A1, respondent demographics are largely uncorrelated with our quantities of interest.

seven-point party identification scale.[6] Pure independents—those who identify as independent and do not lean toward either party—were screened out of the survey. The remaining respondents, those who identify with or lean toward the Democratic or Republican Parties, were asked one of several open-ended follow-up questions. In this section, we focus on the 532 respondents who were asked why they identify with their chosen party. Specifically, those who identify with a party were asked "In your own words, why do you think of yourself as a {Democrat/Republican}?" and those who lean toward a party were asked "In your own words, why do you think of yourself as closer to the {Democratic/Republican} Party?" In a subsequent section, we will discuss another 324 respondents who were asked why they feel they way they do about members of the other party.

The four authors of this study read all the open-ended responses and independently coded whether each answer included one or more of several specific categories of reasons for the respondent's chosen partisanship. We decided on our categories based on common theories in the literature (discussed above) and our expectations about the extent to which we could reasonably assign responses to each of them. These classifications are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive—for some responses, none of the categories applied, and for others, multiple categories applied. Specifically, we assessed whether each response included at least some discussion of:

- values, ideology, or **policy** positions;

- **disdain** for or contentless opposition to the other party;

- specific **candidates**, leaders, or officials;

- previous **performance** of the parties and their leaders;

- **parents**, family, peers, childhood experiences, or long-standing affiliation with a party; and

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[6] Complete question wording for all survey items analyzed in this paper are listed in Appendix 1.

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- group affiliations (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, immigrant status, union membership, etc.) or attitudes toward other **groups**.

For ease of discussion and interpretation, these categories are presented in the order of their prevalence in our subsequent results, which is not necessarily their order of importance in the literature.

Most of our coding decisions were relatively straightforward, but we established some general principles and guidelines to help us resolve tricky cases. If a specific factor was mentioned but was clearly not a reason for the respondent's identification, we did not assign the answer to that category. For example, if a Republican states that they agree with the Republican party on policy but they dislike Donald Trump, we did not classify this as a *candidates* answer because Trump is not a reason for their Republican identification.

When an answer was ambiguous, we attempted to err against classifying it as a policy answer. For example, if a Republican stated that they are a Republican because they are a patriot, we did not classify this as *policy*. The term patriot could signal something about their values or ideology, but the term is ambiguous enough that we decided that the policy category does not clearly apply. And as previously mentioned, when one respondent stated that they are "socially more like Republicans," we decided that the *parents* category applies even though they may have intended to say that they agree with the Republican Party on social policy.

Perhaps the most subjective decisions pertain to the *disdain* category. If a respondent clearly expressed disdain toward or negative attitudes about the other party, we applied this category, even if that disdain was not necessarily presented as the primary reason for a respondent's identification. When respondents expressed disappointment with both major parties, for example, "my party is the lesser of two evils," we did not apply the disdain category. But if a respondent simply expressed

opposition to the other party without explaining why they oppose the other party, we did apply the disdain category.

We coded responses in three stages. First, all four authors coded a randomly selected common set of 100 responses, balanced by partisanship. We discussed these cases and revised our coding rules and categories based on this discussion. Next, we all coded anew all responses, in a random order, including the responses that we had previously coded. Finally, we discussed all ambiguous cases, defined as cases in which exactly 2 of us assigned a response to a particular category. The final codings from each of the four authors were highly consistent with one another. Across all 3,192 respondent-categories, the four coders unanimously agreed in 2,981 cases (93.4 percent), and at least three of the coders agreed in 3,189 cases (99.9 percent). After discussion, we remained split 2-2 in only 3 cases (less than 0.1 percent). For simplicity, in our subsequent analyses, we summarize these decisions by applying a category to a specific response if at least three coders applied that category.[7]

Table 1 shows a random sample of responses that fit into each category. We selected responses for which only one category applied, and we then randomly selected up to two responses (if available) from each category and from each party. The punctuation, capitalization, and grammar of the responses have been lightly edited, and in one case, profane words have been redacted, but the substantive content has not been altered.

For 26 out of 532 respondents (4.9 percent), we decided that none of our categories applied. We examined these cases more closely to ensure we were not missing an important category or that our coding rules were not too strict. In 3 out of 26 cases (12 percent), the respondent appears to reject the premise of the question, saying something like "I try not to take sides" or "I would vote for either party." In 4 cases (15 percent), the response appears to have been cut-off, as if we only have a partial fragment of their intended answer. In 9 cases (35 percent), the respondent simply

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[7] Results are highly similar if we use the proportion of codings including a particular category.

Table 1. Representative Responses of Each Category

Category	Democrats	Republicans
Policy	My beliefs align more with that party.	Because I agree with their policies more than [those of] Democrats.
	Because it is the party that represents a willingness to protect and help people who have less education, wealth, and opportunity and tries to bring equality to the people of the US.	I greatly favor the Republican Party when it comes to social issues.
Candidates	I hate Donald Trump and his kind.	
	I was a registered Republican until Donald Trump hijacked the party. It is no longer a party I can identify with and my only real alternative is the Democratic Party.	
Performance	I changed parties following the Iraq War.	They seem to be more reasonable and overall successful.
Parents	Because I don't associate with Republicans.	I am socially more like Republicans.
	Because that's what I've always known since I was younger. It's what my family is.	Because my parents were Republican and so that's just how I was raised.
Groups	Just the level of class I fall into. I am not political in any way, shape, or form.	
Disdain	I have a soul.	I am a patriot American.
	Because I f***ing give a sh** about people. It is the only decent way to vote.	The Democratic Party has gotten insane and totally illogical so I'm closer to the right.

stated that they are registered with or typically vote for that party, without providing an explanation as to why they support that party.[8] And in the remaining 10 cases (38 percent), the response was too

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[8] Many of these non-answers are substantively interesting and relevant for the debate on partisan origins. Some people appear to identify with a party in surveys without having a meaningful connection to the party. Others appear to answer the party identity questions by thinking about which party they typically support in elections, but their follow-up responses indicate that they do not identify as a Democrat or Republican and perhaps had not even thought about party identity before taking the survey.

ambiguous or unclear for us to confidently apply any of our categories. For example, one Democrat simply wrote "idk," admitting that they do not know why they support their preferred party, and one Republican simply wrote, "I believe in America," which could reflect something about their values or ideology but was too ambiguous for us to apply the *policy* category. For our subsequent analyses, we exclude these 26 non-answers.

