

Adams State University Students' Views towards Political Parties: Across Party Lines

Department of Sociology
Adams State University, Alamosa, CO.

December 10, 2015

This research project is submitted in the Sociological Research Methods class in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor's Degree in Sociology at

Adams State University.

Introduction

Politics continue to evolve overtime. With the foundation of the United States government, two groups were created; the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. Although at this time, these groups of men did not consider themselves to be members of “political parties”, this soon changed as these groups evolved into the Republican and Democratic parties. This two party system has dominated U.S. politics for over a century despite the rapid growth of third party groups. This however, appears to no longer be the trend in politics.

My research focuses on college students’ views towards politics. This research will look to explain any doubts towards the two party system as a direct result of the lack of confidence in politicians and mainstream media. Baker states that “with every passing week or month, it seems, some government agency or another has had a misstep or has been caught up in scandals that have deeply eroded public confidence” (2014). The question that remains, is whether or not this lack of confidence in Washington has led to a significant shift of voters who will focus their efforts on third party groups rather than the typical Republican and Democratic parties. My research will answer this question by investigating whether students at a small southwestern Colorado university who identify themselves with third party groups.

Ladd (2010) states “that the press has become much less popular [because] ‘Americans believe that the news media [has] become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded, and destructive’ ” (Fallows cited in Ladd 2010: 568). It is for this reason that I explore respondents’ confidence levels in political officials, mainstream media, and any changes in their political party affiliation.

Currently, there are many messages being portrayed in the media regarding our current elected officials and their failure to properly protect the American public. With the growing number of international threats such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the intranational scandals involving emails, the confidence level in the Democratic Party alone has seen a sizable shift. The Republican Party has also seen a shift as the 2016 Presidential Candidates for the GOP consist of numerous “political outsiders”, that is to say individuals who do not have a history of holding a political office, as well as a Libertarian rather than a staunch conservative.

With these changes, American voters may be identifying biases in mainstream media and may be losing confidence in their political officials. I want to investigate whether this phenomenon is true by comparing respondents’ views of biases in the media with their level of confidence in their political officials. I hypothesize that respondents who report strong beliefs of biases in the media will also in turn report low levels of confidence in their elected officials.

Although I expect my research to find that the majority of the student body surveyed identifies themselves with the Democratic Party, due particularly in part to being members of a liberal institution, I am hypothesizing that members in this group will have low levels of confidence towards their elected officials. I would also like to investigate whether there is an abundance of individuals who report being aligned with third party groups. I hypothesize that respondents aligned with third party groups will report stronger beliefs of biases in the media as well as higher levels of happiness towards their party of choice.

The independent variables I will use to categorize my data are the reported political party of the respondents and the beliefs of biases in the media. I will be using these variables to measure the levels of my dependent variables which consist of: the level of satisfaction respondents report to their party as well as the level of confidence respondents report toward their elected officials; looking out for their best interests, their ability to make decisions for the American public, whether they are doing their jobs to the best of their abilities, and whether they are making decisions for the good of the American public rather than for their own self interests.

Based on these variables, I hypothesize that all three party groups, Republican, Democrat, and Independent will report low levels of confidence towards the varying capabilities of their elected officials. I am hypothesizing this because I believe respondents in two party groups are losing confidence of politicians in office, especially this close to an election with the increase in media coverage. Independents however tend to be rebellious in nature and do not approve of government in general.

This research is important in order to gain a deeper knowledge of the student body at Adams State University. My research will seek to quantify party affiliation, confidence in political officials, perception of media bias, and satisfaction of party groups. By conducting this research, I will be able to measure how engaged the students at a small southwestern Colorado university really are and the diversity of their political views.

The next section of this report outlines the literature. Following the Literature Review, the Methods section details the methodology of my research. I then report my findings and conclude my paper with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Much research has been conducted in the field of politics and party affiliation. However, a lot of this research is focused on the differences in Republican and Democratic parties, rather than the shifts in political parties.

Why do people pick a certain political party to align themselves with? According to Wattenberg, people generally align themselves with one particular political party over another because that is the party that they were raised to identify with. “This affect is often learned early in life from one’s parents and theoretically grows stronger with age. What is most important is the psychological attachment involved, not any legal membership or contact with the party organization” (Wattenberg 1998: 10).

