Are The Parties' Messages Changing Americans' Political Conceptualization?

Matt Grossmann and Martin Wattenberg

Post-convention period is a good time to try to understand whether party messages match voters' views of the parties and candidates. Implications for elite-led models of politics (do the parties really lead the voters, as we assume) and practical impacts on how much the parties can change impressions with their messages.

Sorry we did not succeed in writing a paper. But we do have our results and have attached the slides and welcome any reactions that come to mind.

Party Messages and Voter Views

Do Voters' Images of the Parties Come From Their Messages?

Grossmann & Hopkins: Parties Offer Different Messages & Voters Hold Different Views of Each Party

Wattenberg: Voters are Conceptualizing Politics More Ideologically and Changing Responses Over Time to Match Content of Campaigns

Joining Forces: Do the Parties' Messages in Each Year Match What Voters Say They Like and Dislike About Them?

Voters develop images of the party: what issues or positions do they have? what groups do they represent? what principles do they stand for?
Our question: do those images come from the parties?

This is a merger of two projects. With Dave, I have tracked the messages that each party delivers in presidential campaigns and the views of each party's voters, finding some consistent differences.

Marty has tracked voter views over time in the ANES likes & dislikes questions, finding real change: voters are more likely to mention ideological principles and policies and some of that may match what the parties are saying, like emphasizing social issues

So we joined forces to figure out if voters' views of the party match what the parties say in each election

Party Messages

1. Party Platforms

2. Convention Nomination Acceptance Speeches

3. First Presidential Debate Answers

Hand Coded & Averaged by Year, 1972-2016

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We have matched data for each party from 1972 to 2016, but that's still only 24 total party-years.

For the party message data, we use our Asymmetric Politics coding scheme, slightly modified to match Marty's.

We code party platform quasi-sentences (oops – guess that will have missing data for 2020), convention nomination acceptance speech paragraphs, and the presidential candidates' answers from the first presidential debate. Here, we use an average of the three by year (except first two in 1972)

Voter Views

Mentions in ANES Likes or Dislikes about the Party or Candidate

Matching Codes Across Years, 1972-2016

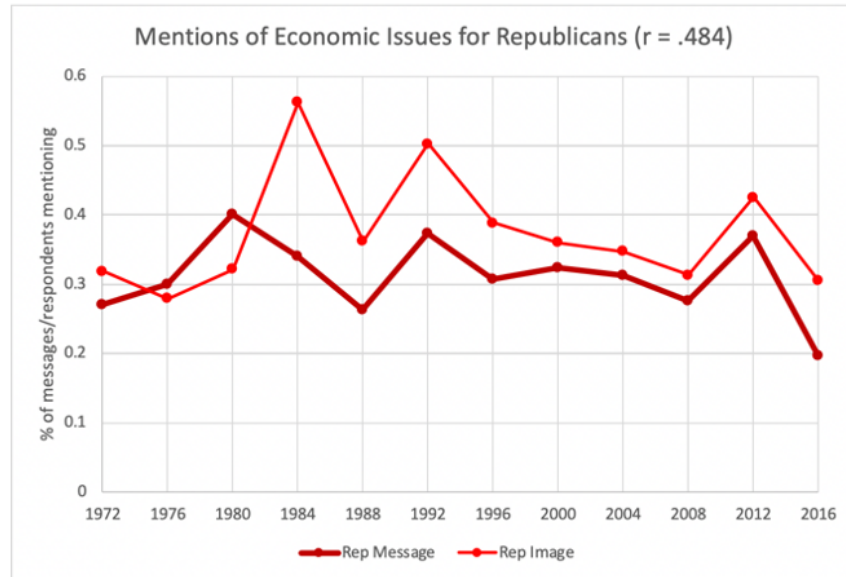Issue Areas Covered: Economic, Social, and Foreign

Statements of Philosophy or Group Benefits

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We use five proportions for each party in each year: the average proportion of sentences, paragraphs, and answers that cover economic issues, social issues, and foreign issues and the proportion that mention philosophical principles or labels and social group benefits.

We then do the same for citizens' views of each party and presidential candidate for each year: the proportion mentioning each issue category and the proportion mentioning philosophy or group benefits across the likes and dislikes of each side. We are not looking at Converse's levels of conceptualization coding here. Marty coded specific responses from each respondent so they could have both philosophy and group benefits and issue areas.