Expert Survey

To benchmark our results against the expectations of the research community, we also surveyed published experts in the field. We searched for papers on the topic of partisanship published in the last 10 years in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and we recorded the authors of these studies. Specifically, we identified papers with *partisan* in the title or that came up in an online search for the word *partisan*. We excluded papers that were not about U.S. politics or that purely focused on political theory. We also excluded any deceased authors or those for whom we could not find an email address. This left us with 100 published experts, most of whom are political scientists with academic appointments and who are actively conducting research on political behavior and partisanship.

We emailed these 100 experts in December of 2023 and asked them to take a 5-10 minute survey about the factors that drive partisanship and attitudes toward members of the other party.[9] We indicated that we were planning to publish the average responses across many experts but that

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[9] This survey was deemed "Not Human Subjects Research" by the IRB at the University of Richmond. In the course of fielding the survey we learned that a number of scholars had moved institutions and located them at their new addresses. We were unable to locate two experts at any academic institution.

the responses of each individual expert would remain anonymous. We collected responses for approximately one month, during which we sent follow-up emails to experts who had not yet taken the survey. We ultimately received responses from 68 (approximately two-thirds) of our expert respondents.

We asked our expert respondents to predict the results of our mass survey. We used the categories described above and asked our respondents what percent of mass respondents would provide answers that fell into each of those categories.[10] For simplicity, we asked the expert respondents to consider only those who explicitly identify with one of the two major parties, ignoring independents who lean toward a party. We clarified that the categories are not mutually exclusive so their percentages need not add up to 100.

Next, to assess whether experts expect respondents to misreport the causes of their partisanship in an open-ended survey question, we also asked the experts to report the share of respondents for whom each of these categories is actually an important cause of their partisanship. By comparing the predictions of the experts with their assessments of the actual causes of partisanship, we can learn whether and for which categories experts expect greater bias or misreporting. The experts appear to believe that respondents will overreport the importance of policy, candidates, and performance while underreporting the importance of parents, groups, and disdain. The level of reporting bias expected by the experts is modest, but it indicates that the experts distinguish between stated and actual reasons. For this reason, even if the mass public cannot faithfully report why they belong to their party, we can still assess whether their responses are different from what experts in this field would expect after accounting for these potential biases.

As we explain in a subsequent section, we also asked the experts to make similar predictions and assessments about the reasons partisans feel the way they do about members of the other party.

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[10] Complete survey instrument appears in Appendix 2.

Results on the Causes of Partisan Identification

Table 2 shows our main results from our mass survey on the self-reported causes of partisan identification. The first column shows the share of mass survey responses that fit into each of our categories. We find that 88 percent of respondents mention policy, values, or ideology when explaining their partisanship. Fourteen percent express disdain for or opposition to the other party. Five percent mention specific candidates. Three percent mention the previous performance of the parties. Two percent mention parents, peers, or childhood experiences. And 2 percent mention group membership or attitudes toward groups. Because the categories are not mutually exclusive, the proportions can add up to more than 1.

The next column excludes leaners and focuses only on those who identify as Democrats or Republicans. The results are similar to those for all respondents, but when we exclude leaners, we find that policy responses are slightly more common, performance responses are less common, and references to groups are slightly more common.

To explore potential differences between strong and weak partisans, the next column focuses only on those who strongly identify with their preferred party. Again, the results are similar to those for all respondents, although strong partisans are slightly more likely to mention policy and express disdain and slightly less likely to refer to candidates, performance, parents, or groups.

In the final column of Table 2, we focus on responses that were coded as fitting only one category. When we do this, the share of policy answers increases and the share of other answers decreases, suggesting that to the extent that non-policy factors are mentioned, they are often offered alongside policy. If the responses that fit into only one category reflect the respondents' most important or most salient rationale for supporting their party, these results are particularly useful for understanding which of these theories best explain partisanship. Policy is the primary rationale for 89 percent of these respondents, disdain for the other party is the primary rationale for 7 percent.

Table 2. Why are you a Democrat or Republican?

	All Respondents	Excluding Leaners	Strong Partisans	One Category
Policy	.879	.887	.895	.886
Disdain	.140	.137	.154	.074
Candidates	.049	.043	.031	.016
Performance	.030	.019	.026	.004
Parents	.020	.022	.018	.018
Groups	.018	.024	.009	.002
Sample Size	506	372	228	446

Cell entries are proportions of responses coded as belonging to each category (row). Columns do not add to 1 because responses can belong to multiple categories.

Specific candidates and early socialization are each the primary rationale for less than 2 percent of these respondents, and performance and groups are each the primary rationale for less than 1 percent.

Table 3 shows the results of our expert survey and compares them with the results of the mass survey. The first column shows the average predictions of the experts. On average, the political science experts estimated that approximately 60 percent of respondents would mention policy and approximately 35-40 percent of respondents would mention each of the other factors. The next column of Table 3 shows the experts' average assessments of the actual causes of partisanship. These answers differ somewhat from those in the previous column, suggesting that the experts anticipated some level of reporting bias in our mass survey. Specifically, the experts, on average, believe that people will overreport the importance of policy and underreport the importance of the parents and groups categories.

