



University of Utah

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL

**PARTY IMAGE AND INTRA-PARTY DISSENT IN AMERICAN POLITICS:
THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT AND DEMOCRATIC ECONOMIC POLICY
CONFLICT IN THE 1980s**

**Wyatt R. Hudgens (Matthew Burbank, Ph.D.)
Department of Political Science**

Abstract

In political science, the study of party image seeks to understand and explain how voters perceive and conceptualize the major political parties. Through the evaluation of open-ended questions asked by the American National Election Studies (ANES), scholars find that voters hold differing assessments of the two major political parties, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Voters are more likely to view the Democratic Party favorably (and the Republican Party unfavorably) on issues concerning economic policy. Similarly, voters are more likely to see the Republican Party favorably (and the Democratic Party unfavorably) on matters of ideology and party philosophy. Many of these differences highlight the role of partisan divisions and disagreement on issues of high salience. Partisan conflict plays a paramount role in virtually every aspect of the American political sphere. However, little recognition or distinction is awarded to the effect of internal party conflict on how voters evaluate the major political parties. Intra-party dynamics play a lesser-known, yet essential role on how voters view the parties, and the fluctuation in the electorate's levels of favorability, specifically on issues of remarkable salience.

Conflictual partisan dissent between the American political parties extends back to colonial times, predating America's independence from Great Britain. Political parties recognized and embodied differences among the general public hundreds of years ago, similar to how they recognize and embody differences among the general public in contemporary society. While today's issues differ noticeably from the issues of America's past, the voting public (commonly referred to as the 'electorate') still places considerable faith in the political parties to recognize and represent various aspects of politically charged disagreement within society.

The two major political parties in contemporary American society, the Democrats and the Republicans, often represent subset groups of the American electorate on opposing sides of a multitude of issues spanning from healthcare to tax policy. More broadly, the Democratic Party often represents voters who favor increased government involvement in society. In contrast, the Republican Party frequently represents voters with interests vested in the conservation of traditional moral and social principles, and those with an increased propensity to support a minimal government presence in society. Inter-party dissent, that is, disagreement or clashes between the two major parties, dominates various aspects of American politics, such as legislative harmony and gridlock, electoral conflict, and how voters appreciate (or fail to appreciate) the nation's broader political system. In multiple senses, inter-party dissent is a staple in American politics, and is significantly emboldened by the electorate.

The open and transparent disagreement between elected officials and between members of society, to some effect, serves as sufficient evidence of a functioning and healthy democracy. Though inter-party dissent shows no signs of slowing in strength, the role of internal conflict within political parties is growing (Curry 2019). Such growth prompts interesting inquiries centered around the role of intra-party conflict on the American electorate, specifically on how the American electorate views and penalizes the parties, primarily in terms of their party image assessments.

A topic in the study of political science, known as 'party image,' seeks to understand how Americans conceptualize the major political parties, identify what the parties stand for, and the subsets of voters they represent. Voters often complete this task rather successfully. Donald C. Baumer and Howard J. Gold uncovered, in a 1995 study titled "Party Images and the American Electorate," that the American voting population often consistently and correctly recognizes substantive images of the major political parties, that adequately align with the parties' stances on salient issues (Baumer and Gold 1995). On salient and divisive issues, in contemporary politics, sharp inter-party divisions within the electorate and within Congress often clearly highlight the growing polarization between the two major parties. However, though often masked in American politics, intra-party dynamics highlight divisions in which there is no clear consensus and consequential fractionalization within a single party, usually centered around a specific issue or subset of issues.

This paper seeks to uncover whether or not intra-party dissent plays a sizeable (or any) role concerning party image and electoral action. Party images allow voters to identify and communicate what they like and dislike about each major political party based on their understandings of what the parties stand for. In the context of Democrats vs. Republicans, this task is rather simple. However, with heightened intra-party conflict within either the Democratic or the Republican Party, voters' task of evaluating a party through likes dislikes is rendered much more complicated and extremely muddled by the internal forces of intra-party conflict. The electorate is susceptible to the variability of American politics and somewhat attuned to friction between parties, a key feature of American democracy. However, I argue that voters take into consideration the impact of internal party conflict, at least to some extent, when organizing their likes and dislikes of the political parties and forming their party image assessments.

