

# SPECIAL ISSUE

## Extreme Recall: Which Politicians Come to Mind?

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### Abstract

How do people understand parties? Using data from two original surveys fielded nearly a decade apart, we shed light on people’s mental images of the parties. In the surveys, we asked which politicians immediately come to mind when you think about Republicans (Democrats). People’s mental images of parties are a narrow gallery of few prominent national politicians. Nearly 40% of the people struggle to list three politicians. Further, 44% of the mentions are of the last three presidents. People are also likelier to list more extreme politicians. To shed light on the source of these biases, we analyze a decade’s worth of national television news data. We find that media coverage patterns of politicians are similar to those in the survey data.

**Keywords:** political parties, voters, ideology, recall

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People primarily understand parties in terms of ideology (Noel 2014; Goggin, Henderson and Theodoridis 2020), social groups (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004; Ahler and Sood 2018; 2023), and as part of their social identity (Greene 1999; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). But these understandings are generally mediated. For instance, people rarely learn about the party’s ideology by reading the party’s manifesto. Instead, they likely infer it from the positions espoused by the political leaders covered in the news media. Hence, when the leaders change, people’s understanding of what the party stands for changes (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu 2019; Bittner 2011). By the same token, Winter (2010) shows a correlation between people’s mental images of the party (harking back to Lippmann (1922)) and what percentage of the party’s politicians are female. We shed light on the potential role of people covered in the media in shaping people’s perceptions by leveraging original survey data and a large media corpus.

We ask two different samples, nearly a decade apart, which politicians come to mind when they think about the two major parties. A few national politicians frequently covered in the news dominate the imagination. In the January 2024 Lucid survey, for instance, 44% of the mentions are to Donald Trump, Joseph Biden, and Barack Obama, with Donald Trump alone making up almost one-fifth of the mentions. Only one of each party’s top ten most frequently recalled politicians is not a recent national political office holder—Gavin Newsom for the Democrats and Ron DeSantis for the Republicans; both are active in national politics. Even if you include Governor Nikki Haley and Governor Ron DeSantis, the percentage of mentions of state or local politicians is no more than 12%. Minus them, it is less than 3%. Worryingly, 40% of people cannot list a single state or local politician, even when we explicitly ask them to list state or local politicians who come to mind. The data are consistent with and may indeed underlie the nationalization of politics (Hopkins 2018). To shed light on the role of media in the patterns we see, we analyze a decade’s worth of television news media data that underlies Kim, Lelkes and McCrain (2022). The data are strongly suggestive. The

media data show the same pattern—the same few national politicians who come to people’s minds dominate the news coverage.

The findings have important implications for politics. First, the dominance of contemporary national politicians, especially presidents, in people’s imagination and the media likely constrains state parties from carving out unique ideological positions optimal for their constituencies. The description of American parties as “hundred party systems” ([Brinkley, Polsby and Sullivan 1997](#)) seems archaic, with data more consistent with dramatic nationalization ([Hopkins 2018](#)). Second, people may hold national politicians responsible for policies and political outcomes not in their control. Third, party reputations are in the hands of a few national politicians. When combined with research on how elites shape people’s understanding of parties ([Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu 2019](#); [Bittner 2011](#)) and polarization ([Ploger 2024](#)), the data suggest enormous power in changing how people think about the parties in the hands of a few politicians. Lastly, and relatedly, the data point to the limits of the theory that presents national parties at the center of politics in the US ([Bawn et al. 2012](#)).

## Which Politicians Come to Mind?

Which politicians come to mind depends primarily on relevance and availability. One criterion for relevance is importance. The more important you think a political office is, the more likely you are to seek information about the politicians vying for it or who are in that office. For instance, people may think that the governor’s office is particularly important because of the power granted to the office. The impressions about importance may form early. As [Greenstein \(2017\)](#) reports, most fourth-grade children think the President is the most important individual. The second criterion is instrumental relevance. A politician responsible for solving the issue people care about is relevant to them. For instance, people may take

more interest in local politicians if issues like schools, parks, crime, etc., are important to them. Or they may take more interest in national politicians if national security is top of mind.

Availability is the second major factor affecting which politicians come to mind. The more you see a politician in the media, the more readily the politician comes to mind (when you think about the party) ([Zaller and Feldman 1992](#); [Tversky and Kahneman 1973](#)). Which politicians are covered more heavily in the media than others are, in turn, is a function of politician supply and media demand. Given that all politicians are eager to be in the media, their supply is virtually unconstrained. The only constraint is media hostility. Politicians may be less inclined to appear on shows where they expect a ‘hostile’ reception. It is also likely that politicians may exert extra effort to be in the media if they have a bill to pass or an election to fight.

Media demand for politicians is a function of audience demand and production costs. Audience demand, in turn, depends on relevance, ideology, and entertainment value. Relevance has at least three aspects. The first is that the audience is likely more interested in news about more prominent national politicians who oversee a larger sphere of activity (similar to what we noted before). The second pillar is contextual relevance. The audience is likely more interested in the Secretary of State when there is a major ongoing international conflagration than when there isn’t one. This point has implications for the data we present later. One of our surveys was launched in the middle of the Republican presidential primary, which likely affected the kinds of politicians covered in the media and, hence, which politicians came to people’s minds. Third, and most fundamentally, as local news media outlets have declined, the only politicians in the national news media relevant to the (national) audience are national politicians. Fourthly, there may be a general demand for more provocative (ideologically extreme) politicians, as the audience may find them entertaining. Fifthly, the audience likely prefers dramatic coverage with clear heroes and villains. The

executive, a person in charge who can be held responsible, is likely easier to dramatize than coverage of legislature with a broader cast of characters and harder to pin down villains and heroes. Lastly, given the demand for ideologically congenial politicians by audiences of media sources with a particular ideological bent, partisan channels will likely cover more ideologically congenial politicians ([Kim, Lelkes and McCrain 2022](#)). More subtly, we expect conservative media to highlight more extreme Democratic politicians, e.g., Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who is in the top 5% of liberal Democratic politicians), and liberal outlets to highlight more extreme Republican politicians, e.g., Lauren Boebert (who is in the top 5% of conservative Republican politicians). (The practice is similar to issue distancing—highlighting more extreme positions of the other side ([Henderson 2013](#)).)

Production costs may affect who is covered in subtle but important ways. It is thought that the production costs for episodic news are lower than for thematic news. The dominance of episodic news implies greater coverage of contemporary politicians. Similarly, one of the reasons for the decline in coverage of state and local politicians is likely that production costs are higher.

In all, we conjecture at least four patterns in the kinds of politicians that come to people’s minds when they think about the parties: we expect people to be likelier to recall contemporary politicians than inactive politicians, more national politicians than state or local politicians (see also, [Hopkins 2018](#)), more ideologically extreme politicians than moderate, and more politicians in the executive, e.g., the presidency and the governorship than legislators ([Greenstein 2017](#)). We also investigate if there are patterns in the sex and race of the recalled politicians.

# Study 1

In November 2013, we recruited 344 survey participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (see [Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012](#)). We asked the respondents, “When you think about the Democratic (Republican) party, which political leader(s) first come to mind? Name up to three.” We followed the open-ended question with a multiple-choice question that presented respondents with a list of names and photos of political leaders and asked the respondents, “Is there another political leader that you haven’t mentioned already who immediately comes to mind when you think about the Democratic (Republican) party?” For Democrats, the choices were: Joseph Biden, Barney Frank, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Harry Reid, Ted Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt, John Kerry, John Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, Al Gore, and Barack Obama. For Republicans, the choices were: Paul Ryan, John McCain, Paul Rand, Sarah Palin, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, John Boehner, Jeb Bush, Michele Bachmann, Ted Cruz, Chris Christie, Marco Rubio, Eric Cantor, Mitt Romney, and Mitch McConnell. The respondents could select one politician per party.

We manually reviewed the open-ended responses to normalize the names. Where the response was ambiguous, e.g., Bush than George H. W. Bush or George W. Bush, we tried two things:

1. **Proportional Allocation.** Allocate ambiguous names in proportion to the observed proportion of the unambiguous names. For example, 78% of the unambiguous mentions of Bushes are to George W. Bush, while the rest are to George H. W. Bush. (No one volunteered Jeb Bush.) Hence, we allocated 78% of the ambiguous Bush mentions to George W. Bush and the rest to George H. W. Bush.
2. **All-to-One Allocation.** To test the robustness of our results, we simulate scenarios where we assign all the ambiguous mentions to one person. For instance, we simulate assigning all ambiguous Bush mentions to George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush.

Proportional allocation is the default across Study 1 and 2. (However, all the results are robust to how we allocate ambiguous names.)

If a respondent put a non-Republican leader when asked about a Republican leader, we ignored that response. We merged the responses with the DIME dataset ([Bonica 2013](#)), taking the most recent data for each politician.

To understand the results, it is helpful to understand the national political context in November 2013. The survey was fielded a year after the 2012 elections. In 2012, President Barack Obama won the presidential election by beating Mitt Romney, the Republican Party retained control of the House of Representatives, with John Boehner continuing as speaker of the House and Nancy Pelosi continuing as minority leader, and the Democratic Party retained control of the Senate, with Senator Harry Reid continuing as the majority leader and Senator Mitch McConnell as the minority leader.