The third column of Table 3 reprints the results from the "excluding leaners" column of Table 2. These are the results from our mass survey that should be most comparable to those from our survey of experts because the experts were asked to predict the responses of those who identify as Democrats or Republicans excluding leaners. Comparing these numbers with the expert

Table 3. Adjusting for Expert-Assessed Response Bias

	Expert Predictions	Expert Assessments	Respondent Answers	Adjusted Answers
Policy	.602	.514	.887	.757
Disdain	.374	.325	.137	.119
Candidates	.382	.331	.043	.037
Performance	.346	.305	.019	.017
Parents	.368	.551	.022	.033
Groups	.398	.545	.024	.033

Columns do not add to 1 because responses can belong to multiple categories. Expert predictions are the average predictions from our expert survey. Expert assessments are the expert assessments of the actual causes of partisanship. Respondent answers are reprinted from the "excluding leaners" column of Table 2. The adjusted answers are the respondent answers multiplied by the ratio of expert assessments to expert predictions.

predictions, we see that the experts significantly underestimated the prevalence of policy answers, and they significantly overestimated the prevalence of the other kinds of answers. Policy explanations are approximately 29 percentage points more common than the experts predicted, and the remining reasons are between 23 (Disdain) and 37 percentage points less common (Groups). Put differently, the experts predicted policy explanations to be 1.5 times more common than the next common reason (Groups), but policy is 6 times more common than the next most common reason (Disdain), and between 20 and 40 times more common than any other reason.

In the final column of Table 3, we adjust the respondent answers according to the extent to which the experts appear to expect misreporting. Specifically, we divide the average expert assessment by the average expert prediction, giving us a measure of the extent to which the experts believe responds will over or underreport the importance of a particular factor, and we multiply this by the average respondent answer. In other words, if the experts correctly perceive the extent to which our respondents will over- or under-estimate the true causes of their partisanship, these numbers indicate the share of respondents for whom each factor is actually an important cause of their partisanship in light of the rate at which respondents stated that reason.

To illustrate the logic of this adjustment, consider the prevalence of policy as an explanation for partisanship. The experts predicted that 60.2 percent of respondents would mention policy. They also stated that they believe policy to be an important cause of partisanship for 51.4 percent of the public. Therefore, they expect that among those who mention policy in our survey, policy is only an important cause of partisanship for approximately 85 percent of them (51.4/60.2 ≈ .85). In our mass survey, we found that 88.7 percent of non-leaner partisans mentioned policy. If we multiply this by the 85-percent adjustment factor inferred from the expert survey, we conclude that policy is an important cause of partisanship for 75.7 percent of partisans.

The adjusted numbers are not necessarily intended to be taken literally. We do not know the extent to which our survey respondents may have over- or under-stated the importance of different factors. But these adjustments represent our best effort to take the experts seriously and account for their expectations of misreporting and bias. When we do this, we conclude that policy is an important cause of partisanship for approximately 3 in 4 partisans. Disdain for the other party is an important cause for approximately 1 in 10. And none of the other factors are important causes for more than 4 percent of our respondents. Even with this adjustment, policy is at least 6 times more common than the next most common explanation (Disdain).

Table A1 of the Appendix examines the extent to which different factors predict which respondents provide each type of explanation among our mass survey respondents. We find little evidence of variation in explanations for party identification across party, ideology, demographics, or region. Out of 72 tests of heterogeneity, only 5 results are statistically significant, not much more than we would expect by chance if there was no heterogeneity. One suggestive finding is that, controlling for the other variables, those who identify as ideologically extreme are 7.9 percentage points more likely to express disdain for or opposition to the other party. By contrast, we find that controlling for the other variables, strong partisans are not more likely to hold disdain for the other

party. In the next section, we explore this topic further by also analyzing open-ended survey responses about why people feel the way they do about the other party.

Causes of Partisan Animosity

We use a similar approach to assess the origins of partisan animosity and affective polarization. Specifically, we asked a different subset of respondents to rate on a scale of 0 to 100 how favorable they would feel toward someone who is a member of the opposite party using a standard feeling thermometer. We then asked these respondents, "Why do you feel this way?" and gave them an open-ended text box to provide their explanation. We coded these open-ended responses in a similar way to how we coded the previously discussed explanations for partisan affiliations. However, we modified the categories to better match both the literature on affective polarization and answers respondents provided. Specifically, for each response, we coded whether the respondent made a reference to one of the following factors:

- values, ideology, or **policy** positions;

- negative reactions to the **character**, integrity, or personality traits of members of the other party;

- group affiliations, attitudes toward other **groups**, or perceptions that members of the other party have negative attitudes toward certain groups;

- specific **candidates**, leaders, and officials;

- personal **experience**, parents, family, or peers;

- previous **performance** of the parties and their leaders;

- **factual** disagreement with members of the other party; and

- perceptions that members of the other party hold **disdain** for members of one's own party;

- rejecting the **premise** of the question or explaining why they do not dislike all members of the other party.

With the exception of rejecting the premise, we discuss and present these categories in the order of their prevalence in our subsequent results, which is not necessarily their order of importance in the literature.

Again, these categories map closely onto explanations provided in the literature for negative feelings toward the out party. The *policy* category identifies responses that root feelings of animosity in negative reactions to those who disagree about important policies or values/ideological attachments. The *character* category identifies explanations that focus on specific flaws of out-partisans, such as being dishonest or close-minded, and was created based on our initial review of responses. The *groups* category is meant to identify responses focused on explanations rooted in the group-orientations of parties. The *candidates* category includes the possibility that partisan animosity arises from animosity toward specific candidates and those who support those candidates. The *experience* category includes explanations rooted in personal experience and early childhood socialization.[11] The *performance* category includes the possibility that partisan animosity results from the performance of elected officials from the opposite party.

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[11] In practice, few respondents explicitly mentioned parents, family, peers, or early childhood experiences in response to this question. One exception is a Democrat who gave a favorability rating of 60 to Republicans and wrote, "My whole family is Republican." In other words, the respondent who explicitly mentioned their family or early childhood experiences appears to have been explaining why they do not dislike members of the other party. Almost all of the responses in this category make reference to personal experience. For example, one Democrat wrote, "I've rarely met a Republican who I enjoy being around . . ."

We created the *factual* category after reading responses and finding that several referenced factual disagreements with members of the other party (for example, Democratic respondents who mentioned Republicans who don't believe that Joe Biden fairly won the 2020 presidential election). This *disdain* category, which is conceptually distinct from the *disdain* category in the previous section, captures responses that explain animosity as a reaction to the animosity or negative feelings of the outparty toward them (second order beliefs or reflected animosity). Finally, the *premise* category denotes responses where the respondent rejects the premise of the question by indicating they did not feel negatively toward all members of the out party, most often by saying they distinguish among out-partisans or giving reasons why they like out-partisans.