The first results allow you to see what this looks like. Here we compare the proportion of Republican party messages that reference economic issues in each year with the proportion of citizens' likes and dislikes about the party and candidate that mention economic issues.

Voters are usually slightly more likely to mention economic issues than the party, but they track reasonably well in recent years. 1992 and 2012 were unsurprisingly more economic focused.
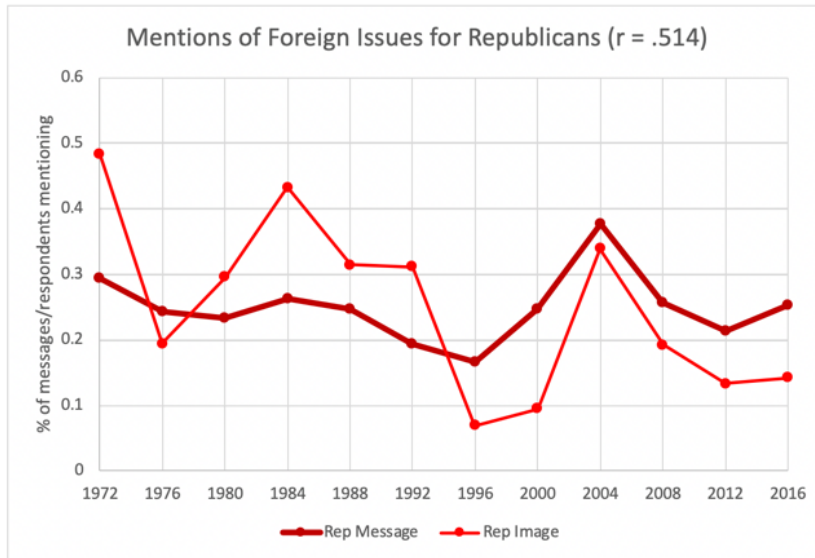
Dems' Economic Emphasis Matches Voters

Mentions of Economic Issues for Democrats (r = .658)
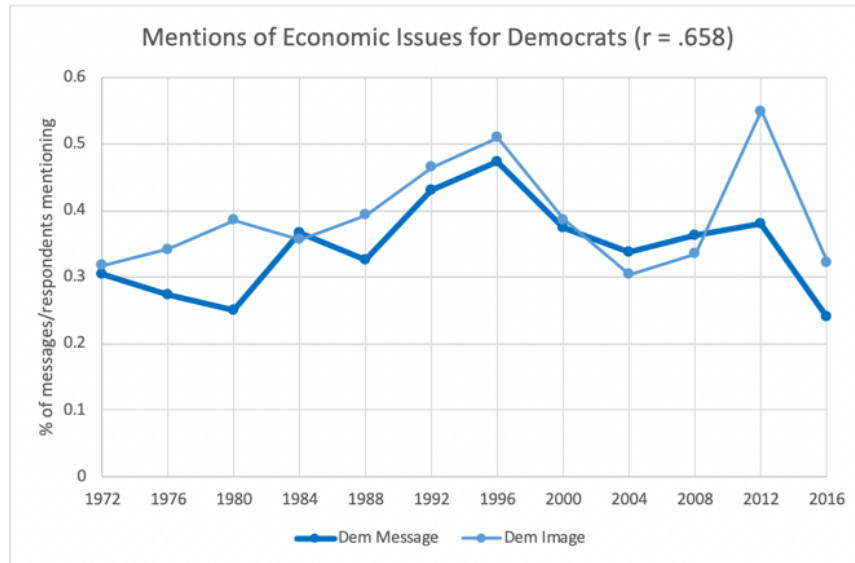
Let's look at the Democrats' economic messages and voters' views of them. They also track closely. The Democratic economic message was more prominent than the Republicans in 1996, for example, and voters may have noticed. Interestingly, economic messages and voters' views were down for both parties in 2016.
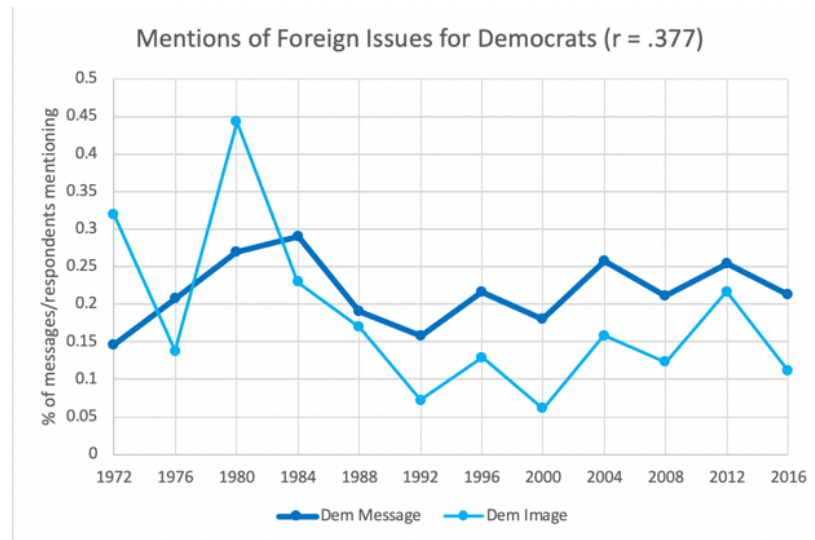
Reps' Foreign Emphasis Matches Voters