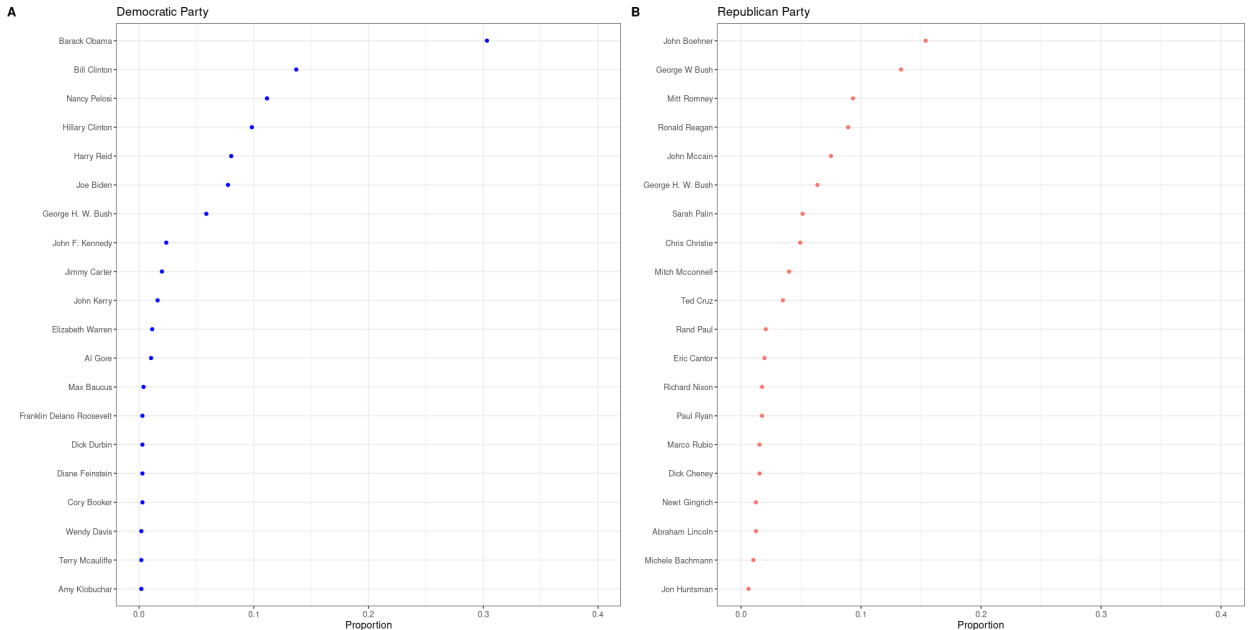
## Results

When asked to list up to three politicians who first come to mind when they think about parties, about 15% of the respondents list fewer than three politicians (see Figure [SI 1.1](#) for details). This suggests a shallow pool of politicians, consistent with low levels of political knowledge ([Bawn et al. 2012](#)).

Of the politicians that come to mind, the same few national politicians dominate. Just three politicians constitute 57% of the recalled politicians for the Democratic Party and 40% for the Republican Party, with the top politician alone constituting 31% and 16% of the recollections, respectively (see Figure [SI 2.1](#) for the top politicians).

Six of the ten most frequently mentioned Democratic politicians were presidents, presidential candidates, or vice presidents—Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Joe Biden, Jimmy Carter, John F. Kennedy, and John Kerry. Hillary Clinton was also in the top ten. Outside the top ten, only two other Democratic politicians were recalled by more than 10% of the

respondents. Presidents, presidential candidates, and vice presidents also dominate the Republican Party’s top 10, with half of the top ten falling into this category—George W. Bush, Mitt Romney, Ronald Reagan, John McCain, and Sarah Palin. As Figure 1 underscores, the American political parties are, in the minds of the voters, parties of the presidents. Figure SI 2.3 provides further evidence for the predominance of the presidential office in people’s minds. More than half of the mentions of politicians are naming presidents or vice-presidents.



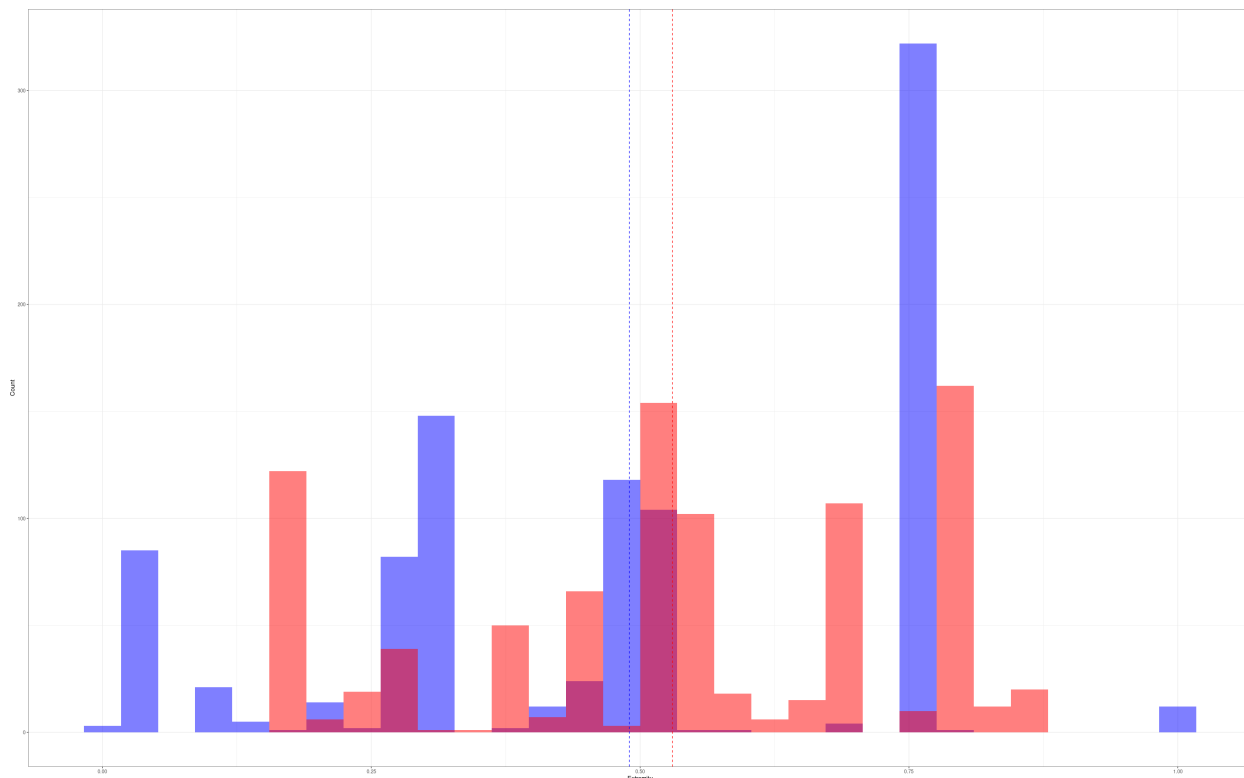
**Figure 1:** Top 20 most frequently recalled politicians in open-ended questions (Study 1).

State and local politicians constitute just 6.4% of the total citations. But that is too generous a number. In total, 17 politicians are mentioned, and the most frequently mentioned state and local Republican Party politicians are people with a national profile: Governors Sarah Palin (50 mentions), Chris Christie (48), and Jon Huntsman (6). In all, the data show that people think about political parties in terms of national politicians.

The recalled politicians are more extreme than the median member of the party’s Congressional contingent. As Figure 2 shows, the average recalled Democrat is significantly more extreme than the mean of the Congressional Democratic caucus (the difference is 1.125 SD of Congressional Democrats), while the average recalled Republican is closer to the



Republican caucus (the difference is 0.6 SD).<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 2:** Ideological distribution of recalled politicians (Study 1).

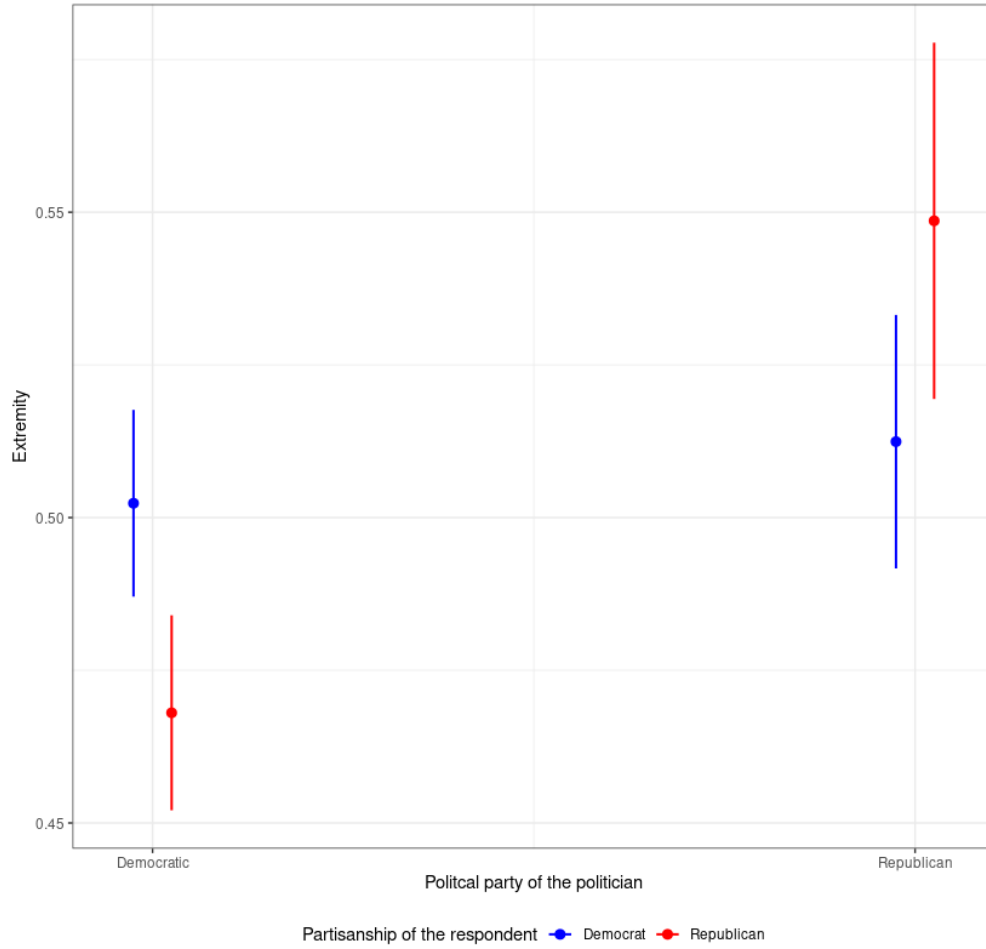
*Note:* Linearly scaled most recent dynamic CF-Scores with 0 representing the most moderate politician for both parties and 1 representing the most extreme politician of either party. The average extremity score for each party is given by the dashed lines.

Further, more extreme politicians are more at the top of people’s minds. As Table 1 shows, people recall more extreme politicians earlier. The average difference between being recalled first and last is one-quarter of the extremity scale. For comparison, the difference between Nancy Pelosi and John McCain is .25 on the same scale.

Next, we checked if people are more likely to recall more extreme opposing partisans than co-partisans. As Figure 3 shows, contrary to our prediction, both Democrats and Republicans are likelier to recall more extreme co-partisan political leaders.