Because the literature on affective polarization largely focuses on negative attitudes toward members of the other party, we applied these categories (other than the premise category) based on whether the category is the reason the respondent dislikes members of the other party. For example, if a respondent indicated that they disagree with the other party on policy, but they think there are some good and honest people in the other party, we would apply the *policy* category but not the *character* category. We would also apply the *premise* category because the person provided a reason that they do not dislike all members of the other party.

We reserved the factual disagreement category for cases of genuine disagreements about facts. For example, one Democratic leaner wrote, "70+ percent of Republicans believe an outright lie and pushing that lie is a threat to our Democratic system." The respondent perceives that most members of the other party hold a belief that the respondent believes to be false. Therefore, there is a factual disagreement, and this category applies. Alternatively, if a respondent accused members of the other party of lying or dishonestly, this does not necessarily reflect factual disagreement. Lying implies an intentional misrepresentation of the truth, so we would code this as impugning the *character* of the other party.

The codings from each of the four authors were slightly less consistent than those about explanations for partisanship. Across all 2,916 respondent-category pairs, the four coders unanimously agreed in 2,661 cases (91.3 percent), and at least three of the coders agreed in 2,902 cases (99.5 percent). We were split 2-2 in only 14 cases (0.5 percent). As before, we summarize these decisions by coding a category as applying to a specific response if at least three coders applied that category.

For 20 out of 324 respondents (6.2 percent), we decided that none of our categories applied. In 6 out of 20 cases (30 percent), the answer was blank or cut off. In 3 out of 20 cases (15 percent), the respondent simply restated that they do not like members of the other party but made no effort to provide a reason. And in the remaining 11 cases (55 percent), the answer was too ambiguous for us to confidently apply any of our categories. For example, one Republican leaner wrote, "They are dissimilar to me," without specifying a particular dimension of dissimilarity. They may have meant to write that they are dissimilar in their ideology, group identities, social habits, or something else, so for this reason, we did not apply any of the categories. For our subsequent analyses, we exclude these 20 non-answers.

Although the literature on affective polarization typically asks why people tend to dislike members of the other party, a non-negligible share of partisans do not strongly dislike members of the other party. In our sample, 18.1 percent of our respondents provided a thermometer rating for members of the other party of 50 or more, and 30.6 percent provided a rating of 40 or more. When asked why they feel the way they do, 20.4 percent of all respondents rejected the premise of the question or explained why they do not dislike all members of the other party. To better understand why partisans dislike members of the other party, we exclude various subsets of these respondents in subsequent analyses, but the meaningful share of partisans who do not dislike members of the other party is an interesting result in and of itself.

Table 4. Why do you dislike members of the other party?

	All Respondents	Rating <50	Excluding Premise	Excluding Leaners	Strong Partisans	One Category
Policy	.589	.675	.694	.591	.633	.541
Character	.263	.317	.322	.272	.283	.145
Groups	.092	.108	.107	.082	.108	.009
Candidates	.072	.088	.091	.078	.083	.032
Experience	.059	.060	.070	.065	.050	.023
Performance	.053	.060	.058	.047	.050	.014
Factual	.026	.032	.033	.017	.017	.009
Disdain	.023	.028	.025	.022	.008	.009
Premise	.204	.060		.194	.092	.218
Sample Size	304	249	242	232	120	220

Cell entries are proportions of responses coded as belonging to each category (row). Columns do not add to 1 because responses can belong to multiple categories.

Table 4 presents the results of our mass survey on the origins of affective polarization. The first column shows the share of responses that fit into each of the categories. Approximately 59 percent of our respondents mention policy, values, or ideology when explaining why they do not like members of the other party, 26 percent mention character or personality traits, 9 percent mention groups, 7 percent mention specific leaders or candidates, 6 percent mention personal experience, 5 percent mention the previous performance of the parties, 3 percent mention factual disagreement, 2 percent mention their perception that members of the other party dislike them, and as previously discussed, 20 percent reject the premise of the question and explain why they do not dislike members of the other party. Overall, policy and values are, by far, the leading reasons respondents say they dislike members of the other party. The next most common explanation has to do with the character or traits of members of the other party. In terms of magnitude, policy explanations are 33 percentage points more common (more than twice as common) than the next most frequent response.

In the second column, we exclude respondents who gave a rating of 50 or more to members of the other party. And in the third column, we exclude respondents whose answer was coded as rejecting the premise of the question. By focusing on these subsets of respondents who provide low thermometer ratings or who do not reject the premise of the question, we can better assess why some partisans dislike members of the other party. Among these respondents, just over two-thirds mention policy, and just under one-third mention character. Again, to the extent we trust self-reports, policy appears to be the predominant reason that partisans dislike members of the other party.

Column 4 of Table 4 excluded leaners and Column 6 focuses only on those who strongly identify with their party. Stronger party identifiers are less likely to reject the premise of the question and slightly more likely to mention character and personality traits. But they are also more likely to mention policy, values, and ideology.

The final column of Table 4 focuses on those respondents for whom exactly one of our categories applied. Of those respondents, 54 percent mention policy, 22 percent reject the premise of the question, 15 percent mention character, 3 percent mention specific leaders or candidates, 2 percent mention personal experience, and only 1 percent of respondents fit into each of the three remaining categories. So to the extent that partisans dislike members of the other party—and not all do—policy disagreement is the predominant explanation.