Methodology

To evaluate party image and intra-party conflict, this paper will rely primarily on public opinion data to understand the public's recognition of salient issues, as well as public sentiment surrounding such issues. For evaluation of party image, this paper will draw upon data compiled by the American National Election Studies, organized and presented within *Party Images in the American Electorate*, by Mark D. Brewer, to understand patterns of voter images of the major political parties, over a significant period of American political history (1952-2004). Empirically driven research papers and other academic scholarships will supplement my argument, provide a contextual narrative, and support various claims herein.

Party image is a relatively new field within the study of political science, and scholarship on the subject is seemingly few and far between. The remarkable subjectivity of the topic makes this argument tricky. Little is known about the role of certain external forces on party image, such as intra-party conflict. However, historical instances point to the possibility of intra-party conflict influencing party image assessments, even if the extent of such influence is minimal and less apparent. This paper will evaluate two historical instances with some visible intra-party split. The two instances include the Republican Party and the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment (hereafter ERA) in the 1970s, and the Democratic Party's conflict and confusion surrounding the party's economic vision (or lack thereof) during the 1980s.

Party Image

To make an argument that intra-party conflict is empirically relevant concerning party image, it is necessary to identify the characteristics of party image and highlight several works that provide strong data and robust support for the presence of party image in contemporary politics. These works also serve to highlight the importance of party image's role within the political sphere, concerning American voters and electoral tendencies. Scholarly explorations into party image have uncovered several key findings that allow for an understanding of what party image is, its defining characteristics, and its electoral importance.

Mark D. Brewer defines party images as the "mental images" that voters have of the major parties (Brewer 2004). Voters compartmentalize these "pictures" of the parties, communicating them through the American National Election Studies (ANES) in terms of likes and dislikes. Likewise, scholars have uncovered several empirical implications of party image. First, there is strong evidence supporting the notion that party images have become more frequent and increasingly distinct over time (Baumer and Gold 1995). Second, in their 1995 study mentioned above, Baumer and Gold studied features of image possession among voters. Their findings indicated that voters, for the most part, held images of the parties that were dominant, meaning that the electorate's pictures of the parties were, for the most part, correct and accurately aligned with the party and their ideals (Baumer and Gold 1995). In essence, voters communicate their understandings (images) of the political parties through likes and dislikes, based on their assessments of what each party stands for. Party images have increased over time, becoming more distinct and influenced by the polarization of the parties. Party images provide substantive information about the electorate's perceptions of political parties.

Intra-Party Dynamics

Similarly, an empirical understanding of intra-party-political conflict is required for comparison of party image and intra-party strife. Intra-party conflict is often displayed best in

Congress, speaking volumes to the functionality of a political party, and their ability to pass laws on salient issues that voters recognize as significant.

At least in the context of congressional action and legislative workability, intra-party conflict has gradually increased over time, resulting in numerous failed attempts by parties to pass key pieces of their respective agendas, even during periods of unified government control. While the public generally perceives conflict and inaction within the halls of Congress mainly as the result of partisan differences, little attention is allocated to the rise of intra-party dissent in various congressional senses. Such forms of intra-party dissent include inherently political tactics, such as the prevention of legislation from receiving formal committee action, only one chamber passing legislation under a unified government, or failures by the House and Senate to reconcile legislation under a unified government (Curry 2019). Intra-party dissent in Congress increasingly serves a barrier to congressional action, and the achievement of a party's legislative goals. I argue that increasing intra-party conflict in a congressional capacity influences the electorate's understandings and party image assessments of the political parties.

Research by Melody Rose in 2001 introduced the role of intra-party dynamics in the context of divided-government politics, specifically during the Clinton administration. Though Rose concluded that further empirical assessment was required for a comprehensive understanding of the subject, some key findings emerged from her research. Rose found validity in prior works that discovered connections between "dynamics and incentive structures that connect divided party control with political rancor" (Rose 2001). Divided government prompts not only standard partisan squabbling but interesting forms of intra-party conflict. In terms of the federal government, academic works point to an increasingly significant role of intra-party dynamics, both during periods of unified and divided government control.