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<sup>1</sup>However, people tend to *think* that these relatively moderate politicians are ideologically extreme (see Table SI 3.4).



**Figure 3:** Ideological extremity of recalled politicians by the partisanship of the respondent and politician (Study 1).

Dependent variable is linearly scaled most recent dynamic CF-Score with 0 representing the most moderate politician for both parties and 1 representing the most extreme politician of either party. Interaction between political parties asked in the open-ended survey question and self-declared partisanship of respondents.

To further explore extremity, executive, and recency biases, we exploited the closed-ended responses. We estimated a model that predicted which politician was selected given their ideological extremity, race, and political position. Since ideology estimates only exist for a few non-contemporaneous politicians, we had to estimate models for extremity and recency separately. (We aim to describe the patterns rather than make causal claims.)

As Table 2 shows, there is a large executive bias, with presidents recalled most frequently. There is also a weak preference for recalling contemporaneous politicians (see Col-

umn 3).

	1	2
	Ideological Extremity	Ideological Extremity
(Intercept)	0.33*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.02)
Recall Order	0.27*** (0.02)	0.43*** (0.03)
Republican		0.27*** (0.03)
Recall Order*Republican		-0.34*** (0.03)
Num. obs.	1882	1882
R <sup>2</sup> (full model)	0.10	0.15

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

**Table 1:** Relationship between Recall Order and Extremity in Study 1

	1	2	3
	Selected	Selected	Selected
(Intercept)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)
Extremity	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.02)	
Contemporaneous			0.04** (0.01)
Race: White		0.06** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
Gender: Male		-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)
Most recent office <i>Ref: President</i>			
Vice President		-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)
House		-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)
Governor		-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)
Senate		-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)
Num. obs.	7590	7590	9315
Num. groups: Respondents	345	345	345

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Table 2:** Predicting what kinds of politicians are selected in closed-ended questions (Study 1).

## Study 2

In January 2024, we interviewed 730 respondents recruited through Lucid (see [Coppock and McClellan 2019](#)). We again asked the respondents, “When you think about the Democratic (Republican) party, which political leader(s) first come to mind? Name up to three.” As before, we followed the open-ended question with a closed-ended one asking the respondents to pick “any other political leaders that immediately come to mind when you think about the Democratic (Republican) party?” from a list. Unlike Study 1, where we let respondents pick only one politician, this time, we let the respondents choose as many politicians as they wished. The list presented was a deliberate mix that varied along all the potential dimensions of bias we conjecture: recent and not so recent, male and female, white and non-white, executive and non-executive, and more and less extreme. For Democrats, the 2023 list contained Joseph Biden, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, John F. Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Dianne Feinstein, John Lewis, Ilhan Omar, Joe Manchin, and Tulsi Gabbard. For Republicans, the list included John McCain, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Ted Cruz, Mitch McConnell, Mitt Romney, Michele Bachmann, Lindsey Graham, Newt Gingrich, Nikki Haley, Mike Pence, Donald Trump, Richard Nixon, Lisa Murkowski, and Greg Abbott. The respondents could select as many additional politicians as they wanted from the list. Much later in the survey, after asking people some sociodemographic questions, we asked half the respondents which state or local politicians come to mind when they think about the parties.

We processed the open-ended responses in the same way as we did in Study 1. And like before, we joined the politician data to the DIME dataset to get the recent most CF-Scores, DW-Nominate, office, and other sociodemographic characteristics of the politicians ([Bonica 2023](#)).

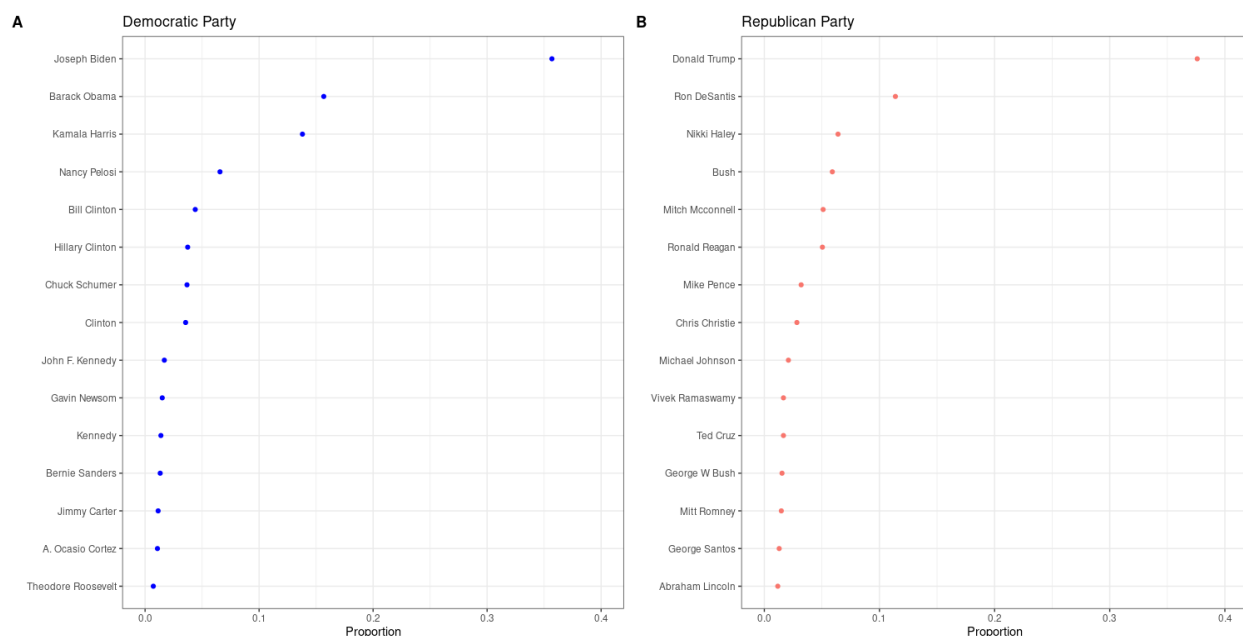
To aid the interpretation of the results, it helps to know the political context when the

survey was fielded. The survey was fielded in January 2024, in the middle of the Republican presidential primary. The leading contenders were Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, and Nikki Haley. For the Democratic Party, the current president, Joseph Biden, was running for reelection.

## Results

Nearly 55% of the people list fewer than three politicians, with roughly 10% failing to name a single politician in response to the open-ended question (see Figure [SI 1.2](#)). The numbers are consistent with low levels of political knowledge ([Bawn et al. 2012](#)). However, the numbers are substantially higher than in Study 1. We believe the reason lies in Amazon Mechanical Turk workers being less inclined to leave anything missing lest their wages be garnished. In this case, it implies listing politicians that don't immediately come to mind. Hence, we think the Lucid data provides a more accurate picture.

More strikingly and consistent with Study 1, as Figure 4 shows, people mention the same few national politicians. (Figure [SI 2.2](#) shows the entire distribution of recalled politicians.) More precisely, the president, vice president, ex-presidents, and presidential candidates dominate people's images of the parties. Just three politicians—President Joseph Biden (35.7%), former President Barack Obama (15.7%), and current Vice President Kamala Harris (13.8%)—make up 62.5% of the recalled politicians for the Democratic Party. For the Republican Party, the top three politicians constitute 55.4% of the mentions. Former president Donald Trump (37.6%) is the most frequently recalled, followed by his top two opponents in the Republican primaries, Governor Ron DeSantis (11.4%) and Nikki Haley (6.4%). Looking beyond the top three, ten of the top fifteen Democratic Party politicians are presidents, vice presidents, or prominent presidential candidates. For the Republican Party, six out of fifteen fall into this category. As Figure [SI 2.4](#) underscores, the American political parties are, in the minds of the voters, parties of presidents.



**Figure 4:** Top 20 most frequently recalled politicians in open-ended questions (Study 2).

Politicians not in national politics, e.g., governors, mayors, state legislators, etc., virtually never come to people’s minds unprompted. Only two governors, Gavin Newsom and Gretchen Whitmer, are in the top 25 for the Democratic Party, and both are mentioned by fewer than 3% of the respondents. (Governor Newsom debated Governor DeSantis on Fox News roughly a month before the survey.) For the Republican Party, once again, only two governors, Governor Ron DeSantis (who was running in the presidential primary) and Governor Greg Abbott, make it to the top 25. Abbott comes to mind less often than ousted House representative George Santos. Even when we explicitly ask people if any state or local politicians came to mind, as we do near the end of the survey, more than 40% of the people cannot list even one state or local politician (see Figure SI 1.3).

Aside from a strong bias toward the presidency, there is also a strong recency bias in who comes to mind. Old party stalwarts like John F. Kennedy (1.7%), Jimmy Carter (1.1%), Theodore Roosevelt (0.7%), and Ronald Reagan (5%) rarely come to mind. Only 5.9% recall someone named Bush, with George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush explicitly mentioned 1.5% and 0.04% of the time, respectively; Jeb Bush is never mentioned explicitly.

At the tail end of the distribution are Abraham Lincoln (0.1%) and Richard Nixon (0.09%).

Lastly, politicians that come to mind are, on average, more extreme than the Congressional mean (see Figure 5).<sup>2</sup> The Congressional mean on the rescaled CF-Score is around 0.53 for the Democratic Party (0.52 in the House and 0.64 in the Senate) and 0.64 for the Republican Party (0.64 in the House and 0.61 in the Senate). Compare this to a mean of .82 for the recalled politicians. Breaking up these numbers by the partisanship of the mentioned politicians in our open-ended responses, the mean for the Democratic politicians is 0.81 and 0.85 for Republican politicians. To put these numbers in perspective, the standard deviation for the Republican members of Congress is 0.14 and 0.16 for the Democrats.

The above analysis understates the extremity bias. Ideologically extreme politicians are also mentioned earlier. As Table 3 shows, politicians mentioned earlier are more ideologically extreme. The difference between the first and the third spot is 0.10 units on the CF-Score scale. For comparison, this gap is roughly as large as the one between Mitch McConnell (1.099) and John McCain (1.205), Ted Cruz (1.528) and Donald Trump (1.633), Ilhan Omar (-1.247) and Bernie Sanders (-1.358) or Nancy Pelosi (-1.072) and Barack Obama (-1.202). However, as the second column in Table 3 shows, the tendency to recall more extreme politicians earlier is concentrated among recollections of Republican politicians.