Table 5 presents the experts' predictions and assessments of the causes of partisan animosity. The first column shows what the experts predicted the respondents of our mass survey would say. These scholars predicted, on average, that 55 percent of responses would mention specific candidates, 53 percent would mention policy, 44 percent would mention character, 40 percent would mention groups, and 20-35 percent would mention each of the other factors. The second column shows what the experts believe to be actually important causes of partisan animosity. Comparing the

Table 5. Expert Predictions about Partisan Animosity

	Expert Predictions	Expert Assessments	Respondent Answers	Adjusted Answers
Policy	.530	.483	.591	.538
Character	.437	.394	.272	.245
Groups	.399	.522	.082	.107
Candidates	.548	.449	.078	.064
Experience	.203	.340	.065	.108
Performance	.353	.319	.047	.043
Factual	.315	.272	.017	.015
Disdain	.290	.298	.022	.022
Premise	.221	.199	.194	.174

Columns do not add to 1 because responses can belong to multiple categories. Column definitions are analogous to those in Table 3.

first two columns, the experts report that mass survey respondents will slightly overstate the importance of policy, candidates, character, and factual disagreement, while understating the importance of personal experience and groups.

The third column of Table 5 reprints the "Excluding Leaners" column from Table 4 because this is the group that the experts were asked about. We find the experts underestimate the prevalence of policy answers by approximately 6 points while they significantly overestimate the prevalence of almost every other factor. Interestingly, although the literature on partisan animosity tends to focus on those who dislike members of the other party, the experts correctly predicted that approximately one in five respondents would reject the premise of the question.

As in Table 3, the final column of Table 5 adjusts our mass survey results according to the extent to which the experts expect the survey to over- or understate the actually important causes of partisan animosity. If we trust the experts to properly assess the proportional level of response bias, we would conclude that policy is an important cause of partisan animosity for 54 percent of partisans, character is an important cause for approximately 25 percent, personal experience and

groups are each an important cause for 11 percent, and the other factors are only an important cause for 6 percent or less.

Paralleling the analyses in Table A1, Table A2 in the Appendix investigates variation in stated explanations for partisan animosity across respondents. As in Table A1, most of the estimated coefficients are statistically insignificant. One potentially interesting finding is that Democrats and older respondents are more likely to mention a specific candidate or leader, and virtually all of these mentions are of Donald Trump. But overall, there is little variation in the stated explanations for partisan animosity by party, ideology, demographics, or region.

Discussion and Conclusion

We do not expect open-ended survey responses to reflect a thorough and consistently accurate description of why each respondent affiliates with a political party or feels the way they do about out-partisans. As discussed above, we assume that some people do not know why they relate to parties as they do and might not be honest about their reasons even if they do. Furthermore, respondents may be differentially identifying more proximate or distal causes. Presumably, different factors we coded affect each other in complex ways, in addition to affecting partisanship. For these reasons, we do not believe that evidence presented here should be used to rule out the importance of factors infrequently mentioned in open-ended responses.

For those skeptical of the capacity for informative self-reflection among members of the mass public, it may be useful to conduct parallel research on other affiliation-like choices that individuals make, like religious orientations, preferred sports teams, or marriage decisions, to understand how and whether politics is unusual. For example, do individuals provide similarly substantive explanations for other choices, such as describing their choice of religion on doctrinal

grounds, preferred sports teams based on their strategies, or marital partners based on their core values? We think this would be a promising line of inquiry for future research.

At the same time, we do not believe that members of the public are entirely incapable of identifying why they affiliate with or feel negatively toward political parties. Political parties have relatively well-known values, ideological alignments, and policy platforms. Accounts of partisanship and affective polarization would be wrong to entirely ignore the substantive justifications people offer for their survey responses. For these reasons, we invite contemporary members of the public back into academic debates on the origins of partisanship.

When allowed to describe the reasons for party identification in their own words, people most frequently justify (or understand) their partisanship in substantive policy terms. Although political scientists often worry that partisanship shapes preferences, most people see their preferences as the reason for their partisanship. Their explanations imply that they would change sides if parties came to represent different values and agendas, and that political preferences can be important in shaping partisanship even when they don't perfectly align with one party or the other.

Many other leading explanations for party identification are less frequently mentioned in open-ended responses. To some extent this is expected; survey respondents may not immediately connect their partisanship to early life socialization or past experiences with government policy even if these are the most important determinates of their partisanship. We believe that our expert survey respondents are well aware of this challenge. But most other reasons for party identification were referenced less frequently than experts expected and still appear less important than they expected when we adjust for the experts' expected rate of misreporting.

However, a minority of partisans do justify their partisanship in terms of disdain for an opposing party and its supporters, as suggested by the literature on negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). This literature has relied heavily on feeling thermometer measures.

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Although the frequent use of feeling thermometers may be a historical accident, we see value in studying how members of the public justify their responses to this survey measure.

Debates regarding reasons for party identification and partisan animosity share many of the same theoretical foundations. Our results show that stated reasons for feeling thermometer ratings (specifically low ratings of one's opposing party) are somewhat similar to stated reasons for partisanship. When asked why they identify with their party *or* why they feel the way they do about members of the other party, the vast majority of partisan Americans mention policy, ideology, and values. Policy explanations are much more common than experts predicted, and this is still true even after adjusting for the experts' expectations about misreporting bias. Other explanations such as early childhood socialization and group identity are much less common than policy, and much less common than experts expect. Therefore, policy appears to be the predominant and most salient reason that Americans selected their party and feel the way they do about members of the other party.

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Appendix

Why Are You a Democrat? Studying the Origins of Party Identification
and Partisan Animosity with Open-ended Survey Questions

Table of Contents

Mass Survey Text

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...
>   Democrat
>   Republican
>   Independent
>   Other
>   Not sure

If independent, other, or not sure:
Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or Republican party?
>   Democratic
>   Republican
>   Neither

If randomized into Why PID and if think of yourself as democrat or republican:
In your own words, why do you think of yourself as a [respondent party]?

If randomized into Why PID and if lean toward party:
In your own words, why do you think of yourself as closer to the [respondent party] Party?

If randomized into Why out-party feeling thermometer and partisans / lean toward a party:
We would like to know your feelings toward someone you might meet.

We'd like you to rate your feelings towards this person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person.

You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person.

The thermometer will start out with the marker at 50. To record your result, click on the marker and move it to the rating you select. *Please note that you have to move the marker even if you want to select a rating of 50.*

Using the feeling thermometer below, how favorable would you say you feel towards someone who is a [opposite party.]