Mentions of Foreign Issues for Republicans (r = .514)

Now let's look at foreign issue emphasis. They track reasonably well for Republicans, with messages and voters' images high in 2004. Republicans may have successfully emphasized a winning issue.
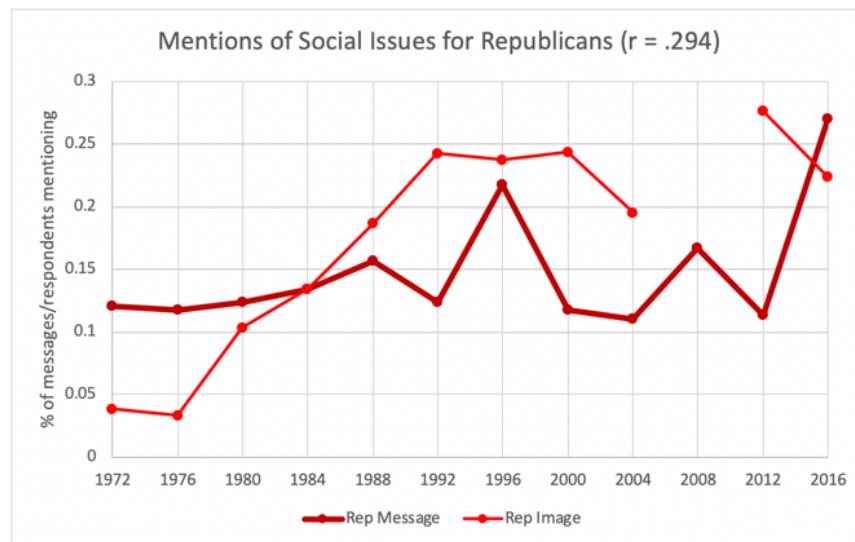
Democrats also track reasonably well in recent years, with a pendulum pattern, but note that there is lower emphasis overall.

On social issues, we have missing data for 2008. Marty coded the 2012 and 2016 responses according to the old coding scheme, but the 2008 coding was done by ANES using a new scheme that didn't match up on this dimension.

Here, we see some correspondence, but not everything lined up. The Republican message emphasized more social issues in 2016, but voters did not.