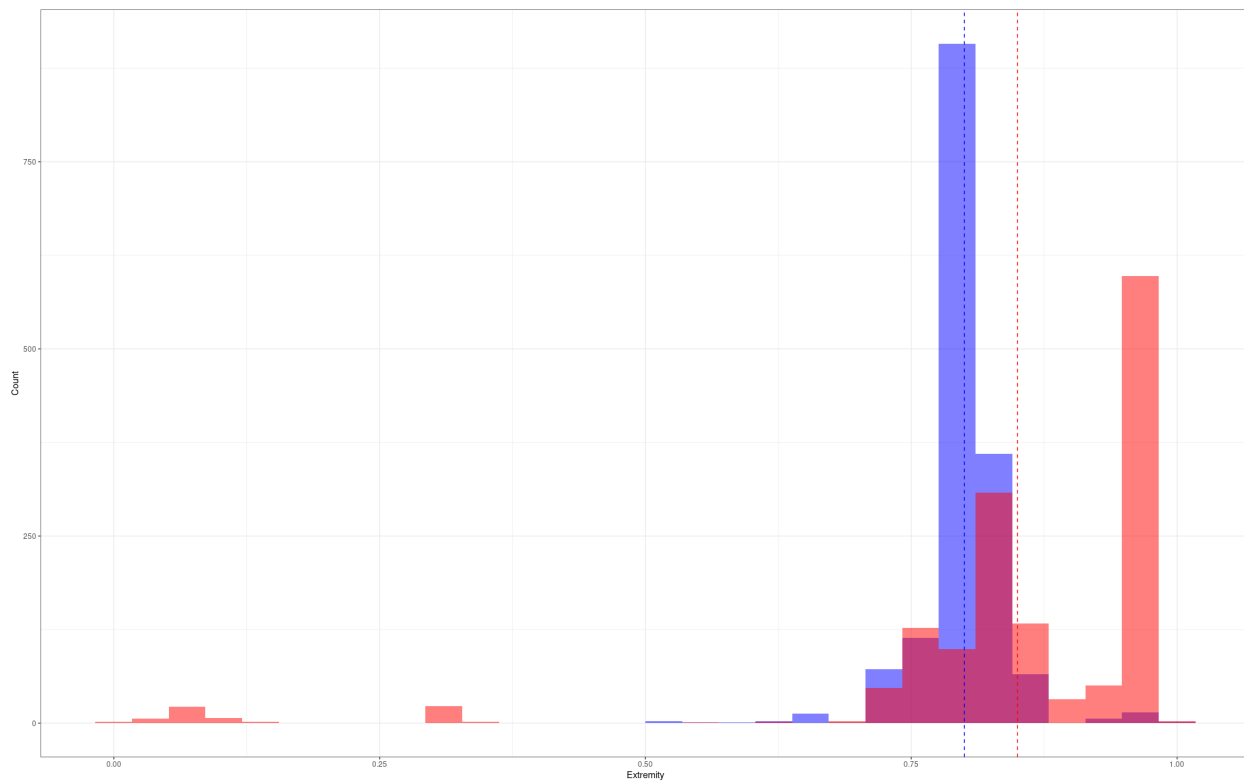
One conjecture was that people would recall more extreme politicians of the other party than their party. We investigate this by interacting with the partisanship of the survey respondents with the party affiliation of the named politicians. As Figure 6 shows, the pattern is faint. But if there is a pattern, it is that people tend to recall more extreme politicians of the party they belong to.

Lastly, we get at gender and racial biases by comparing the percentage of men and white politicians recalled to the percentages we see in Congress. About 80% of the recol-

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<sup>2</sup>We constructed the population of members of Congress by including all politicians who have won a race for a House seat since 2020 and a Senate seat since 2015.





**Figure 5:** Ideological distribution of recalled politicians (Study 2).

*Note:* Linearly scaled most recent dynamic CF Scores with 0 representing the most moderate politician for both parties and 1 representing the most extreme politician of the party with the more extreme member. The average extremity score for each party is marked by dashed lines.

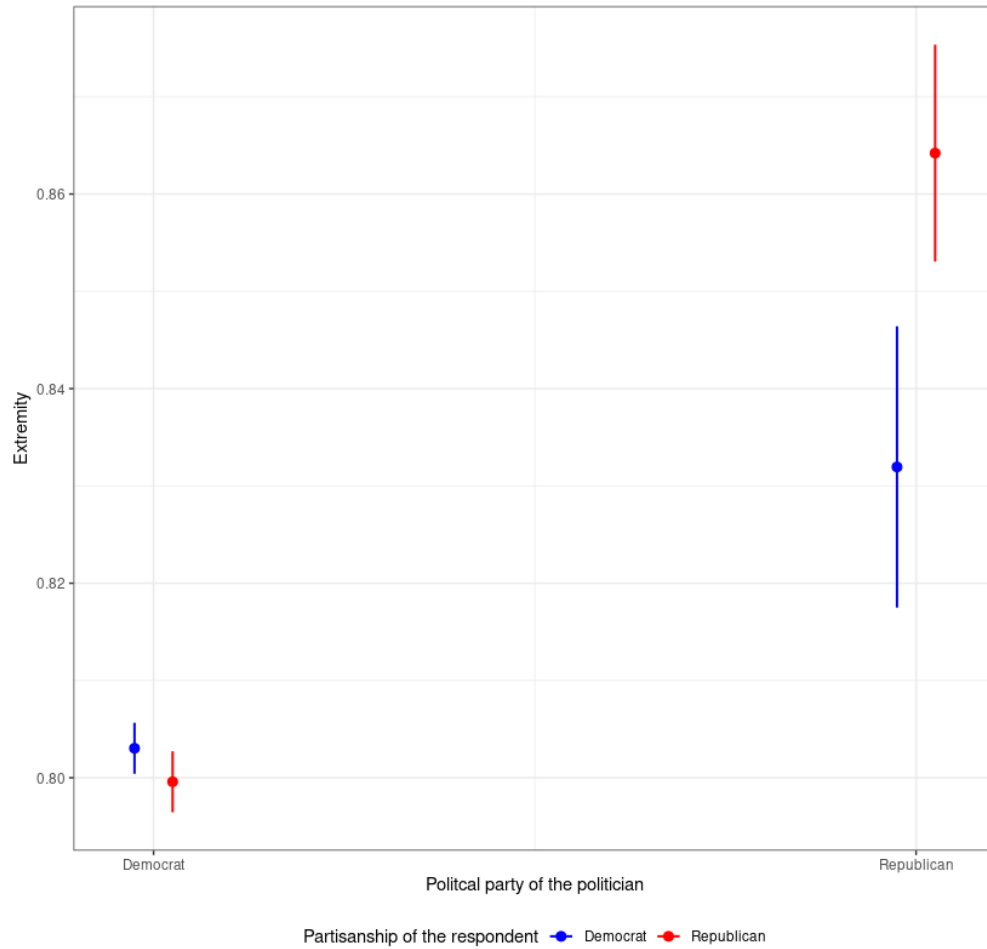
	1	2
	Ideological Extremity	Ideological Extremity
(Intercept)	0.75*** (0.01)	0.79*** (0.00)
Recall Order	0.10*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.00)
Republican		-0.08*** (0.01)
Recall Order*Republican		0.17*** (0.02)
Num. obs.	3029	3029
R <sup>2</sup> (full model)	0.05	0.12

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Table 3:** Relationship between Recall Order and Extremity in Study 2

lections are of male politicians, while just about 72% of the 118th Congress is male. (The House has 71% men and the Senate 75%.) As Table SI 2.3 shows, there is a gender bias in who recalls whom. Male survey participants are approximately 3% less likely to name a female politician than female participants. Respondents are also significantly more likely to name female politicians for the Democratic Party than the Republican Party (see Figure SI 2.5). 79% of the politicians who come to mind are White, compared to 75% in Congress.

Closed-ended questions provide another way to shed light on the different biases in recall. We can use the list of 15 politicians per party presented in the survey and investigate what attributes of these politicians explain selection by the respondents. As column 1 in Table 4 suggests, people pick more extreme politicians of the options presented. In column 2, we control for some aspects of the politicians, like gender, recency, race, and most recent office of the politicians. Note that we cannot offer a unique interpretation of respondent choices. The core finding that respondents select more extreme politicians remains, albeit the effect attenuates slightly. More recent politicians are more likely to be selected. Further confirming findings from the analysis of the open-ended responses, presidents are much more likely to be selected than governors, members of Congress, vice presidents, or Secretary of



**Figure 6:** Ideological extremity of recalled politicians by the partisanship of the respondent and politician (Study 2).

Linearly scaled most recent dynamic CF Scores with 0 representing the most moderate politician for both parties and 1 representing the most extreme politician of either party. Interaction between the political party of the politician and partisanship of respondents.

State. Across all our analyses, we find a robust association between ideological extremity, recency, and executive office and recall. However, we cannot definitively say that people chose a particular politician because she was more extreme. For one, lurking variables (Joiner 1981) can explain the correlations.

	1	2
	Selected	Selected
(Intercept)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.66*** (0.02)
Extremity	0.37*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.02)
Race: White		−0.00 (0.01)
Contemporaneous		0.04*** (0.01)
Most recent office <i>Ref: President</i>		
Governor		−0.46*** (0.01)
House		−0.54*** (0.01)
Sec. of State		−0.02 (0.02)
Senate		−0.39*** (0.01)
Vice President		−0.14*** (0.01)
Num. obs.	18325	18325
Num. groups: Respondents	733	733

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Table 4:** Predicting what kinds of politicians are selected in closed-ended questions (Study 2).

# Media Representation

We suspect the biases in people’s recall are founded in media representations. We do not have a direct test, but media data can help clarify whether there are grounds for investing this more closely. So, we end our empirical section by visualizing a decade’s worth (2010–2021) of news video data from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC [Kim, Lelkes and McCrain \(2022\)](#). The study uses data from Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer.<sup>3</sup> Since we use data from the study, we use the same filter: “individuals with at least 10 hours of screen time by August 2020 (cumulative).”

