

# Whose Party is It?: Lame Ducks, Presidential Candidates, and Evaluations of the Party

American Politics Research  
2022, Vol. 50(4) 539–544  
© The Author(s) 2022  
Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/1532673X221076435  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/apr](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/apr)



Joel Sievert<sup>1</sup>  and Victor Hinojosa<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Presidents and presidential candidates serve as an important source cue for the mass public's attitudes toward and evaluations of the political parties. Our study evaluates these dynamics during the transition from a lame duck president, Barack Obama, to a new party standard-bearer, Hillary Clinton. Our analysis takes advantage of the fact that the 2014 and 2016 Cooperative Election Study (CES) and the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) surveys asked respondents to evaluate both Obama, Clinton, and the Democratic Party. These data allow us to examine whether the transition from Obama to Clinton changed the primary referent for public attitudes toward the Democratic Party. Our results provide mixed evidence about a change in the relative importance of attitudes toward Clinton and Obama when the former became the nominee, and the latter was a lame duck. While the public's view of the connection between Obama and Democratic Party's ideological profile remained constant across time, respondents did update their affective assessments of the party in the face of a new party leader once Clinton was the nominee.

## Keywords

presidents, presidential candidates, political parties, elections, nationalization

Presidents and presidential candidates are an important source cue for the public's attitudes toward the political parties (Jacobson, 2019; Nicholson, 2012). Presidential politics can influence both beliefs about the party's ideological positions (Brasher, 2009; Dancy et al., 2019; Jacobson, 2019) and partisan polarization (Nicholson, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Smidt 2020). Presidential politics is also closely linked with vote choice and election outcomes in both federal- and state-level contests (Sievert & McKee, 2019). Contemporary American party politics can therefore be viewed as increasingly president centric.

Our study contributes to research on president-party linkages by examining the transition between a lame duck president, Barack Obama, and a new party standard-bearer, Hillary Clinton. Our analysis uses the 2014 and 2016 Cooperative Election Studies (CES) and the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES). Each of these surveys asked respondents to evaluate Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and the Democratic Party. The inclusion of these questions across survey years allows us to compare the relative weight given to attitudes toward Obama and Clinton over time. According to prior research, the public's attitudes toward the Democratic Party should be more strongly correlated with ratings of Clinton when she is the nominee, while the relationship between views of Obama and the party should weaken over time.

Our study provides mixed support for this expectation. We find evidence of this dynamic when we examine affective evaluations toward the Democratic Party, but not for ideological ratings. We do, however, find that Independents are more likely than committed partisans to update their beliefs about the party's ideological profile to account for a new presidential nominee.

## Presidential Pulse of Party Politics

Presidential politics can influence the public's attitudes toward the parties along two dimensions. First, evaluations of a party's ideological positions and policy reputations are informed by presidential politics (Brasher, 2009; Dancy et al., 2019; Jacobson, 2019; Nicholson, 2012). The positions adopted by a candidate and a president's governing decisions can both influence the party brand. Both Obama's and Clinton's public rhetoric during this period could influence the Democratic Party's ideological reputation. In his second

<sup>1</sup>Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Joel Sievert, Texas Tech University, 113 Holden Hall, Lubbock, TX 79409, USA.

Email: [joel.sievert@ttu.edu](mailto:joel.sievert@ttu.edu)

term, Obama focused more on issues—LGBT rights, gun control, and economic inequality—that pushed the party's stance in a more liberal direction (Azari, 2019). Clinton's 2016 campaign embraced her role as the first female presidential nominee, which was a marked shift from her campaign strategy in 2008 (Sides et al., 2019) and reinforced the Democratic Party's position on gender issues.

Second, presidential politics can shape the public's affect toward the parties. Jacobson (2019) found a robust relationship between feeling thermometer ratings of the president and his political party. McLaughlin et al. (2020) find that voters' emotional responses to presidential candidates are correlated with their affect toward the parties. The affective linkage between presidents, candidates, and their parties was particularly pronounced during this period. Obama contended with larger partisan divisions in public opinion toward his presidency than any of his predecessors (Donovan et al., 2020; Tesler, 2016). Similarly, Clinton was a polarizing figure (McThomas & Tesler, 2016), and there were large partisan gaps in attitudes toward her 2016 candidacy (Sides et al., 2019).