Parties & Voters Match a Bit on Social Issues

Mentions of Social Issues for Democrats (r = .334)
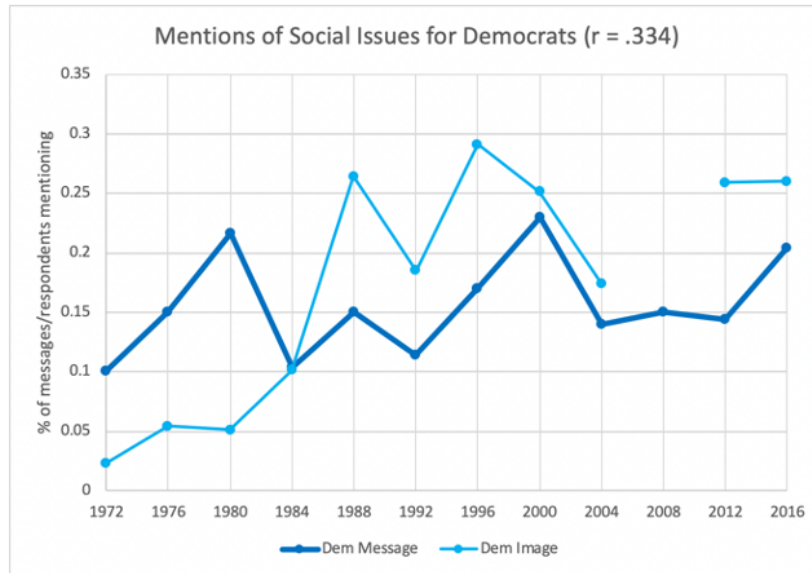
For both Democrats and Republicans, there is a gradual increase over time in social issue mentions for voters that is not as clear in their messaging, but there is moderate correspondence.

But Several Potential Explanations

1. Both Parties and Voters are Responding to Real-World Issues and Events Like Recessions and Wars

2. Parties are Anticipating Voter Interests and Adapting

3. Voters are Repeating Back What Parties Emphasized But Not Necessarily Updating Their Views

4. Voters are Creating Images of the Parties to Match Their Messages

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So for issues, there is at least some correspondence. But that could reflect mechanisms other than voters responding to parties' messages. First, parties and voters could both be responding to the same real-world events: with economics mentioned more in recessions and foreign issues mentioned more in wars.

Second, parties could be anticipating voter interests, by for example responding to polls and focus groups or media coverage, rather than leading them.

Or voters could be mechanically repeating back party messages without necessarily changing their more-stable images of each party

But we can't rule out the possibility that parties can lead and change voters' impressions each year through their emphasis.
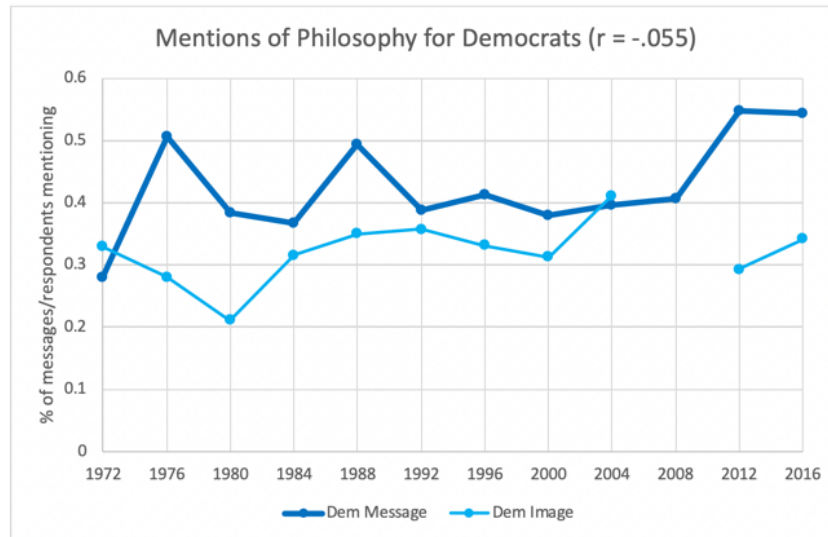
Reps Are More Philosophical than Voters