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

If randomized into Why out-party feeling thermometer and partisans / lean toward a party:
Why do you feel this way?

Expert Survey Text
Suppose we were to ask a representative sample of Democrats and Republicans why they identify
with their party. For example, Democrats were asked: "Why, in your own words, are you a
Democrat?"

For purposes of this question, assume respondents are those who identify with that party. That is,
we exclude independents who lean toward a party.

Among those who provide a meaningful response, what percent <u>of their answers</u> will mention the
following factors? Your responses need not sum to 100% because someone might mention multiple
factors.

 (Note, you must click on a slider to record your answer, even if your answer is 0.)

Percentage (%)   Not Applicable

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Values, ideology, or policy positions

Specific candidates, leaders, and officials

Previous performance of the parties and their
leaders

Parents, family, peers, childhood experiences,
or long-standing affiliation with a party

Group affiliations (e.g., race, gender, sexuality,
religious affiliation, immigrant status, union
membership, etc.) or attitudes toward other
groups

Disdain for or contentless opposition to the
other party

Are there any additional factors not on this list that you think we should have included? Specifically, are there other common reasons that people would say they identify with their party? If so, please list them below and indicate what percent of respondents you think would mention that factor.

Suppose we were to ask a representative sample of Democrats and Republicans to rate, on a scale of 0 to 100, how warm or cold their feelings are toward someone who identifies with the opposing party using a feeling thermometer. For example, Democrats were asked: "Using the feeling thermometer below, how favorable would you say you feel towards someone who is a Republican?" Then, we ask the following open-ended question: "Why do you feel this way?"
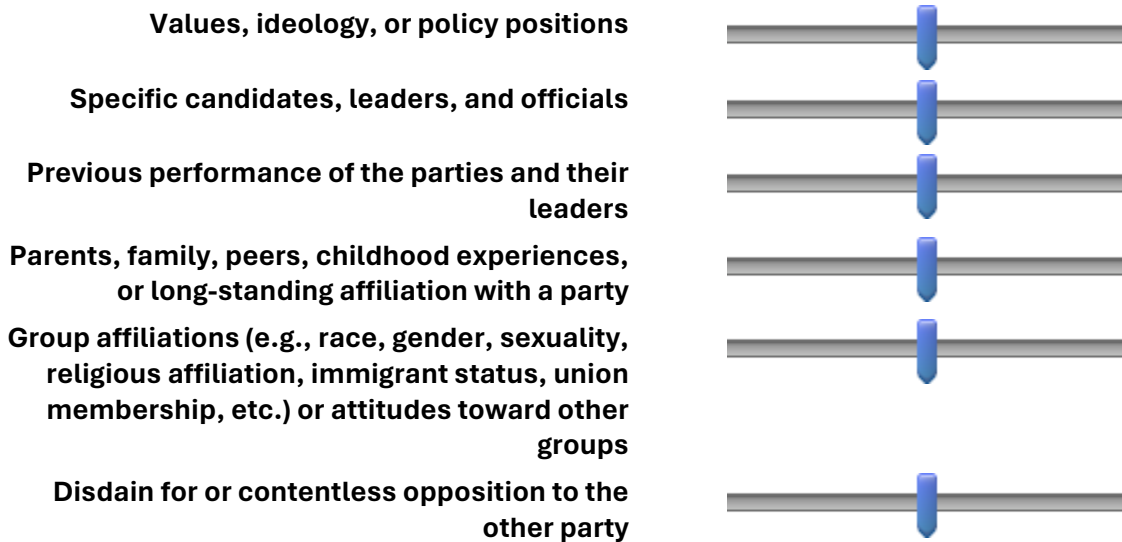
For purposes of this question, assume respondents are those who identify with that party. That is, we exclude independents who lean toward a party.

Among those who provide a meaningful response, what percent <u>of their answers</u> will mention the following factors to explain any dislike they have for those who identify with the opposite party? Your responses need not sum to 100% because someone might mention multiple factors.

(Note, you must click on a slider to record your answer, even if your answer is 0.)

Percentage (%)   Not Applicable

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

Values, ideology, or policy positions

Specific candidates, leaders, and officials

Previous performance of the parties and their leaders

Personal experience, parents, family, or peers

Group affiliations, attitudes toward other groups, or perceptions that members of the other party have negative attitudes toward certain groups

Perceptions that members of the other party hold disdain for members of one's own party

Negative reactions to the character, integrity, or personality traits of members of the other party