### Lame Ducks, Presidential Candidates, and the Party

Our primary theoretical and empirical interest is the connection between presidential politics and political parties during a transition in party leadership. According to Jacobson (2019, 9) when "a president's second term draws to a close...the focus of partisan evaluations will begin to shift to the party's new nominee." Jacobson reports evidence from both the 2004 and 2008 presidential nominations to support this proposition (14–17). These findings suggest that the correlation between respondents' perceptions of Obama and the Democratic Party should be strongest prior to the nomination of a new Democratic nominee but should weaken by 2016 when he was a lame duck. We would expect to find the inverse pattern for Clinton.

Several factors may condition the hypothesized relationship. First, partisanship can result in more stable evaluations over time (Donovan et al., 2020; Sievert & Williamson, 2021). We would therefore expect self-identified Independents to be the main group that updates their attitudes toward a party once it selects a new presidential nominee. Conversely, Democratic and Republican identifiers should have relatively stable attitudes even after a new nominee is selected.

Next, the historical nature of both Obama's presidency and Clinton's nomination increased the importance of race and gender, respectively, for public opinion about presidential politics (McThomas & Tesler, 2016; Siders et al., 2019; Stout & Le, 2017; Tesler, 2016).<sup>1</sup> These findings suggest two implications for our analysis. First, there should be a consistent racial gap in attitudes toward Obama and Clinton among Black respondents that does not diminish over time (Stout & Le, 2017). Race, like partisanship, may

therefore yield greater stability in evaluations across time. Second, by making gender more central to her campaign rhetoric in 2016, Clinton may change how respondent gender shaped views about her connection with the Democratic Party.

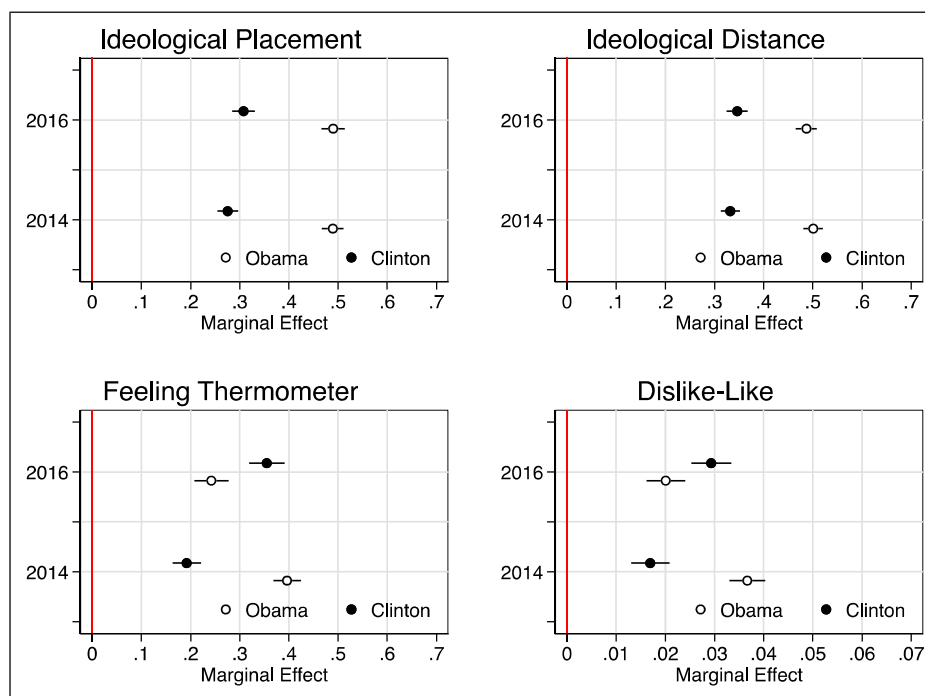
### Data

For this study, we use both the CES and ANES to explore the connection between evaluations of the president, presidential candidates, and their respective political party. The 2014 and 2016 CES surveys asked respondents their perceptions of Obama's, Clinton's, and the Democratic Party's ideological positions on the standard seven-point liberal-to-conservative scale, which ranges from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative). We also used answers to these questions to construct a measure of perceived ideological distance, which takes values from 0 (same ideological position) to 6 (opposite ends of the ideological scale). The 2012 and 2016 ANES surveys allow us to examine affective evaluations because respondents were asked to rate Obama, Clinton, and the Democratic Party on a feeling thermometer scale. These scores can take any value from 0 (least favorable) to 100 (most favorable) with 50 representing mixed feelings. We also use the respondents rating of the Democratic Party on the Dislike-Like scale, which ranges from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like), as an outcome measure.<sup>2</sup>

A respondent's evaluation of the political party serves as our outcome variable for each regression model while the assessments of Clinton and Obama are the main predictors. We allow the effect of evaluations of Obama and Clinton to vary over time by interacting each covariate with an indicator for survey year. If the marginal effect of attitudes toward Obama (Clinton) will be greater (weaker) in the first time-period and weakened (strengthened) in 2016, that would be evidence in support of the hypothesized relationship. Our regression models also include several control variables. First, we treat partisanship as a nominal variable where the categories are Independent, Democrat, and Republican. The only respondents coded as Independents are those who did not indicate that they leaned toward one of the major parties. We also control for a respondent's gender and whether the respondent was White or Black.