Mentions of Philosophy for Republicans (r = .471)
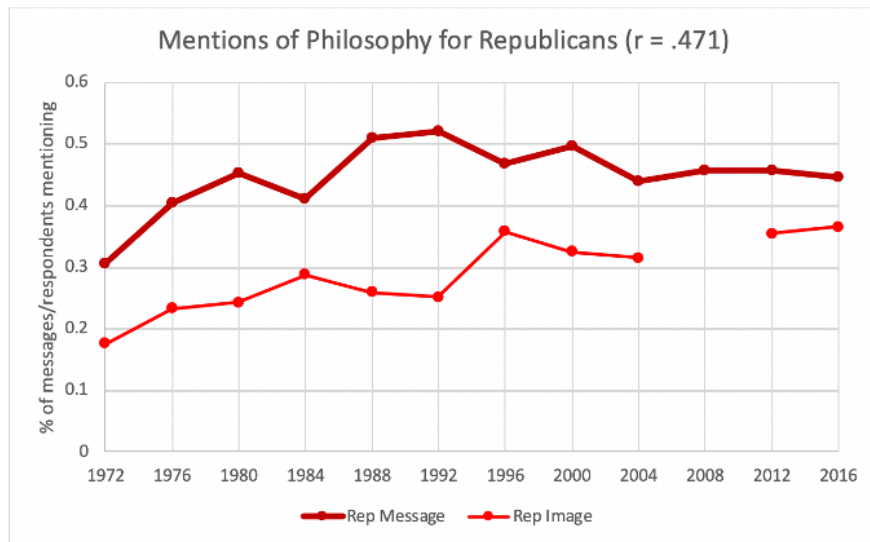
The story gets more complicated when it comes to their emphasis on philosophical principles. We again had to skip 2008 for coding differences. For Republicans, there is moderate correspondence with both increasing. But the Republican message is consistently more based on ideological ideas and labels than voters' views of them. They may be pitching at too high a level to break through.

Dems are Unaligned with Voters on Philosophy

Mentions of Philosophy for Democrats (r = -.055)

For Democrats, there is no correspondence at all. The party usually mentions more philosophy than voters talking about them, but voters don't register changes like the increased philosophical rhetoric in 2012 and 2016, whether it is against Republicans or in favor of their own views.

Reps are Unaligned with Voters on Groups

Mentions of Group Benefits for Republicans (r = -.236)
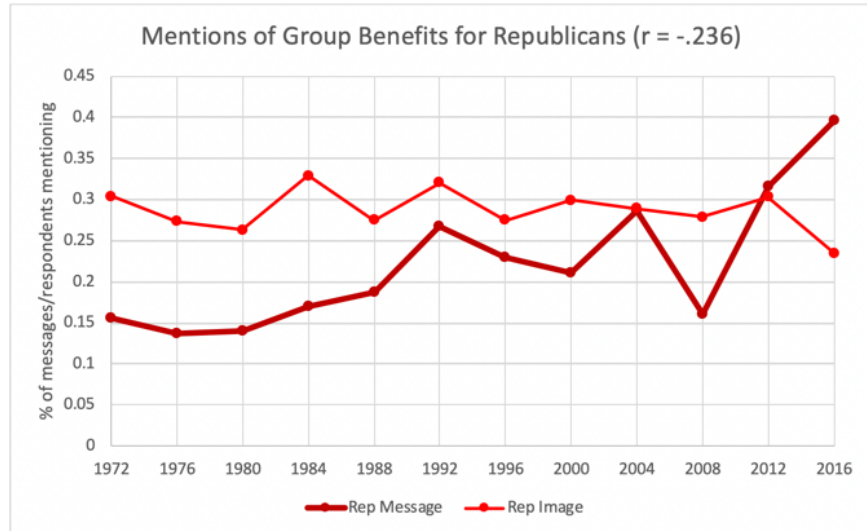
For mentions of group benefits, there is no correspondence for Republicans. Voters usually mention groups more often and they are not registering Republicans' increase, including in 2016. Perhaps because Republicans are regularly seen by some voters as bad for some groups, like the poor and minorities.
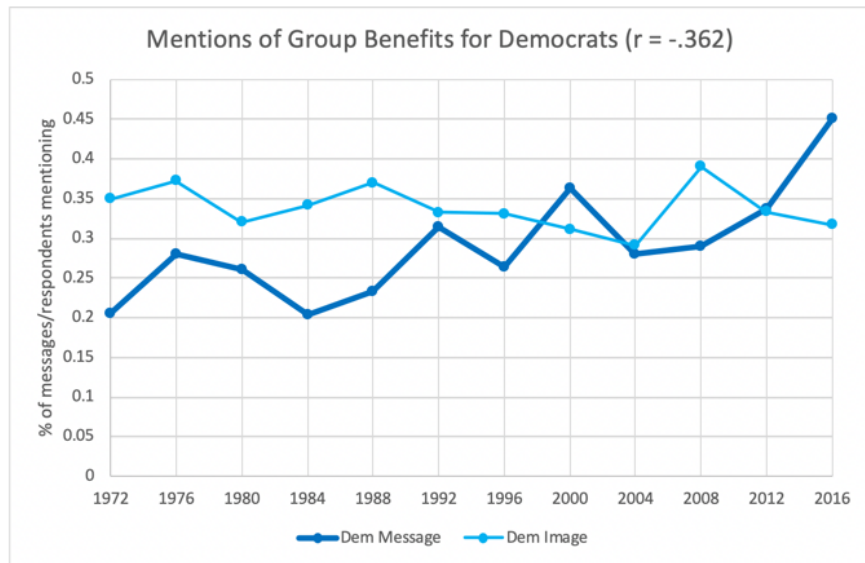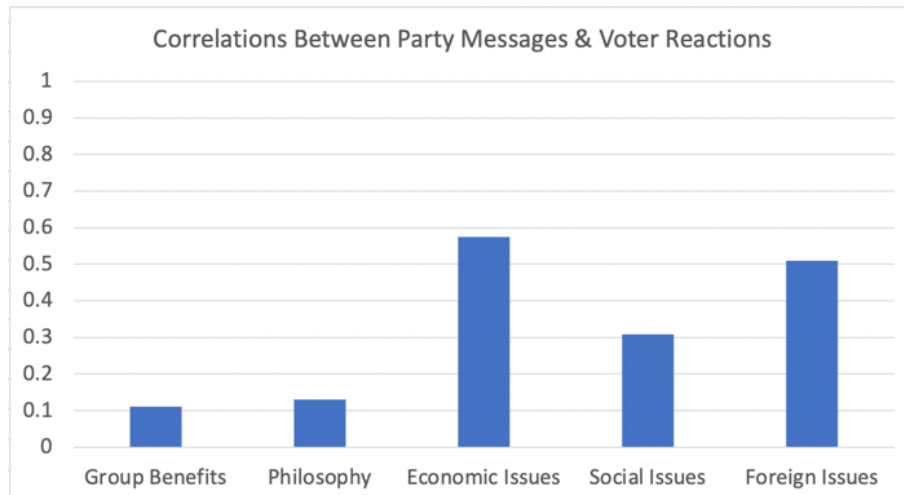
For Democrats, there is again no correspondence and voters don't recognize the increase in group rhetoric, including in 2016.