Factual disagreement with members of the other party

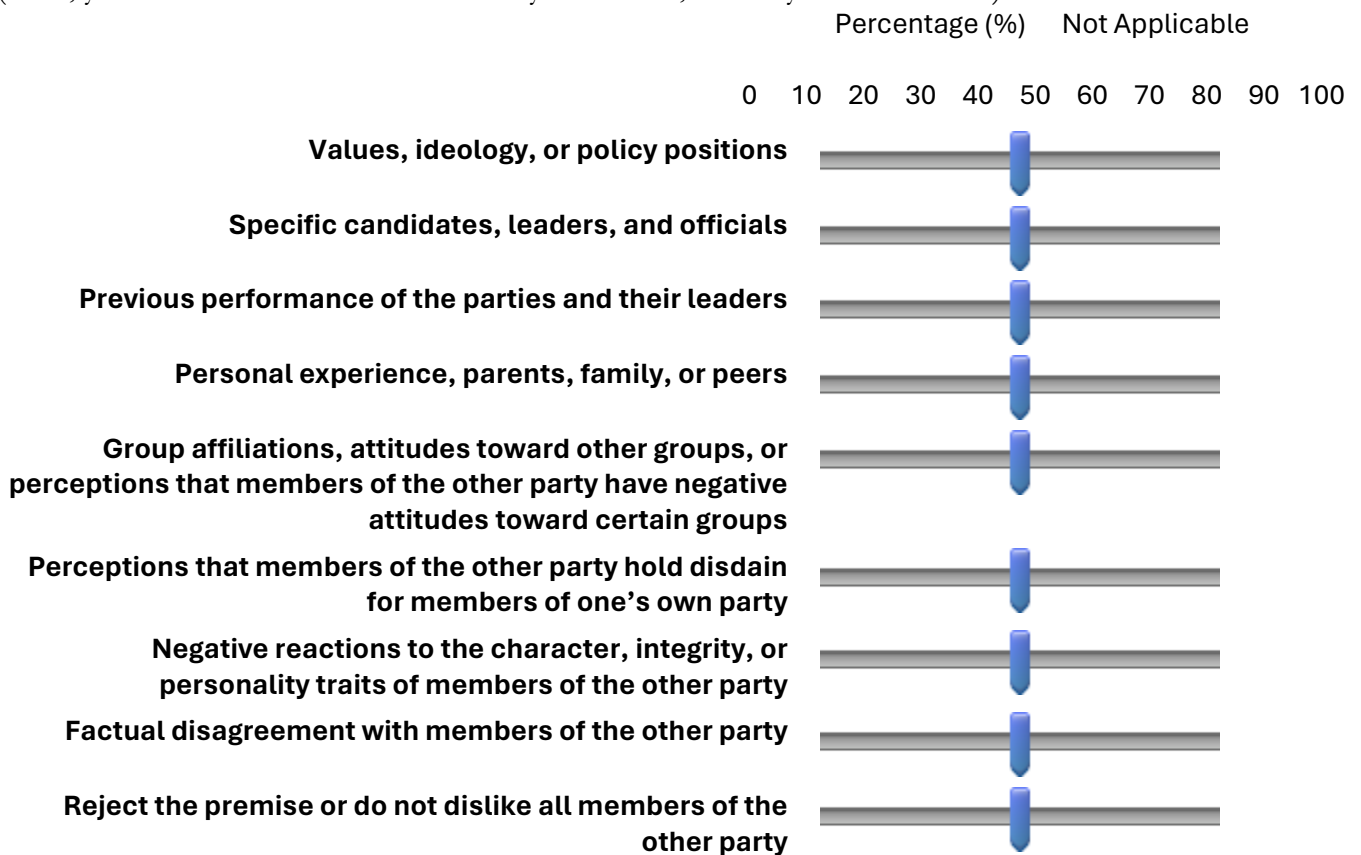**Reject the premise or do not dislike all members of the other party**

Are there any additional factors not on this list that you think we should have included? Specifically, are there other common reasons that people would say that explain their feelings toward the other party? If so, please list them below and indicate what percent of respondents you think would mention that factor.

Think about ordinary Democrats and Republicans.

For purposes of this question, assume respondents are those who identify with that party. That is, we exclude independents who lean toward a party.

Regardless of what people say on a survey, for what percent of people are each of these factors actually important causes of their partisanship? Your responses need not sum to 100% because multiple factors might be important causes.

(Note, you must click on a slider to record your answer, even if your answer is 0.)

[Carry forward options in the same randomized order]

Think about ordinary Democrats and Republicans.

For purposes of this question, assume respondents are those who identify with that party. That is, we exclude independents who lean toward a party.

Regardless of what people say on a survey, for what percent of people are each of these factors actually important causes of their negative feelings toward those who identify with the other party? Your responses need not sum to 100% because multiple factors might be important causes.

(Note, you must click on a slider to record your answer, even if your answer is 0.)

[Carry forward options in the same randomized order]

In your professional opinion, what are a few of the most important pieces of scholarship for understanding the contemporary causes of partisan identity/affective polarization in the United States? Self-citations are appreciated too!

In your professional opinion, what are the key challenges in providing persuasive evidence about the causes of partisanship and affective polarization in the United States?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on the causes of partisanship. We greatly appreciate your participation in this short survey. Please let us know if you have further questions or comments.

Variation in Explanations of Party Identification

For each category of responses, we run a regression where the dependent variable is a binary variable indicating whether a response fits into that category (1=yes, 0=no). We include all respondents for whom at least one category applied. The independent variables are all binary variables measuring the partisanship, ideological strength, demographics, or region of our respondents.

Specifically, we include indicators for Democrats; strong partisans; those reporting extreme ideology (i.e., identifying as extremely liberal or extremely conservative); women; White people; those who are at least 40 years of age; those who are employed full-time; college graduates; those with household annual incomes greater than $70,000; and residents of the Northeast, Midwest, and West (the South is the omitted region).

Most of the coefficients in Table 4 are substantively and statistically insignificant, suggesting that to the extent that respondents give different reasons for supporting their preferred party, these responses do not meaningfully vary across these groups. There are a few notable exceptions. Controlling for the other variables in the regression, Republican and White respondents are more likely to mention the previous performance of the parties. Older respondents and those with higher household incomes are more likely to mention groups. There are also some regional differences in the mention of specific candidates, with those from the Midwest being least likely.

Some of these statistically significant coefficients could be attributable to chance. There are 72 coefficients of interest in Table 4, and 5 of them are significant ($p < .05$). Even if there were no relationship between these variables and respondents' explanations for their partisanship, we would expect 3.6 statistically significant coefficients by chance. If these were 72 statistically independent tests, we would expect to obtain 5 or more significant coefficients approximately 29 percent of the time under the null $(1 - \sum_{i=0}^{4} \binom{72}{i} * .95^{72-i} * .05^{i} \approx .292)$. So we cannot conclusively reject the possibility that none of these variables are correlated with our categories of interest.

Although this result is not quite statistically significant, we find that controlling for the other variables, those who identify as ideologically extreme are 7.9 percentage points more likely to express disdain for or opposition to the other party. By contrast, we find that controlling for the other variables, strong partisans are not more likely to hold disdain for the other party. In the next section,

we explore this topic further by also analyzing open-ended survey responses about why people feel the way they do about the other party.

Variation in Explanations of Partisan Animosity

Paralleling the analyses in Table A1, Table A2 investigates variation in stated explanations for partisan animosity across respondents. As in Table A1, most of the estimated coefficients are statistically insignificant. Policy appears to be the most common explanation for partisan animosity for all demographic groups. Perhaps as expected, those who identify as ideologically extreme are more likely to mention policy, although this estimate is not statistically significant. Residents of the Northeast are more likely to mention policy than those from other regions. But interestingly, we find substantively modest and statistically insignificant differences by party, gender, race, age, education, and income.