Scholarship examining intra-party conflict primarily explores the role of intra-party dynamics from within government bodies (Congress, the presidency, etc.), prompting the need to question the role of intra-party dynamic within the general electorate outside of government, specifically with attention to party image. In a subsequent study entitled "Party Image and Partisan Resurgence," Baumer and Gold found that elite-level individuals drive aggregate partisan awareness and serve as a link between the divided political parties and the general electorate (Baumer and Gold 2007). Political elites, who are often highly partisan, and who have a higher propensity to more carefully follow politics, use their political knowledge to (1) drive aggregate partisan awareness and (2) disseminate images of the parties throughout the electorate (Baumer and Gold 2007). With an increased propensity to more closely follow politics, political elites can connect the broader electorate with the often complex and ever-changing political world within government, where explorations into intra-party conflict have mainly occurred.

The Equal Rights Amendment

For the electorate to form substantive images of the political parties, the parties must recognize and, to some extent, clearly embody issue differences within the electorate (Brewer 2004). Arguably, no subset of issues, primarily in the 1970s and 1980s, was more divisive and embodied by the political parties than gender-related issues. The rise of the feminist movement and momentous strides at gender equality paved the way for a bitter partisan battle over the ERA in the 1970s.

The ERA was passed by Congress in 1972 and subsequently sent to the individual states for ratification. The proposed amendment magnified the role of gender in American politics and centered inter-party dissent around the highly salient issues of gender, feminism, and equality. To this day, voters most favorably associate the Republican Party with issues concerning 'party philosophy,' which is closely linked with the modern conservative ideology of the party (Brewer

2004). Over time, the conservative movement increasingly opposed feministic ideals and the framework of the ERA. Because the battle over the ERA was mainly fought in the ideological arena, it not only pit Republicans against Democrats but, more notably, cemented a path for the emergence of the conservative movement into the Republican Party, creating internal rifts and clear ideological divisions within the party.

Republican Party Internal Dissent

The ERA, and the Republican Party's policy and ideological stances on gender-related issues, impacted how voters assessed the party philosophy of the Republican Party, to some extent. While the Republican Party dominated the Democratic Party over issues concerning party philosophy, the Ronald Reagan conservatism of the 1980s was still in its infancy during the 1970s, and the emergence of conservative principles into the Republican Party during the 1960s created crucial fractionalization. Such fractionalization prevailed until the 1980s and the seemingly party-wide adoption of conservative values (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Conservatism, which would ultimately become embodied by the Republican Party, served as a roadblock to state-action on the ERA.

I argue that even though the conservatism of the 1970s was less associated with the Republican Party than in the 1980s, conservatism's rise and presence prompts sufficient reasons to argue for the presence of intra-party splits within the Republican Party. The integration of conservative Democrats into the Republican Party and general realignment of the political parties was well underway before the 1970s. On the issue of conservative opposition to the ERA, one could argue against the validity of linking conservatism with the Republican Party (due to the volume of conservative Democrats and the incomplete association of conservatism with the Republican Party); however, for the purposes of this paper, the process of party change in question occurred over a lengthy period of time and is multi-faceted. By the 1970s, conservatism and conservative principles within the Republican Party began to garner noticeable support (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). In 1964, Barry Goldwater ran a presidential campaign introducing conservative principles and closely likening them with Republicanism.

Similarly, conservatism played a sizeable role in the party following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the 1970s, though conservative Democrats remained, conservatism was more closely aligned with the Republican Party than ever before. Conservatism in the Republican Party was present enough to cause some intra-party disruption and effectively push back against the established Republican Party, specifically regarding the ERA.

The intra-party conflict centered around the ERA stemmed primarily from party philosophy. In the eyes of the electorate, the most significant point of contention within the Republican Party was ideological, pitting staunch conservatives and religious fundamentalists, who increasingly opposed the ERA between 1976 and 1980, against moderate members of the Republican Party, who were more likely to favor the ERA and other strives at societal gender equality.