If you put all 24 cases together, which also enables an accounting for overall party differences, there is a moderate relationship for issue emphasis and almost no relationship for group benefits of philosophy.

Voters' Views vs. Partisans' Views

Perhaps Republican(Democratic) Voters are Responding More to Republican(Democratic) Messages about Both Parties?

Dividing Voters by Their Party vs. The Party They Like/Dislike Does Not Change Much

Or Perhaps Voters in Each Party Have a Distinct View, Regardless of Party Messages?
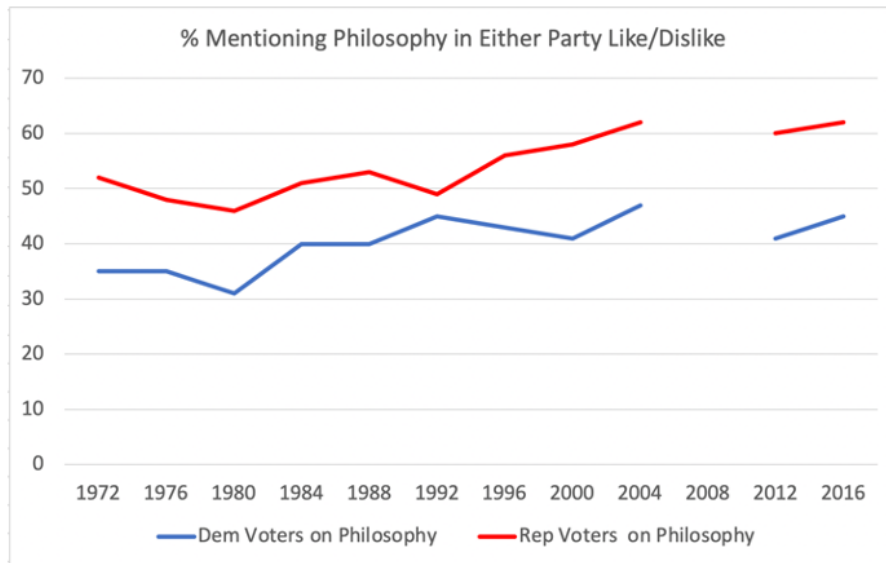
We wondered why and thought perhaps voters in each party are only responding to their own party's messages about both parties, rather than all voters responding to each party's message. For example, mostly Republicans watched the RNC and mostly Democrats watched the DNC.