Including the Northeast estimate mentioned above, there are only 6 statistically significant estimates of interest in Table 7. White respondents are less likely to impugn the character of members of the other party. Ideologically extreme respondents are more likely to mention groups. Democrats and older respondents are more likely to mention a specific candidate or leader, and virtually all of these mentions are of Donald Trump. And lastly, as expected, strong partisans and those who are ideologically extreme are less likely to reject the premise or state that they do not harbor animosity toward members of the other party.

Table A1. Variation in Explanations of Party Identification

	(1) Policy	(2) Disdain	(3) Candidates	(4) Performance	(5) Parents	(6) Groups
Democrat	.014	.020	.013	−.060*	−.016	−.002
	(.036)	(.036)	(.025)	(.025)	(.017)	(.016)
Strong	.024	−.004	−.035	−.005	.003	−.015
	(.029)	(.034)	(.023)	(.016)	(.011)	(.011)
Extreme	−.010	.079	−.009	−.004	−.005	−.005
	(.033)	(.042)	(.024)	(.016)	(.012)	(.011)
Woman	.013	−.045	.001	.004	−.011	.007
	(.030)	(.032)	(.020)	(.016)	(.012)	(.012)
White	−.021	.026	.008	.019*	.001	−.031
	(.039)	(.043)	(.023)	(.009)	(.018)	(.020)
Age ≥ 40	.055	.025	.018	.027	−.014	.025*
	(.030)	(.034)	(.022)	(.016)	(.014)	(.012)
Employed	−.020	−.026	−.009	−.027	.005	.006
	(.032)	(.033)	(.020)	(.016)	(.015)	(.014)
College	.004	.047	−.001	.007	−.016	−.015
	(.033)	(.034)	(.022)	(.015)	(.015)	(.012)
Income ≥ 70k	−.002	−.034	.004	−.004	−.001	.026*
	(.035)	(.035)	(.020)	(.016)	(.014)	(.013)
Northeast	−.014	.018	.009	.038	.001	.023
	(.044)	(.045)	(.032)	(.025)	(.018)	(.021)
Midwest	.033	.009	−.047*	.026	.007	−.015
	(.039)	(.043)	(.023)	(.023)	(.020)	(.010)
West	.020	.013	−.026	.002	−.013	−.003
	(.038)	(.041)	(.024)	(.015)	(.014)	(.013)
Constant	.844**	.087	.060	.045*	.052	.031
	(.053)	(.055)	(.036)	(.022)	(.028)	(.026)
Observations	506	506	506	506	506	506
R-squared	.013	.024	.018	.054	.012	.037

*Robust standard errors in parentheses; ** p<0.01, * p<0.05. The dependent variable in each column is a binary variable indicating whether a respondent provided a reason for their partisanship coded as matching that category.*

Table A2. Variation in Explanations of Partisan Animosity

	(1) Policy	(2) Character	(3) Groups	(4) Candidates	(5) Experience	(6) Performance	(7) Factual	(8) Disdain	(9) Premise
Democrat	−.024	.070	.055	.103**	.038	−.072	.030	−.027	−.117
	(.067)	(.058)	(.029)	(.029)	(.024)	(.040)	(.021)	(.022)	(.063)
Strong	.054	.036	−.016	.016	−.028	.005	−.014	−.039	−.148**
	(.062)	(.058)	(.037)	(.029)	(.029)	(.030)	(.014)	(.022)	(.045)
Extreme	.131	−.000	.113*	.024	.030	.003	.022	.038	−.131**
	(.067)	(.066)	(.049)	(.034)	(.035)	(.035)	(.022)	(.030)	(.040)
Woman	.020	−.040	.021	.028	.031	−.026	−.028	.004	−.031
	(.056)	(.052)	(.033)	(.029)	(.029)	(.028)	(.019)	(.016)	(.044)
White	.114	−.147*	−.096	.015	−.011	−.009	.014	−.031	.033
	(.073)	(.068)	(.052)	(.032)	(.037)	(.037)	(.021)	(.025)	(.052)
Age ≥ 40	−.075	.024	−.007	.119**	.004	−.017	.035	−.008	−.001
	(.061)	(.055)	(.034)	(.037)	(.031)	(.027)	(.023)	(.016)	(.050)
Employed	−.099	−.057	−.017	.004	−.026	−.036	−.006	.024	.053
	(.060)	(.055)	(.037)	(.030)	(.032)	(.034)	(.018)	(.016)	(.049)
College	−.049	.016	.034	−.042	.013	−.006	−.034	.006	.005
	(.066)	(.061)	(.038)	(.033)	(.030)	(.035)	(.025)	(.020)	(.053)
Income ≥ 70k	.050	−.035	−.033	.030	.027	.034	.010	−.018	−.037
	(.063)	(.057)	(.037)	(.034)	(.028)	(.030)	(.023)	(.023)	(.050)
Northeast	.175*	.028	−.045	.087	−.028	.010	.003	−.031	−.097
	(.078)	(.071)	(.043)	(.050)	(.033)	(.039)	(.025)	(.018)	(.065)
Midwest	.117	.055	−.059	.008	−.008	.003	.030	.001	−.085
	(.079)	(.072)	(.039)	(.033)	(.036)	(.034)	(.030)	(.028)	(.063)
West	.086	.048	−.001	.039	.017	.016	.007	−.016	−.063
	(.075)	(.067)	(.048)	(.039)	(.038)	(.036)	(.023)	(.020)	(.059)
Constant	.474**	.332**	.121	−.105*	.025	.134*	.004	.074*	.404**
	(.103)	(.093)	(.062)	(.046)	(.047)	(.054)	(.029)	(.037)	(.089)
Observations	304	304	304	304	304	304	304	304	304
R-squared	.067	.040	.080	.095	.025	.034	.043	.042	.113

*Robust standard errors in parentheses; ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.*