This psychological bond between voter and political party group however has been on the brink of separation. Generally this attachment would create a “perceptual screen” which would allow “one [to] see what is favorable to one’s partisan orientation and filter out dissonant information” (Wattenberg 1998: 12). Wattenberg found that “the stronger the party bond, the more likely the selection and distortion process were found to be” (1998: 12). With the increase in media coverage however, voters have been forced to witness the scandalous behavior and unsuccessful policy placements of their elected officials. “Between 1964 and 1972 the percentage of respondents identifying with one of the two major parties declined from 77

to 64 percent. In addition, people who continued to identify with a party after 1964 expressed a weaker sense of identification than previously” (Wattenberg 1998: 23).

My research will measure the bond between voters and their political party. By looking at the confidence level voters have toward their elected officials we can gain a deeper understanding of whether or not one’s party truly represents their values. Also, by looking at the level of happiness voters feel towards their political party, I am predicting that there is a strong correlation between happiness and whether or not the respondent is a registered member of a third party group. Voters who have aligned with a third party group will show greater levels of happiness than those who are not.

Research conducted by Pinkleton, Weintraub, and Fortman, however, shows that respondents who do not have strong confidence levels with media, are often skeptical in regard to government (1998). “Young voters--become trapped in a cycle in which cynicism lowers perceived efficacy, which in turn increases cynicism and apathy” (Pinkleton, Weintraub, Fortman, 1998). Based on the research conducted by Pinkleton, Weintraub, and Fortman (1998), I expect to find in my research that respondents who reported strong beliefs of biases in the media are more likely to have also reported low confidence in their elected officials.

Gastil argues that “there are two fundamental problems in American politics. The first is that most Americans do not believe that elected officials represent their interests. The second is that they are correct” (2000: 1). General Social Survey results have shown that in 1994, eight percent of respondents had a “‘great deal of confidence’ in Congress” and thirty nine percent “expressed ‘hardly any’ confidence in Congress” (Gastil 2001: 1). Additionally in 1994, seventy

four percent of respondents affirmed the statement in the General Social Survey “that ‘most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man’” (Gastil 2001: 1). I expect my findings will reflect Gastil’s (2001) findings that respondents report little confidence toward their elected leaders.

The next section outlines the methods I used to gather my data.

Methodology

Through the sociological research method of surveys, I gathered data for this research project. The survey consisted of twelve questions to determine the political views of college students at Adams State University. Six of these questions were based on a Likert Scale to determine respondents’ level of confidence in political officials, their views of biases in the media, and their perceived level of happiness toward their political party. Additionally, three multiple choice questions were asked to determine respondents’ history towards party alignment. Lastly the survey consisted of three demographic questions to gain a deeper understanding of respondents’ race, gender, and age to determine if these factors played a role in their voting behavior (see Appendix A for a copy of the survey).

By gaining permission from instructors to enter classrooms, I was able to administer the survey. This judgmental sampling technique allowed me to complete the data gathering phase in a timely manner. With a wide spectrum of educational disciplines, I was able to gather data from students with differing interests and therefore increased the randomization and validity of my results.

The surveys were anonymous and confidential. All respondents were asked to complete a Consent Form, which was kept separate from the data (see Appendix B for a copy of the Consent Form). With a sample size of one hundred and sixty three students at Adams State University, I was able to obtain a representative sample in which I updated the results into the SPSS database.

Drawing on a cross section of students, I was able to obtain results from many different age groups which allowed me to recode the respondents' age into two categories; traditional and non-traditional students. Additionally, I recoded the Likert Scale questions into two categories; agree and disagree. This was possible by joining together the categories of Strongly Agree with Agree, and Strongly Disagree with Disagree. This recoding technique was also used for the variable measuring happiness; Very Happy and Somewhat Happy became Happy, and Very Unhappy and Somewhat Unhappy became Unhappy.

By using descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analyses I was able to draw tentative theoretical conclusions.

The next section outlines the findings of my research.

Findings

The primary focus of this research is to determine the views college students have towards politics. This research investigates whether students at a small southwestern Colorado university identify themselves with third party groups, such as Independents, more so than the more traditional two party groups, Republican and Democrats.