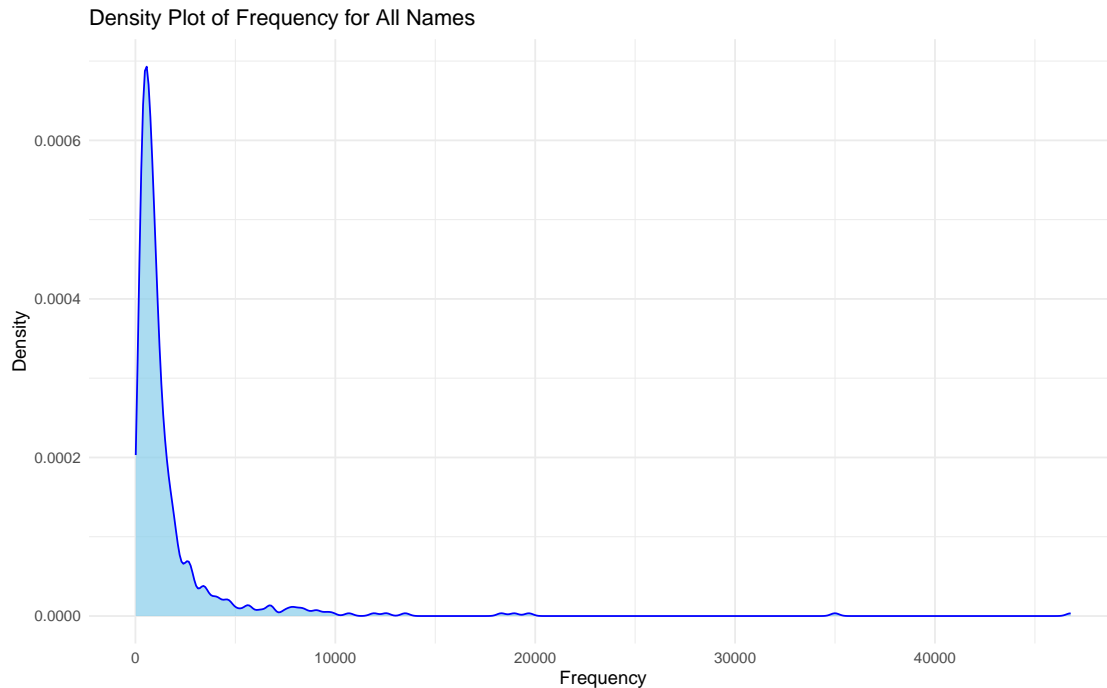
Consistent with [Sood and Weitzel \(2020\)](#), Figure 7 shows a sharp skew in the coverage of various politicians. A few politicians dominate the media landscape and are mentioned disproportionately often.

Who are these politicians? Figure 8 shows similar patterns to our open-ended survey responses. National politicians, especially from the executive branch, but primarily presidents, vice presidents, and presidential candidates, constitute a vast majority of the politicians covered in the media.<sup>4</sup> Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden dominated the media coverage over the last decade. It is, therefore, not surprising that they also dominate the minds of our survey participants.

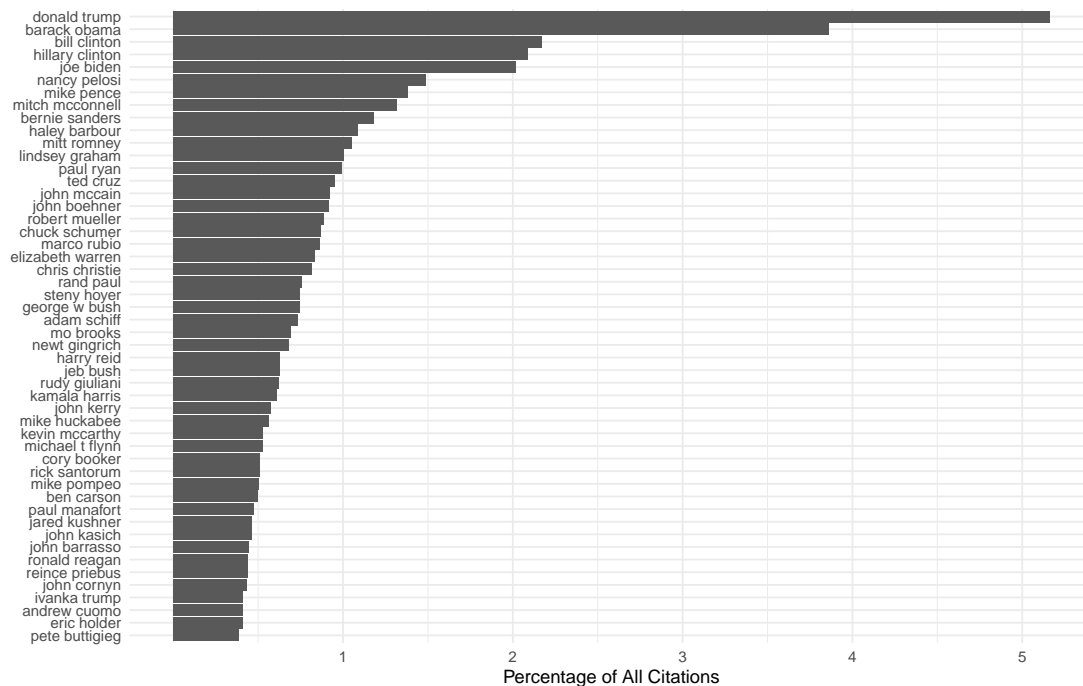
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<sup>3</sup>For more details about the data collection methods, see <https://tvnews.stanford.edu/>.

<sup>4</sup>See also <https://gojiberries.io/2014/07/08/liberal-bias-in-politician-references-in-news/> that comes to the same conclusion using a different dataset.



**Figure 7:** Coverage of Various Politicians Across News Media



**Figure 8:** Top 50 most covered politicians in the news media.

## Discussion

A few recent national politicians, primarily presidents, ex-presidents, and prominent presidential candidates, come immediately to mind when people think about the parties. Very

few people voluntarily name a state or local politician. Even when we explicitly ask people to name a state or local politician, more than 40% of the people cannot name one. Lastly, people recall politicians who are somewhat more extreme than the median party member in Congress. Parallely, the same few national politicians dominate national news media. These facts suggest that the patterns in people’s associations between parties and politicians are rooted in media coverage and availability biases.

The implications for politics are profound. The American political system has nominally independent party organizations in each state ([Mayhew 2014](#)). This structure is useful as parties in each state can pick optimal positions for the state, rather than being defined by one national position. For instance, as [Shor and McCarty \(2011\)](#) show, the California Democratic Party is to the left of the Texas Democratic Party. But if a few national politicians dominate people’s mental images of the parties, people may mistake the national leaders’ position as the state party’s. This may, in turn, help explain (or be a consequence of) the observed trend of nationalization in gubernatorial elections ([Sievert and McKee 2019](#); [Amlani and Algara 2021](#)) and state legislative elections ([Rogers 2023](#)).

A more dramatic potential consequence of a few politicians dominating people’s images may lie in parties being vulnerable to being hijacked by a politician. One way to think about the positions held by these national political leaders is that they reflect the positions of the supporters or party elites. In a democracy, it is reasonable to ascribe the positions of the party leaders to their supporters, based on the simplistic idea that why else would people be supporting the leaders? However, as research has shown, this is a misleading heuristic. As [Lenz \(2013\)](#), etc., show, people’s policy positions adapt to take positions of the leaders they trust rather than constrain the positions that leaders take. Further, personality-driven political coverage in the media has loosened many of the constraints created by party elites. In a first-past-the-post system, parties can also elect leaders that reflect the minority. For instance, Donald Trump was the *minority* winner of the 2016 Republican presidential

primary. But once elected, Donald Trump likely affected not just the Republican Party positions, but also how the public understood the Republican Party. For instance, recently, Donald Trump, not yet elected as the presidential candidate for the Republican Party, posted (original capitalization and grammar):

“The Republican Party should always be on the side of the Miracle of Life - and the side of Mothers, Fathers, and their Beautiful Babies. IVF is an important part of that, and our Great Republican Party will always be with you, in your quest, for the ULTIMATE JOY IN LIFE!"

Lastly, there are limitations to our data. For one, people’s images of the parties are likely shaped by more than elected politicians, politically appointed government officials, and party leaders. For instance, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, David Limbaugh, etc., are neither official spokespersons for the party or elected officials nor work in the government. But people’s understanding of the issues the Republican Party thinks are important and the positions it advocates may stem from what they say in the media. To get at that, rather than asking which politicians come to mind, we may want to ask which *people* come to mind when you think about a party. Beyond this, we need more research to more carefully look at the antecedents of these mental images and their consequences.