### Findings

For each of the analyses reported, we estimated OLS regression models where the outcomes are assessments of the Democratic Party and our main quantities of interest are interactions between our main predictors, evaluations of Obama and Clinton, and an indicator for the survey year. For each model, we calculated the marginal effects of attitudes toward Obama and Clinton by survey year. Since our primary



**Figure 1.** Marginal Effect of Obama and Clinton Evaluations on Democratic Party Evaluations by Survey Year. Note: The white dots denote the marginal effect of Obama evaluations, while the black dots represent the marginal effect of Clinton evaluation. The lines correspond to 90% confidence intervals.

interest is whether the relative weight given to attitudes toward Obama and Clinton changes across time, we focus solely on the marginal effects, but the full model results are available in the [Supplemental material](#).<sup>3</sup>

The top two panels of [Figure 1](#) present the marginal effects for ideological placement and distance.<sup>4</sup> The marginal effect for evaluations of Obama on the ideological placement of the Democratic Party is the same for both 2014 and 2016—0.49 and 0.49. We find a slight increase in the estimated effect for Clinton, 0.28 and 0.31, respectively, but these changes are not statistically or substantively significant. Our results for ideological distance measure are similar. The marginal effect for evaluations of Obama is substantively the same across both survey years—0.50 and 0.49, respectively—and there is essentially no change in the estimates for Clinton across the survey years—0.33 and 0.35. In short, the connection between perceptions of the ideological profile for Obama, Clinton, and the Democratic Party are constant across the two periods.

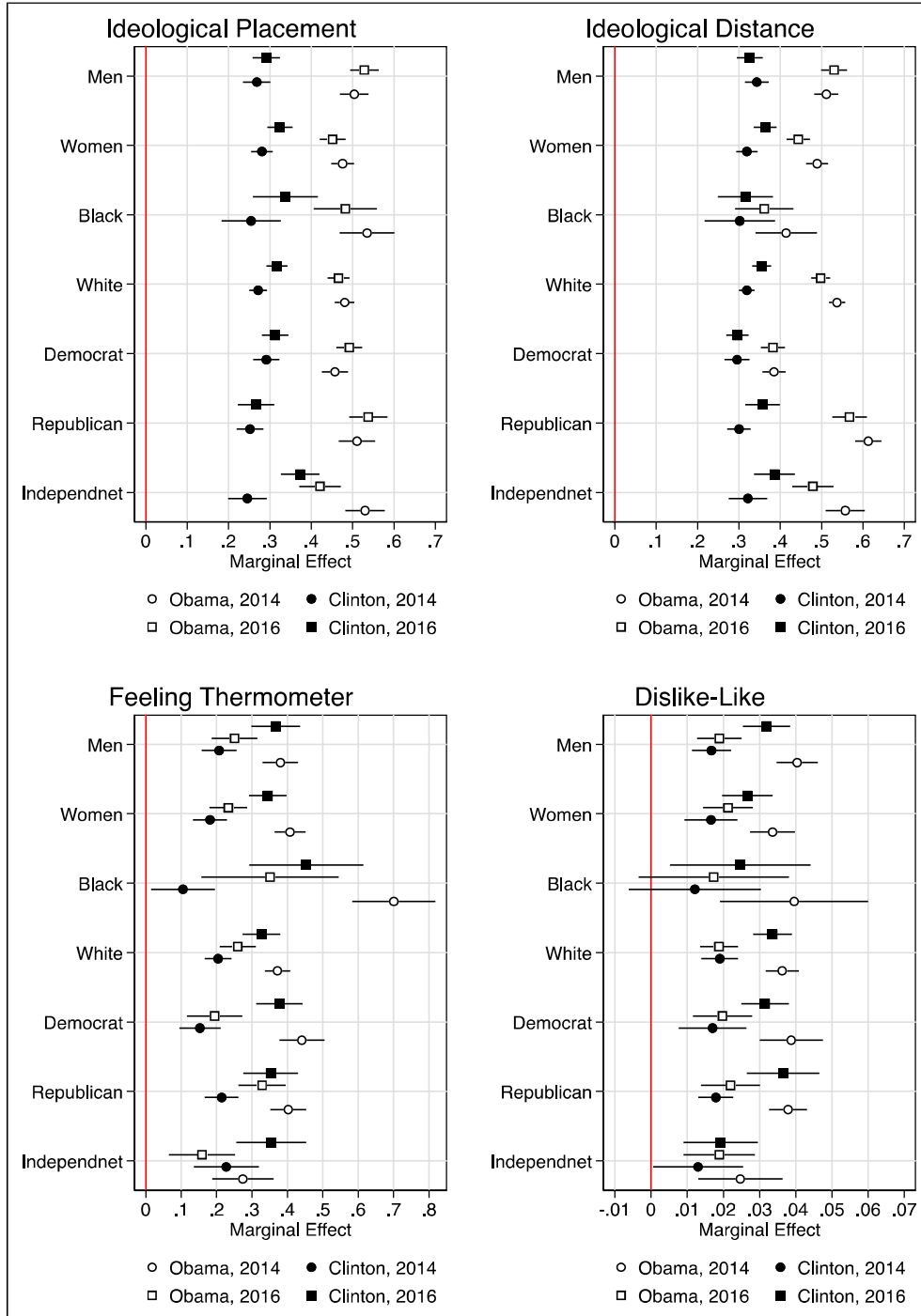
The bottom panels of [Figure 1](#) present the marginal effects for the feeling thermometer and dislike-like scales.<sup>5</sup> For these measures, we do find the expected change over time. In 2012, the coefficient for ratings of Obama is roughly double the magnitude of the estimate for Clinton's ratings, 0.40 and 0.19. By 2016, the pattern reverses with the estimate for Clinton now being larger, 0.24 compared to 0.35. Substantively, this means that a 10-point change in Obama's thermometer score had a nearly two-point *weaker* effect in 2016 as compared to