Of the 163 students who were sampled, I hypothesized that the majority of the student body would identify themselves with the Democratic Party. My results show however that there was a fairly even break among parties that respondents identified with. Table 1 shows that 35.8% of the respondents classified themselves as Republican, 31.7% as Democrat, and 32.5% as Independent. These results show that my hypothesis was wrong as more respondents identified with the Republican and Independent Party than they did with the Democratic Party. Additionally, I hypothesized that the majority of respondents would report strong beliefs of biases in the media. My results show that 77.2% of respondents stated that they believe the media is biased towards one political party, whereas only 22.8% disagreed (see Table 2). Therefore my second hypothesis holds true and correlates with the views expressed by Fallows (Ladd 2010: 568).

Table 1: Respondents' Political Party Affiliation

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Republican	35.8
Democrat	31.7
Independent	32.5
Total	100
(N)	(120)

Table 2: Respondents' views that the media is biased towards one political party

<i>Biases in Media</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Agree	77.2
Disagree	22.8
Total	100
(N)	(162)

I hypothesized that as the reported belief of biases in the media increased, the level of confidence respondents reported regarding their elected officials' ability would decrease (see

Table 3). Additionally, I hypothesized that individuals who reported being aligned with Independents would report stronger beliefs of biases in the media (see Table 4) as well as higher levels of happiness towards their party of choice (see Table 5).

Table 3: Respondents' views of biases in the media and their level of confidence towards their elected officials' doing their jobs to the best of their ability

<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Media is Bias</i>	
	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>
Agree	44.8%	62.2%
Disagree	55.2%	37.8%
Total	100%	100%
(N)	(125)	(37)

Table 3 indicates that 55.2% of respondents, who reported biases in the media, also conveyed that they are not confident that their elected officials are doing their jobs to the best of their ability. This chart also shows that 62.2% of respondents, who do not believe that the media is biased, reported that they are confident in their elected officials. This data shows that my hypothesis was correct that if a respondent believes there is no bias in the media, then they are more likely to report higher levels of confidence in their elected officials. These findings mirror research conducted by Pinkleton, Weintraub, and Fortman (1998).

Table 4: Respondents' political party and whether or not they believe the media is biased

<i>Bias in Media</i>	<i>Political Party</i>		
	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Agree	83.7%	76.3%	76.9%
Disagree	16.3%	23.7%	23.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(43)	(38)	(39)

Table 4 shows that 83.7% of Republicans believe that the media is biased towards one political party whereas only 76.3% of Democrats and 76.9% of Independents also agree with this statement. Therefore, my hypothesis was proven wrong as Republicans tend to report stronger beliefs of bias in the media than Independents.

Table 5: Respondents' political party and their happiness towards their party

<i>Happiness</i>	<i>Political Party</i>		
	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Happy	81.4%	97.4%	89.2%
Unhappy	18.6%	2.6%	10.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(43)	(38)	(37)

Table 5 shows that 97.4% of Democrats report that they are happy with their political party while only 81.4% of Republicans reported that they are happy. This is interesting because it is a 16% difference in the level of happiness between the two party groups and less than a 10% difference in reported happiness of Independents to these two parties. Eighty nine percent of Independents reported that they are happy with their political party. I hypothesized that students who identify with third parties will be more satisfied with their political party than students who identify with the traditional parties. This data however shows that my hypothesis was not accurate as Democrats report being happier with their political party than Independents.

Additionally I hypothesized that members of each political party would report low levels of confidence towards the varying capabilities of their elected officials. I hypothesized this because it was my belief that respondents were losing confidence towards politicians in office,

especially with the 2016 elections just around the corner. These findings can be seen in Tables 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Table 6: Respondents' political party and whether or not they are confident that their elected officials are looking out for theirs and their families' best interests

<i>Confident</i>	<i>Political Party</i>		
	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Agree	32.6%	57.9%	48.7%
Disagree	67.4%	42.1%	51.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(43)	(38)	(39)

Table 6 shows that 57.9% of Democrats reported that they were confident that their current elected officials are looking out for them and their family's best interests, whereas only 48.7% of Independents and 32.6% of Republicans agreed. This data shows that my hypothesis was correct as over fifty percent of Republicans and Independents reported low levels of confidence. However my hypothesis was wrong in regards to Democrats as these respondents were more likely to report high levels of confidence in their elected officials.