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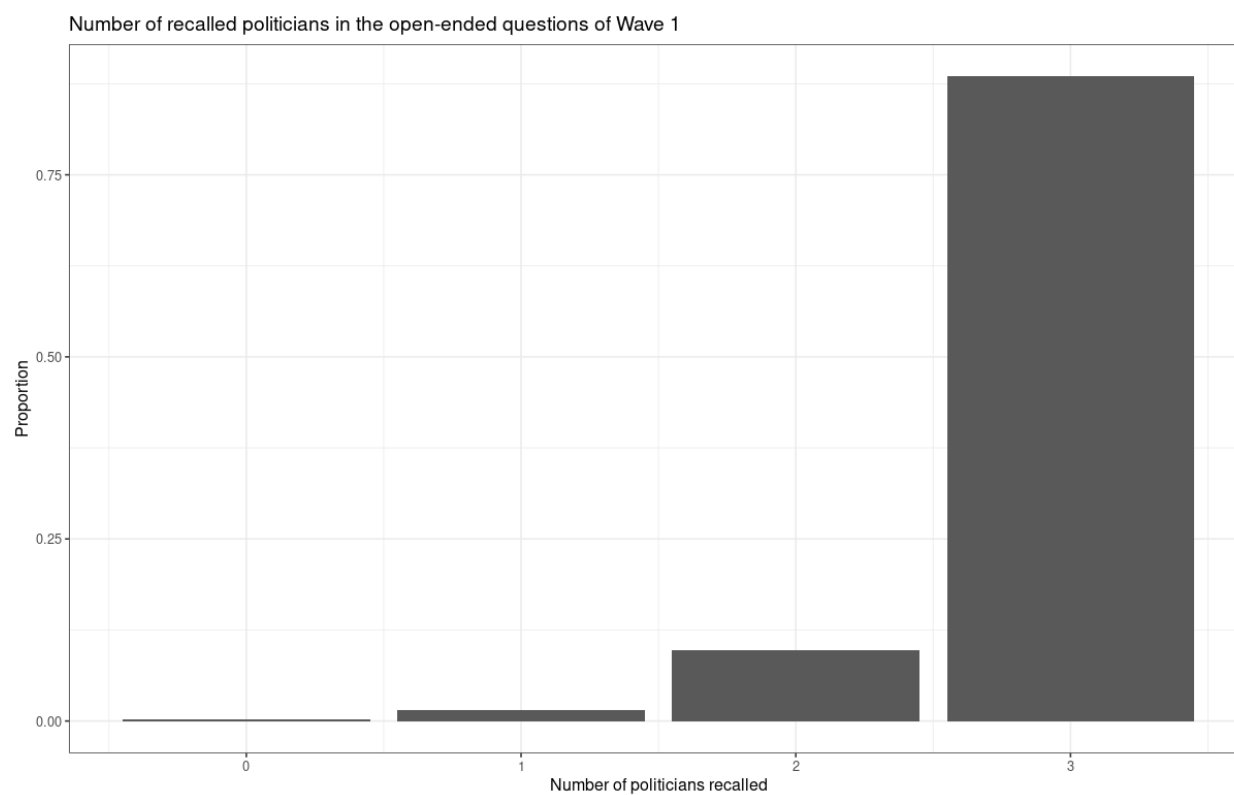
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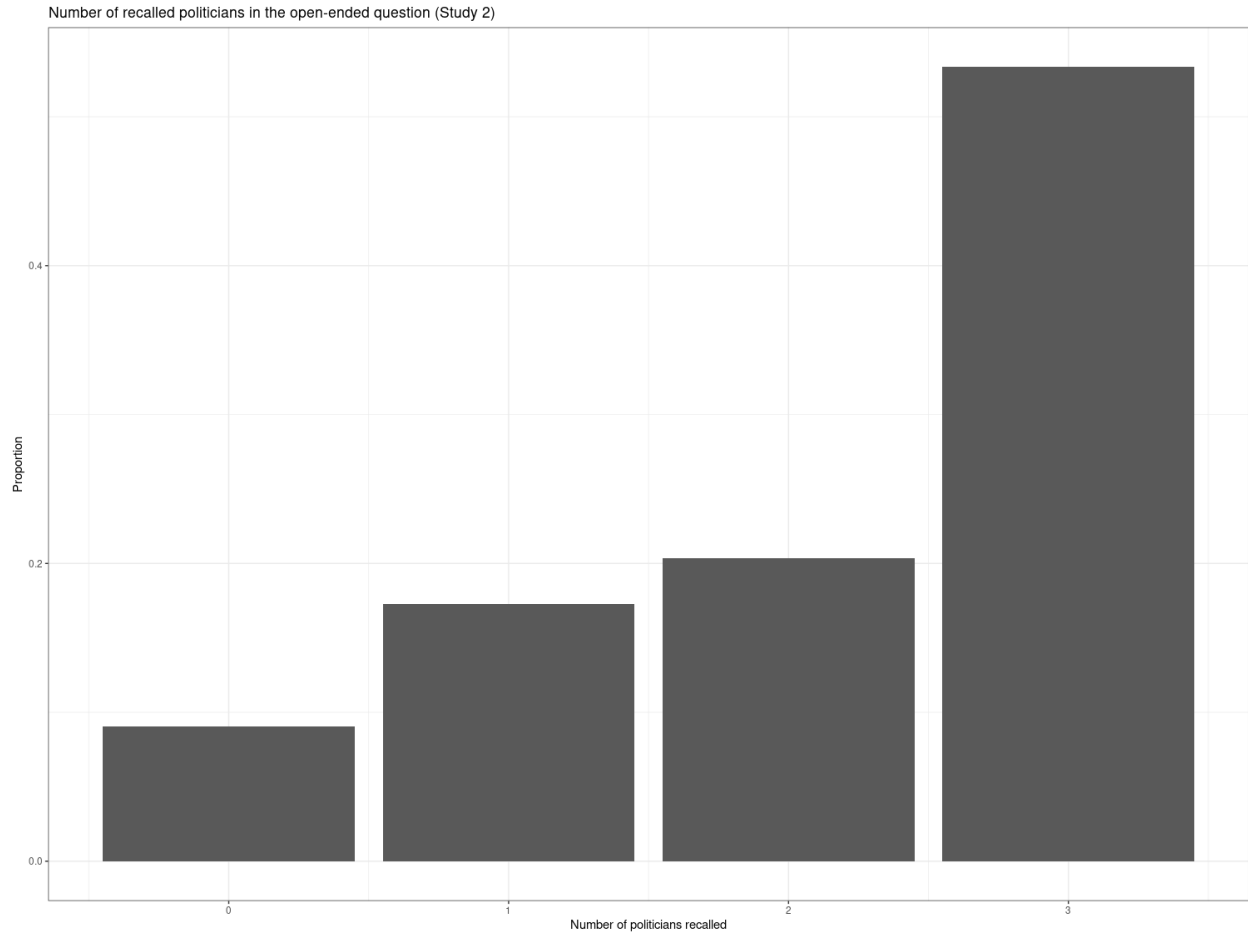
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# Supporting Information

## SI 1 Number of Recalled Politicians



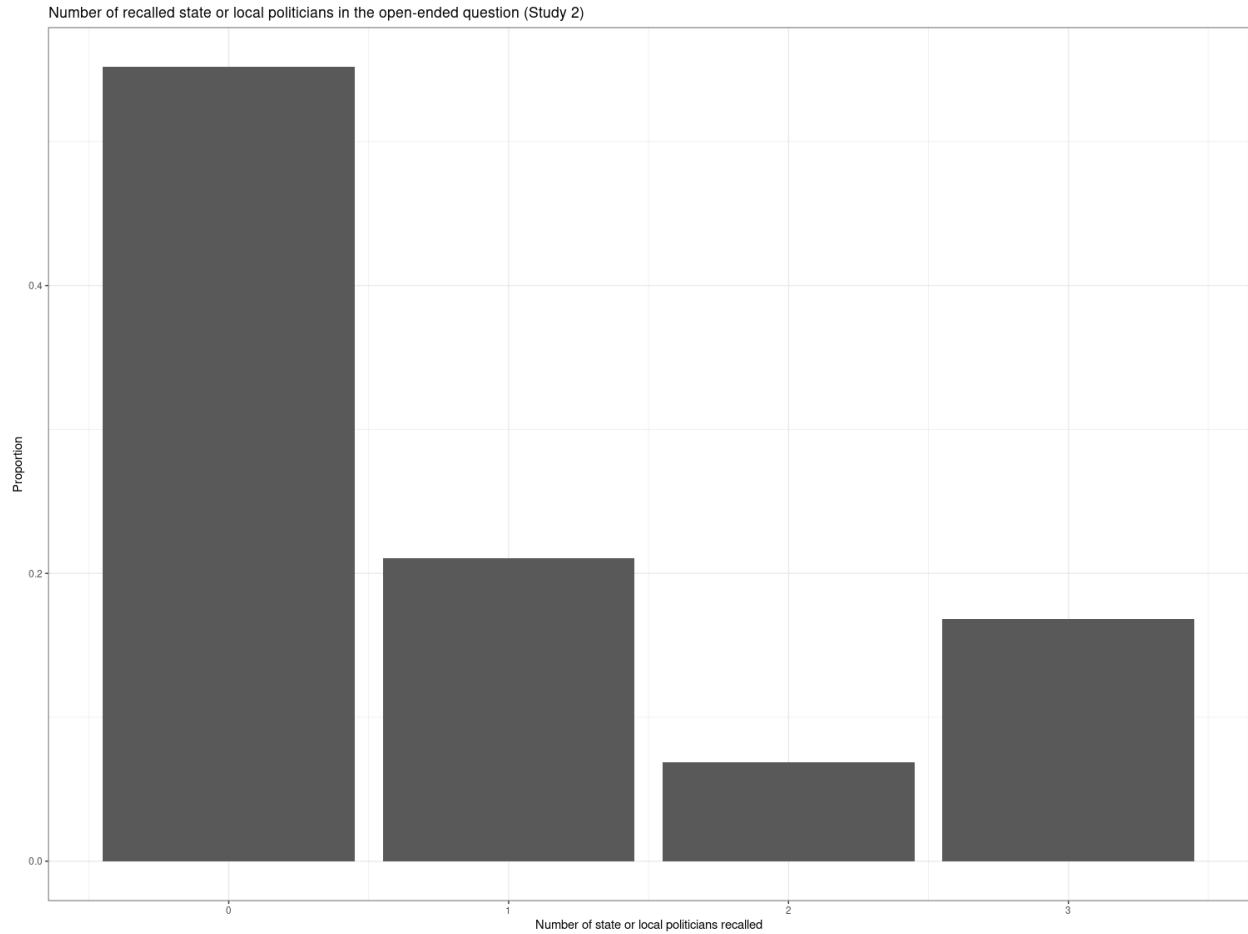
**Figure SI 1.1:** Number of politicians recalled in open-ended questions in Study 1



**Figure SI 1.2:** Number of politicians recalled in open-ended questions in Study 2

	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	N
Open, all	2.10	2	1.01	998
Closed, all	7.38	7	3.72	1300
Open, state and local	0.97	1	1.15	857