2014, while the same change in evaluations of Clinton would yield a 1.5-point *larger* effect. We find similar results for the dislike-like scale. In 2012, the estimate for Obama was well over two times larger than the marginal effect for Clinton, 0.037 and 0.017, but the pattern reverses in 2016.

As noted earlier, we expect that our results may vary by subgroup. We therefore estimated separate models by subgroup for each of our outcome measures.<sup>6</sup> For these models, the relevant subgroups include partisanship, race, and gender. In [Figure 2](#), we report the marginal effects for Clinton and Obama by survey year for each of these models, and we are once again interested in changes in the marginal effect for Obama (white dots and squares) and Clinton (black dots and squares). Given the large number of model estimates reported in [Figure 2](#), we do not discuss the full set of results, but instead focus on the key takeaways.

First, with respect to the ideological measures, Independents are the only subgroup that evidences any notable differences across time. The marginal effect for Obama and Clinton begins to converge in 2016 after being much more distant in 2014 for both ideological placement and distance. Conversely, both Democrats and Republicans exhibit the same relative stability observed in [Figure 1](#). There are two additional groups with small changes across survey years, Women and Black respondents, but these changes are not substantively meaningful.

Second, most subgroups exhibit the same across time changes in affective attitudes as those depicted in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 2.** Marginal Effect of Obama and Clinton Evaluations on Democratic Party Evaluations by Respondent Subgroup and Survey Year. Note: The white dots (squares) denote the marginal effect of Obama evaluations, while the black dots (squares) represent the marginal effect of Clinton evaluation. The lines correspond to 90% confidence intervals.

There are, however, more notable changes in affective evaluations that can be observed amongst Black respondents. In the feeling thermometer model, the marginal effect of Obama’s feeling thermometer score was 0.70 in 2012 and drops to 0.35 in 2016. Clinton’s scores have the opposite effect as the marginal effect increases from 0.10 in 2012 to

0.45 in 2016. For the dislike-like scale, the marginal effect for attitudes toward Obama was only significant in 2012, while for Clinton, the estimate was only significant in 2016. These findings run counter to the expectation that there should be a consistent racial gap in attitudes toward Obama and Clinton.

## Conclusion

Overall, we find mixed evidence regarding the connection between presidential politics and evaluations of the Democratic Party during a period of leadership change. We find evidence of stability over time with respect to assessments of the Democrat's ideological profile. In both periods, a respondent's belief about Obama's ideological position is more strongly correlated with evaluations of the party than assessments of Clinton. Self-identified Independents are one notable exception to this pattern. While partisans do not appear to update their attitudes toward the party, an Independent's assessment of the Democratic Party's ideological reputation does, on average, respond to the selection of a new presidential nominee. Affective evaluations of the Democratic Party do, however, behave as expected. While affect toward Obama was strongly correlated with evaluations of the Democratic Party in 2012, respondents were more likely to link their feelings about Clinton with the party once she was the nominee.