So we re-did the analysis dividing voters by their own partisanship rather than the party they are asked about. But that really did not change much and overall the matches were less strong.

But there is one other possibility that I am unsurprisingly partial to: perhaps voters in each party have somewhat distinct views of politics, regardless of the party messages they hear.
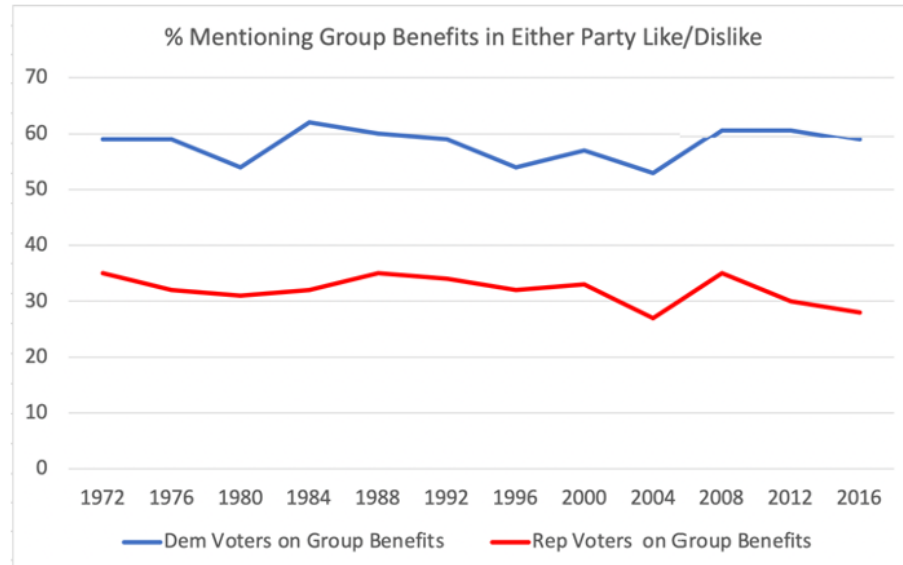
We do see some evidence of this long-term asymmetry. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to mention philosophy in their answers about both parties. The rate is increasing in both parties, but not altering the difference much.

Dem Voters Always Mention More Groups

% Mentioning Group Benefits in Either Party Like/Dislike

Dem Voters on Group Benefits — Rep Voters on Group Benefits

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And the pattern is even starker for group benefits. Democrats are much more likely to mention group benefits in their likes and dislikes, regardless of party messaging. And here there is not clear trend over time. So this could be explained in part by persistent differences in party messaging that cumulate, but it does not seem to be responsive to election year change. And if anything, both parties are emphasizing groups more to little effect. One possibility is that the groups mentioned are changing, mostly from class to adding race and gender, perhaps requiring more laundry list emphasis without changing voters' conceptualization.

Conclusions

The Issue Content of Voters' Views of the Parties Matches The Parties' Messages Reasonably Well

But That Leaves Multiple Potential Explanations

Voters' Conceptualization of Politics as About Social Group Conflict or Philosophical Conflict Does Not Match Their Changing Messages Well

Instead, Each Party's Voters Have Different Tendencies

Parties' Messages Don't Explain Increasing Conceptualization

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Overall, the issue content of parties' messages matches voters' views of the party fairly well but we can't be confident that is because the voters are following the parties.

For philosophy vs. groups, there is a longstanding difference in each parties' voters' emphasis, but no responsiveness to changes in parties messages.

So we can't conclude that parties are responsible for the increase in philosophical conceptualization, leaving open the option that it is due to factors like increasing education levels or media coverage instead.

For parties, this means it may be easier to change which issues are at the forefront of voters' minds than changing how they think about political choices.