Table 7: Respondents' political party and whether or not they are confident in their political leaders' ability to make decisions for the American public

<i>Confident</i>	<i>Political Party</i>		
	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Agree	46.5%	63.2%	51.3%
Disagree	53.5%	36.8%	48.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(43)	(38)	(39)

Table 7 shows that 63.2% of Democrats and 51.3% of Independents reported that they were confident in their political leaders' ability to make decisions for the American public, whereas only 46.5% of Republicans agreed. This data shows that my hypothesis was incorrect as Democrats and Independents reported high levels of confidence in their elected officials. However, 53.5% of Republicans reported low levels of confidence in this area.

Table 8: Respondents' political party and whether or not they are confident that their elected officials are doing their jobs to the best of their ability

<i>Confident</i>	<i>Political Party</i>		
	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Agree	51.2%	60.5%	43.6%
Disagree	48.8%	39.5%	56.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(43)	(38)	(39)

Table 8 shows that 60.5% of Democrats and 51.2% of Republicans reported that they were confident that their elected officials were doing their jobs to the best of their ability, whereas only 43.6% of Independents agreed. This data shows that my hypothesis was incorrect as Democrats and Republicans were more likely to report high levels of confidence in their elected officials. My hypothesis was correct however as 56.4% of Independents reported low levels of confidence in their political leaders.

Table 9: Respondents' political party and whether or not they are confident that their elected officials make decisions for the good of the American public and not for the good of their own self interests

<i>Confident</i>	<i>Political Party</i>		
	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Independent</i>
Agree	32.6%	42.1%	33.3%
Disagree	67.4%	57.9%	66.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(43)	(38)	(39)

Table 9 shows that 67.4% of Republicans, 57.9% of Democrats and 66.7% of Independents reported that they are not confident that their elected officials are making decisions for the good of the American public and not for the good of their own self interests. This data shows that my hypothesis was correct as members of all three party groups, Republican, Democrat, and Independent, reported that they are not confident in their elected officials.

Overall, my findings were very interesting as some of my hypotheses held true while others did not. For the most part, Democrats reported higher levels of confidence in their elected officials; looking out for their best interests, their ability to make decisions for the American public, and whether they are doing their jobs to the best of their abilities. However, my hypothesis held true as the majority of respondents in the Republican, Democratic, and Independent Parties reported that they are not confident that their elected officials are making decision for the good of the American public rather than for their own self interests. This

finding echoes research conducted by Gastil that most respondents believe “that ‘most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man’” (2001:1).

The next section details my conclusions.

Conclusion

The results of my research indicate that there is a large majority of college students who report a lack of confidence in their political leaders as well as biases in the media. My hypotheses were not all correct as I expected to find majority of respondents to align themselves with the Democratic Party due in part to attending a liberal institution. My results however showed a fairly even split between the three parties. I believe these results to be correlated to the location of Adams State University. Located in southwestern Colorado, there is a diverse student population. While I expected to find the majority of the respondents to be Democrats, I did not take into consideration the rural location of the university. Residents in rural areas are inclined to exhibit conservative views as most of these individuals tend to be ranchers and small business owners.

Furthermore, my research shows that the views of Independents are equally balanced between those of Republicans and Democrats. In almost every question asked, Independents reported numbers between Republicans and Democrats. For example, when asked to rate their level of happiness towards their political party, 97.4% of Democrats, 89.2% of Independents, and 81.4% of Republicans said they were happy. These results add up to an 8.2% difference between Democrats and Independents, and a 7.8% difference between Independents and Republicans. This finding correlates to the premise of the Independent Party. The Independent

Party was established by individuals who believed that the political parties needed to go back to the intent of the Founding Fathers. This idea substantiates my results as the Independents views were balanced between the other two parties. Over time, the Republican and Democratic Party branched out to different ends of the spectrum and members of the Independent Party share views with both the left and the right.

In summation, my research has shown that there is indeed a lack of confidence in elected officials, predominantly among Independents. As my findings demonstrate, more than half of the students are not confident that their elected officials are looking out for their best interests (53.6%), or that they are making decisions for the good of the American people rather than for the good of their own self-interests (64%). In addition, more than three quarters of students (77.2%) agree that the media is biased.