**Table SI 1.1:** Descriptive statistics of recall in Study 2

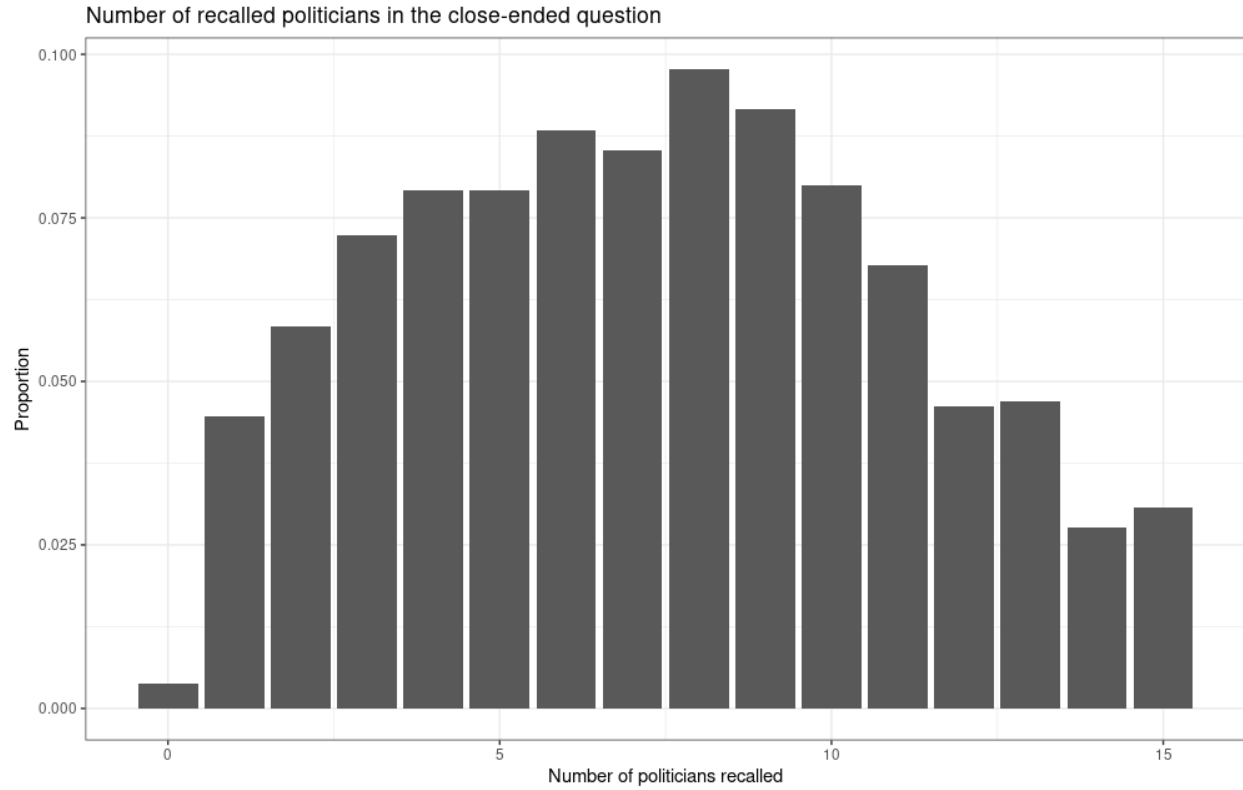


**Figure SI 1.3:** Number of state and local politicians recalled in open-ended questions in Study 2

## SI 2 Who is Recalled?

**Table SI 2.2:** Summary statistics of scaled ideology of recalled politicians

	Scaled, combined			Scaled, separate		
	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
<b>Combined</b>	0.811	0.813	0.124	0.758	0.734	0.124
<b>Party in survey</b>						
<i>Democratic</i>	0.809	0.813	0.079	0.712	0.714	0.039
<i>Republican</i>	0.813	0.887	0.163	0.039	0.887	0.163
<b>Party ID Respondent</b>						
<i>Democrat</i>	0.811	0.813	0.133	0.755	0.734	0.130
<i>Republican</i>	0.812	0.813	0.112	0.812	0.813	0.112



**Figure SI 1.4:** Number of politicians recalled in close-ended questions in Study 2

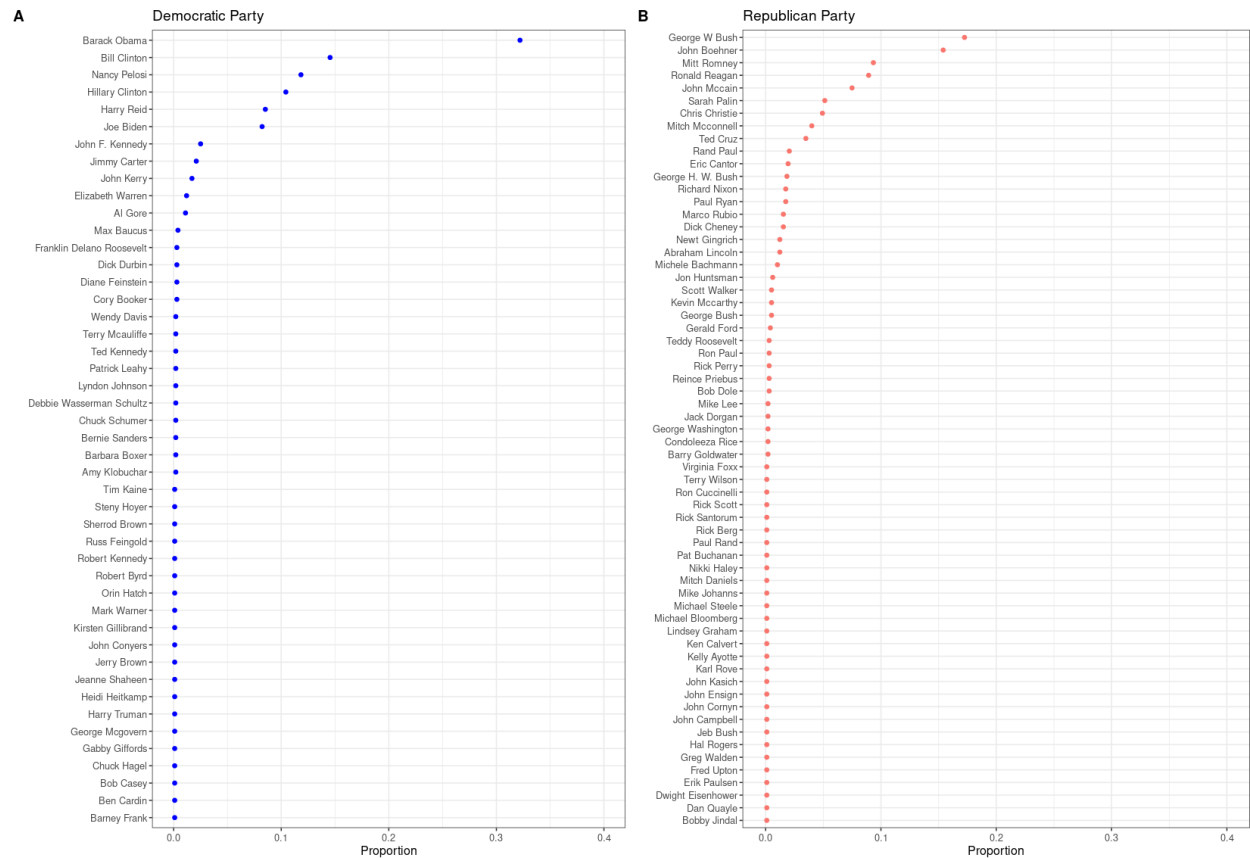
	Female Politician Mentioned
(Intercept)	0.21*** (0.01)
Respondent: Male	−0.03** (0.01)
Respondent: Non-binary	0.02 (0.05)
Num. obs.	3296
R <sup>2</sup> (full model)	0.00

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

**Table SI 2.3:** Gender effects on selection of politician

Estimated is a linear probability model with a binary outcome. 1 indicates that a female politician was named, 0 a male. The model includes clustered standard errors for each respondent.





**Figure SI 2.1:** Frequency of politicians that come to mind when people think about the parties in the open-ended questions in Study 1