One implication of these findings is that the public's evaluations of a party's ideological brand and affect toward the party respond differently during periods of party leadership change. With respect to party ideology, an elected president exerts greater influence over the party brand than a presidential nominee who lacks a record of governance. Unlike ideological issues though, the public is quick to update its affective assessments of the party in the face of a new party leader once a nominee is selected and the sitting president is a lame duck.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Joel Sievert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7937-7024>

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. While prior research finds that racial and gender attitudes can help to explain evaluations of Obama and Clinton, the ANES and CES do not include the same questions we would need to construct the relevant measures in both surveys. We therefore opted to use the more parsimonious demographic measures since they are available across both surveys.

2. Although the 2012 and 2016 ANES surveys asked respondents to place the parties and presidential candidates on this same Dislike-Like scale, they were not asked to evaluate either Clinton in 2012 or Obama in 2016. We therefore cannot use these questions as predictors in our analysis, but instead rely on the feeling thermometer scores.
3. Given the potential for negligible effects, we follow the recommendation provided by Rainey (2014), and employ 90% confident intervals to argue against meaningful effects.
4. One potential concern might be that these results are driven by a high correlation between attitudes toward Obama and Clinton. We therefore estimated separate regression models, which are reported in the Supplemental material, for Obama and Clinton. Our substantive conclusions do not change with these alternative specifications.
5. We once again estimated separate regression models, which are reported in the Supplemental material, for Obama and Clinton. Our substantive conclusions do not change with these alternative specifications.
6. In addition to our main predictors of interest, we also include the other relevant control variables for these subgroup-specific models. For example, in the models that examine partisans separately, we control for gender and race.

## References

- Azari, Julia (2019). Party foul: How obama made partisan, not party, politics in a polarized environment. In Bert A. Rockman & Andrew Rudalevige (Eds), *The Obama Legacy*. University Press of Kansas.
- Brasher, H. (2009). "The dynamic character of political party evaluations". *Party Politics*, 15(1), 69–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068808097891>
- Dancey, L., Tarpey, M., & Woon, J. (2019). The macro-dynamics of partisan advantage. *Political Research Quarterly*, 72(2), 450–459. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918793231>
- Donovan, K., Kellstedt, P. M., Key, E. M., & Lebo, M. J. (2020). Motivated reasoning, public opinion, and presidential approval. *Political Behavior*, 42(4), 1201–1221. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09539-8>
- Jacobson, G C (2019). *Presidents and parties in the public mind*. University of Chicago Press.
- McLaughlin, B., Holland, D., Thompson, B. A., & Koenig, A. (2020). Emotions and affective polarization: How enthusiasm and anxiety about presidential candidates affect intraparty Attitudes. *American Politics Research*, 48(2), 308–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x19891423>
- McThomas, M, & Tesler, M (2016). The growing influence of gender attitudes on public support for hillary Clinton, 2008–2012. *Politics & Gender*, 12(1), 28–49. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x15000562>
- Nicholson, SP (2012). Polarizing cues. *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(1), 52–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2011.00541.x>

- Rainey, C. (2014). Arguing for a negligible effect. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4), 1083–1091. doi: [10.1111/ajps.12102](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12102).
- Sides, J, Tesler, M, & Lynn, V (2019). *Identity crisis*. Princeton University Press.
- Sievert, J., & McKee, S. C. (2019). Nationalization in U.S. Senate and gubernatorial elections. *American Politics Research*, 47(5), 1055–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x18792694>
- Sievert, J, & Williamson, R D. (2021). Elections, competition, and constituent evaluations of US senators. *Electoral Studies*, 75(1), 102424. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102424>
- Stout, C. T., & Le, D. (2017). Traiting places: race and the evaluation of black and white presidential candidates. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 47(2), 311–335. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12370>
- Smidt, CD. (2020). A uniter and a divider: American presidential campaigns and partisan perceptions of the national economy.

*American Politics Research*, 48(2), 329–340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x19875712>

Tesler, Michael (2016). *Post-racial or most-racial?* University of Chicago Press.

### Author Biographies

**Joel Sievert** is an associate professor of Political Science at Texas Tech University. Sievert studies congressional politics and elections, the presidency, and political parties. He has published articles in journals such *Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, and a co-authored book, *Electoral Incentives In Congress* (University of Michigan Press 2018).

**Victor Hinojosa** is an instructor of government at Western Texas College. Hinojosa is interested in political parties and third party movements.