When looking at members of the two party groups, Republicans and Democrats, show a big difference in levels of confidence towards their elected officials. In almost every question asked, regarding confidence, Democrats reported almost a 10% higher level of confidence towards politicians than did Republicans. I believe this to be due in part to the premise of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party tends to be more accepting in nature than the Republican Party. This is shown by the policies that have been passed from this party such as those involving the rights of females and homosexuals. With this in mind, I believe my research to support this idea as members of the Democratic Party are more accepting of the flaws they may see in their elected officials. These results may also be attributed to the fact that the Democratic Party is currently in Executive Office. The platform of the Independent Party however is one that suggests going back to the original intent of the Founding Fathers which

also implies stepping away from a two party system. For this reason, I hypothesized that Independents would report lower levels of confidence towards their elected officials and my results supported this idea.

Future researchers could expand this study by asking more detailed questions of each party's views. This research can also be expanded by comparing the views of college students from different universities. This would be interesting as the political views of students at a rural university may differ immensely from students attending an urban institution. Additionally, if this research were to be conducted as a longitudinal study, the results may differ if Republicans were to win the 2016 elections. The significance of the findings can also be increased by obtaining a larger sample size.

Bibliography

Baker, Peter. 2014. "A Steady Loss of Confidence." *New York Times* 164 (October): A1-A3.

Gastil, John. 2000. *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy through Deliberate Elections*. CA: University of California Press.

(https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=SH_TSsKpQfoC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=lack+of+confidence+in+U.S.+political+officials&ots=GfFw-hL7_7&sig=9aynlf3lonKZ7fK0QvdOp_ZDzh8#v=onepage&q&f=false).

Ladd, Jonathan. 2010. "The Role of Media Distrust in Partisan Voting." *Political Behavior* 32 (December): 567-585.

Pinkleton, Bruce E., Erica Weintraub Austin, Kristine K. J. Fortman. 1998. "Relationship of Media Use and Political Disaffection to Political Efficacy and Voting Behavior." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 42(1): 34-50. Retrieved November 5, 2015.
(<http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?sid=f587c0f0-3bb7-459e-a37f-398ade91bac0%40sessionmgr4001&vid=11&hid=4202&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=903004&db=a9h>).

Wattenberg, Martin P. 1998. *The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-1996*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Appendix A: Survey

Student Survey

Please DO NOT write your name on this survey. This survey is about college students' views on politics. Please answer these questions as honestly as possible. Check the box that applies to you.

1. I am confident that our current elected officials are looking out for me and my family's best interests.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree

2. I am confident in our political leaders' ability to make decisions for the American public.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree

3. I am confident that our elected officials are doing their jobs to the best of their ability.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree

4. I am confident that our elected officials make decisions for the good of the American public and not for the good of their own self interests.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree

5. I believe that the media is biased towards one political party.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Agree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disagree
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strongly Disagree

Please Continue to Page 2

6. What is your current political party affiliation?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Other/Unsure

7. In the past, have you been a member of a different political party?

- NO
- YES



Which party did you once belong to?							
<input type="checkbox"/>	Republican	<input type="checkbox"/>	Democrat	<input type="checkbox"/>	Independent	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other

8. Are you currently happy with your political party?

- Very Happy
- Somewhat Happy
- Somewhat Unhappy
- Very Unhappy

9. What is your race? (Please check the ONE that you most identify with.)

- African American/Black
- Hispanic/Latino
- Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Other_____

10. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other

11. What is your age?_____

Thank you again for taking the time to answer these questions!

Appendix B: Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research project of the Sociological Research Methods class at Adams State University. The research is being conducted in order to investigate students' political views.

I understand that I am being asked to fill out a survey that will take about 10 minutes, and that I can stop filling it out at any time without prejudice. I understand that the information I provide will be used for research purposes only, and that my name will not be identified anywhere in the research. I also understand that the data will be stored in the lead researcher's office and destroyed upon completion of the project.

The researcher has explained the purpose of the research fully. I understand that I can ask the researcher any additional questions I may have regarding the survey, and that a debriefing session will be provided upon request. I also understand that there are minimal risks involved; no more than one experiences in everyday life. Finally, I understand that should I be interested in reading the results of the research, I can request it from the researcher, or from Professor Grace E. Young MCD 380, phone 587-7878, email: geyoung@adams.edu, and it will be provided.

Signature of Participant

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date