During this time, the salience of the ERA and gender-related issues drove inter-party and intra-party dissent on the issue, and efforts on the part of conservatives to mobilize public support against the ERA resulted in its demise during ratification. In 1974, the general public overwhelmingly favored ratification of the ERA, with 73.6 percent of Americans supporting ratification (Daniels, Darcy, and Westphal 1982). Compared with the general public, in 1976, 60.5 percent of conservatives supported ratification (Daniels, Darcy, and Westphal 1982). With a plurality of public and conservative support, ratification of the amendment appeared virtually unstoppable. However, conservative and religious fundamentalist opposition proliferated

between 1976 and 1980, even though public support for ratification remained above 50 percent, reaching its lowest level of support (52.3 percent support) in 1980 (Daniels, Darcy, and Westphal 1982). Growing intra-party Republican division shaped the path of the ERA's failure in state legislatures, even though from the 1940s through 1980, the Republican Party platform included support for the ERA (Frum 2000). In large part, intra-party factors such as declining conservative support and increased mobilization efforts against ratification influenced the ERA's shift in course, more so than a simple party-line split on the issue (Mansbridge 1986).

While Americans dislikes of the Republican Party based on party philosophy remained relatively stable during this time, the electorate's likes of the Republican Party on party philosophy decreased as the fight over the ERA ensued. The stable dislikes and decline in likes of the Republican Party based on party philosophy present a possibility in which the electorate recognized the lack of unanimity of the party on the salient issue, displaying such recognition through party image assessments. As a result, voters who had previously seen the Republican Party favorably in terms of party philosophy were less likely to hold such favorable views. Conversely, voters who had previously disliked the Republican Party based on party philosophy were no more inclined to hold negative views, as the fight over the ERA likely reinforced their negative view of the party in terms of party ideology and philosophy, regardless of intra-party conflict.

As the failure of the ERA became a more distant memory in American politics, and conservatism found a welcoming home within the Republican Party in the 1980s, the favorability of Republican Party philosophy, in terms of party image, rebounded nicely, with positive images of the party based on party philosophy reaching an all-time high (16 percent) in 1996 (Brewer 2004). Intra-party conflict caused a hiccup for the Republican Party in terms of party image, shown mainly by the decline of party philosophy likes during the 1970s. Though imperfect, public opinion supporting the ERA clashed with the fractionalization between the party's most conservative and religiously fundamentalist subset, and more established and moderate sectors of the party. In some measure, this clash highlights the potential role of intra-party conflict on a salient issue and the public's recognition of such dissent having a recognizable impact on party image figures. Republicans could not demonstrate party unity strong enough to increase or sustain their favorable party image within the electorate during the 1970s fight over the ERA.

Economics in the 1980s

Moving from the 1970s to the 1980s, the next historical example of intra-party dynamics and party image's relationship concerns the decline in positive party images of the Democratic Party based on economic-centered issues during the 1980s. Perceived favorably by the electorate on economic issues, primarily as the party championing the working class and the common man, the electorate places significant pressure on the Democratic Party to uphold their positive standing within the electorate on economic-related issues. To increase favorability within the electorate on economic issues, the Democratic Party must display party coherency and a certain level of party uniformity around economic issues. When internal disruptions arise, it becomes much more challenging for the party, in terms of favorable party image sustainability. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Democratic Party lacked uniformity and coherency regarding economic issues. Disarrayed internal dynamics of the party prompted consequential party image assessments.

Democratic Party Internal Dissent

Similar to 'party philosophy' for the Republican Party, voters to this day, most strongly and positively associate the Democratic Party with 'economic issues' (Brewer 2004). In 1976, roughly 28 percent of voters held positive images of the Democratic Party on economic issues, speaking volumes to the public's cemented perception of the Democratic Party as the party of the 'common man.' However, by 1980, that figure fell to 22 percent, and bottomed out at 19 percent in 1984, before briefly rebounding to 25 percent in 1988 (Brewer 2004). There is no empirical doubt that between 1976 and 1984, voters' favorable images of the Democratic Party on economic issues declined. A string of Democratic electoral losses and the success of Ronald Reagan likely contributed to this decline. However, during this time, the Democratic Party did not extend a clear vision to the public on their preferred direction of the economy or their stances on various economic-related issues, and conflicting internal messages from the Democratic Party contributed, in part, to the party image decline.

In the late 1970s through the early 1980s, the Democratic Party grappled with conflicting intra-party ideals on the most efficient way to tackle the economy and preserve their favorable images on economic issues within the electorate. A noticeable shift away from traditional liberalism between the years of 1976 and 1984 sparked economic policy party platforms that were less generous, less geared toward welfare, and more cost-effective than typically prescribed under traditional liberalism (Weaver 1984). Most importantly, these policy Democratic policy shifts were not entirely clear to the electorate. The platform of the Democratic Party that won Jimmy Carter the presidency in 1976 stressed welfare reform and spending as a way to combat economic inequality in the United States. However, the turn of the decade saw the Democratic Party's shift toward a more moderate approach to the economy, to appeal to voters, and counter then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan's conservative approach to the economy.

In the 1980s, the success of Ronald Reagan stemmed, in part, from efforts to reverse course on the economic downturn that broadly defined the initial years of his presidency thwarted Democrats' ability to legislate on the economy and strongly appeal to the electorate on economic grounds. By 1983, Reagan's approval began to grow alongside the economy, as the public cautiously favored President Reagan's economic agenda centered around sweeping tax cuts, increased defense spending, and supply-side economics. In May of 1986, Reagan's job approval rating sat at 68 percent (Newport, Jones, and Saad 2004). Similarly, Reagan's administration saw relatively steady economic growth in terms of GDP, following -1.8 percent growth in 1982 (Amadeo 2020). In 1984, Reagan enjoyed 7.2 percent GDP growth, followed by consistently positive economic growth through the end of 1988 (Amadeo 2020).

Party image-wise, the electorate did not convey their pleasure for positive growth through increased likes for the Republican Party on economic issues; rather, the electorate was less inclined to favor the Democratic Party on economic-centered issues. While voters were still significantly more likely to view the Democratic Party favorably than the Republican Party on issues concerning the economy, they recognized the Democrats' inability to deliver on issues central to the economy and the 'common man.' The decline in likes for the Democratic Party and virtually unchanged favorability for the Republican Party on economic issues supports the notion that such downward shifts might have been more reactive to disarray within the Democratic Party, than the success of the Republican Party.

In similar fashion to the way that positive images for Republican Party philosophy rebounded in the 1980s, positive images for the Democratic Party on economic issues inched back to pre-1976 levels, as the party reconciled and offered a more coherent economic vision to the electorate. In 1992, Bill Clinton brought about a newfound direction for the Democratic Party on the economic front, incorporating into his political agenda welfare reform and efforts aimed at combatting inequality and poverty. To favor the Democratic Party on economic issues, the

electorate needed a clear vision and affirmation of the Democratic Party's ability to appeal favorably and deliver on economic matters. The gradual disappearance of intra-party conflict, in both instances above, sparked momentum upward in terms of favorable party images.

I suspect, however, that party images can withstand, smaller and less significant intra-party disputes, due perhaps, to idiosyncratic circumstances (such as efforts by the political parties to mask internal dissent). However, on larger, more drawn-out issues (in the case of the ERA), or sustained periods of perceived inaction or inability (in the case of the economic landscape of the 1980s), party images appear at least somewhat susceptible and responsive to the influence of intra-party conflict.

In the grand scheme of party image data, and at first glance, the downward shifts in favorable images for the parties (evaluated above) appear relatively insignificant. From 1976 to 1984, the Democratic Party experienced a 9 percent drop in favorable images on economic issues. Likewise, the most significant drop in favorable images on party philosophy for the Republican Party during the 1970s was only five percentage points (Brewer 2004). However, many external forces within the dynamic political world influence and muffle these shifts, and such variations should not be discounted as insignificant or irrelevant. In both of the examples above, the electorate is responding (through likes and dislikes) to the political world around them, with each shift (whether upward or downward) conveying pivotal implications about the electorate's perception of the political parties and their place in the American political and electoral landscape.

Conclusions & Considerations

Though innumerable factors influence how voters view the political parties and craft party images, the timing of the decline in favorability for Republican Party philosophy in the 1970s, and the timing of the similar decline in favorability for the Democratic Party on economic issues in the 1980s is noteworthy. The Republican Party's adoption of conservative principles was not immediate or free of political and intra-party friction. And the Democratic Party's internal, and momentary loss of vision as the economically achieving party and champion of the 'common man' did not stem from inter-party squabbling. There is room to suspect that intra-party dynamics influence party image, at least in a theoretical sense. However, further analysis is likely required to distinguish the empirical relationship between the two forces.

For Democrats, favorable economic images tell the story of what the electorate perceives most favorably about the party. Likewise, for Republicans, favorable party philosophy images tell the story. In the instances detailed above, each of these subsets of images was challenged both by external political pressures, as well as internal forces within a single party. Again, to empirically prove the connection between intra-party disarray and the fluctuation of party images is complicated, mainly due to a lack of empirical information on the topic. Regardless, previous scholarship on party image finds that, in terms of party images, the electorate demonstrates a fair sense of coherency. When making their party image assessments, intra-party conflict influences the electorate, when coupled with various other considerations such as issue saliency, inter-party dynamics, and broader political landscapes.

In contemporary American politics, a large portion of academic, media, and societal focus centers around the dynamics between the two political parties (inter-party dynamics). The electorate is sensitive to changes in the political landscape, often driven on the surface by glaring partisan differences. And through party image assessments, the electorate communicates their conceptualizations of the parties. As party image continues to increase in importance and relevancy, and as the parties continue to polarize, American voters may (intentionally or unintentionally) rely more and more on intra-party conditions to communicate what they favor

and do not favor about each political party. The ability of the electorate to recognize fractionalization and dissent within a single party largely dictates their ability to communicate their sentiments toward such conditions in terms of party image.

More broadly, this paper proposes a new way of looking at the relationship between party image and intra-party dissent in American politics. In many aspects of political science, it can become appealing to point to the seemingly regularized conflict between the two parties as a way to explain various empirical relationships or datasets. In the instance of party image, it is easy to point to Reagan's success in the 1980s or the Republicans' efforts aimed at defeating the Democrats on the ERA as a way to explain the declines in favorable party images. While these explanations are not incorrect, they do not paint the full picture. When voters assess the political parties, they do not solely assess the parties as monolithic bodies pitted against each other, nor do they individually assess each party as if each party operates in a homogenous, unitary fashion. Though perhaps overly optimistic, the electorate's assessments of the political parties may incorporate assessments of each party's identifiable dissent, fractionalization, and conflict.

References

- Amadeo, Kimberly. "What Really Influenced U.S. Growth Through History." *The Balance*. April 14, 2020.
- Baumer, Donald C., and Howard J. Gold. "Party images and partisan resurgence." *The Social Science Journal* 44, no. 3 (2007): 465–79.
- Baumer, Donald C., and Howard J. Gold. "Party Images and the American Electorate." *American Politics Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1995): 33–61.
- Brewer, Mark D. *Party Images in the American Electorate*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.
- Curry, James M. "Party Capacity." 2019. Accessed May 4, 2020.
- Daniels, Mark R., Robert Darcy, and Joseph W. Westphal. "The ERA Won. At Least in the Opinion Polls." *American Political Science Association* 15, no. 4 (1982): 578–84.
- Frum, David. "How We Got Here: the 70's, the Decade That Brought You Modern Life (for Better or Worse)." Essay. In *How We Got Here: the 70's, the Decade That Brought You Modern Life (for Better or Worse)*, 245–48. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2007.
- Grossmann, Matthew, and David A. Hopkins. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Mansbridge, Jane J. *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Newport, Frank, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Lydia Saad. "Ronald Reagan From the People's Perspective: A Gallup Poll Review." Gallup.com. Gallup, June 7, 2004.
- Rose, Melody. "Losing Control: The Intraparty Consequences of Divided Government." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2001): 679–98.
- Weaver, Warren. "Democrats' Platform Shows a Shift from Liberal Positions of 1976 and 1980." *The New York Times*. July 22, 1984.