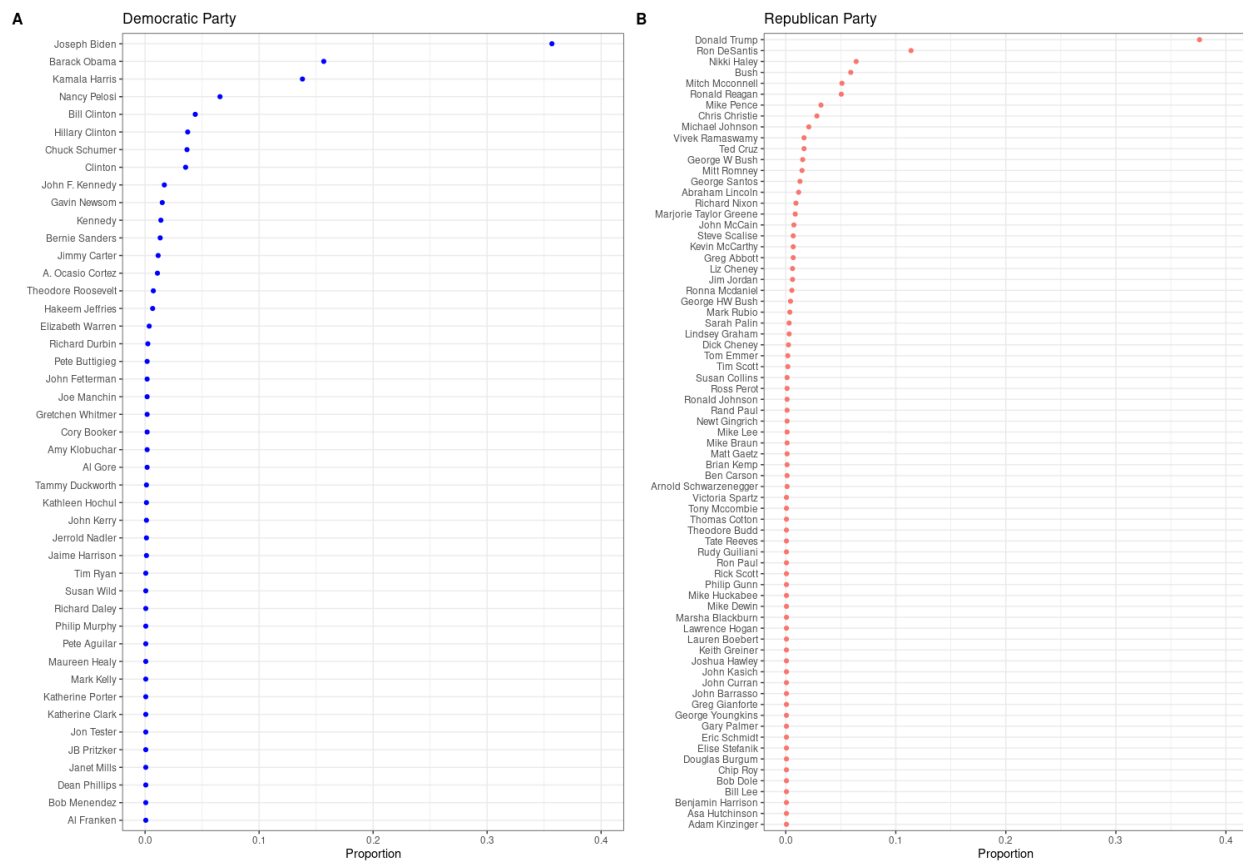
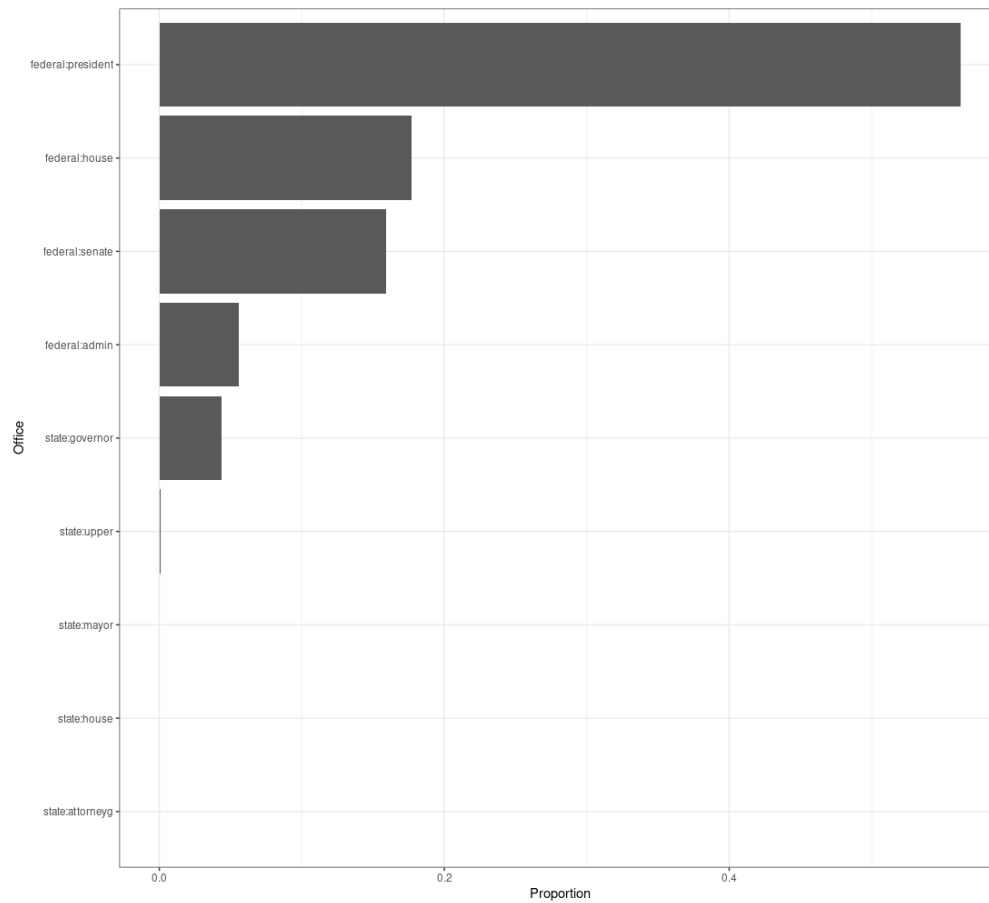
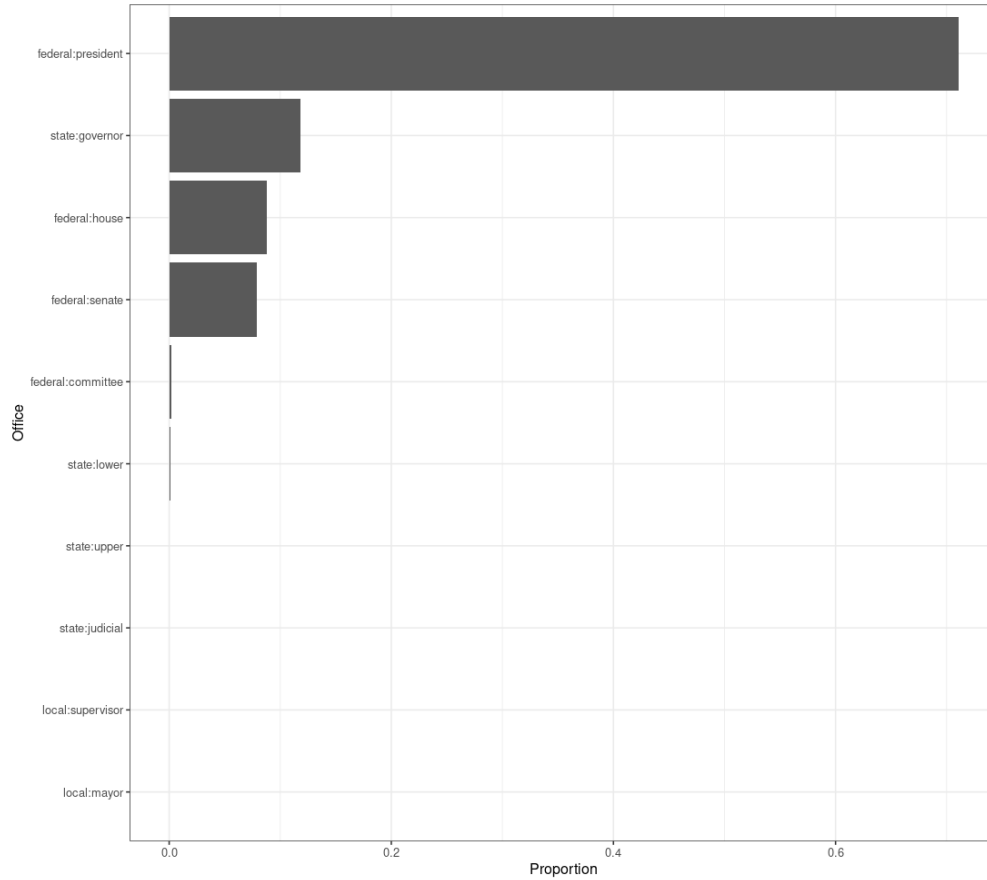


Figure SI 2.2: Frequency of politicians in the open-ended questions in Study 2



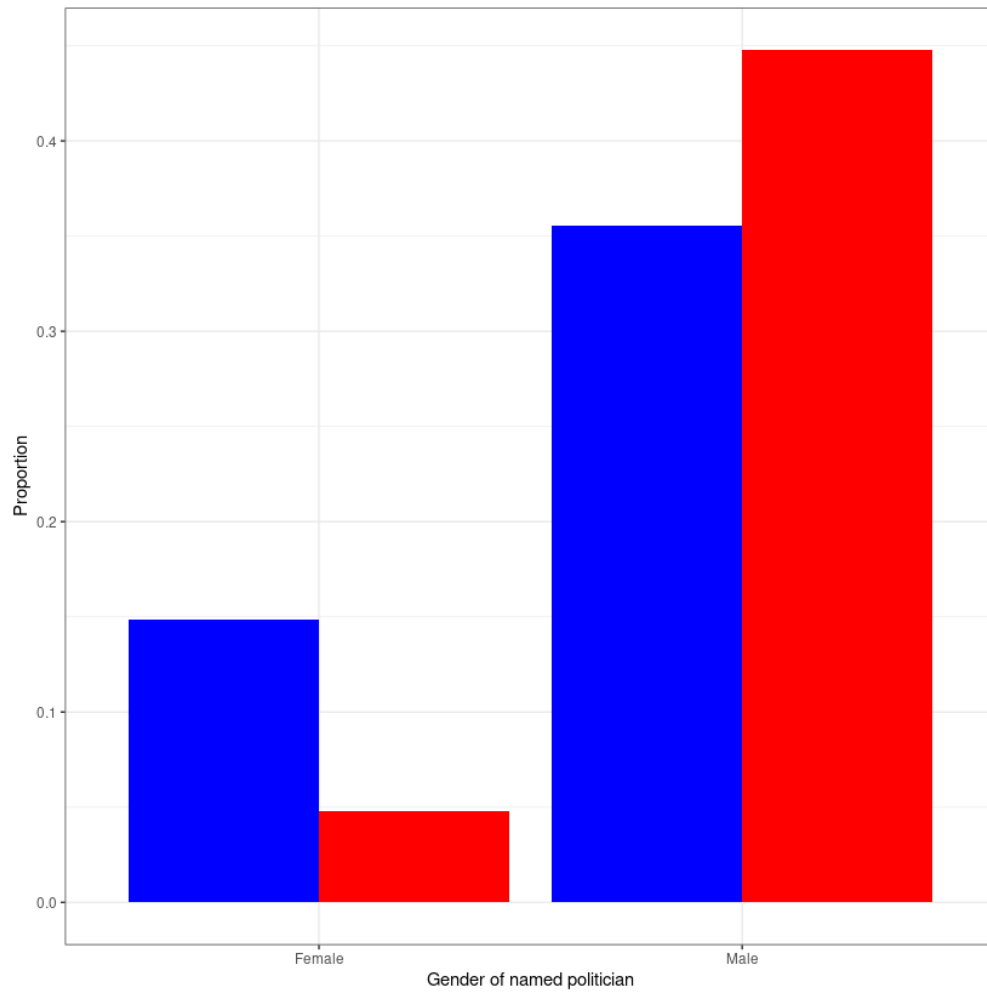
**Figure SI 2.3:** Office of politicians named in open-ended responses in Study 1

Office classification is based on the office listed in Bonica (2023). Most recent office is used. For Rick Santorum we used his presidential campaign. Hillary Clinton (Federal Admin.) and John McCain (Senator) were classified based on their last office and not the presidential campaign.



**Figure SI 2.4:** Office of politicians named in open-ended responses in Study 2

Office classification is based on the office listed in Bonica (2023). Offices were added for Jim Danner, Pete Aguilar, Andrew Johnson, Ross Perot, and Marianne Williamson.



**Figure SI 2.5:** Gender of politicians named in open-ended responses in Study 2

## SI 3 Perceived Extremity (Study 1)

After eliciting the list of politicians who come to mind, we asked respondents to rate, on a seven-point semantic scale, going from Very Conservative to Very Liberal, how liberal or conservative each recalled political leader is. We rescaled the responses to range from 0 (most moderate) to 1 (most extreme). Unlike the table in the main text, we rescaled recall order linearly so that 0 reflects the 1st position and 1 the 3rd. Once again, we see that more extreme leaders are recalled earlier and that people are likelier to recall more moderate members of the opposing party than their own party.

**Table SI 3.4:** Perceived Extremity of Recalled Politicians

	Perceived Extremity	
	(1)	(2)
Constant	0.790*** (0.007)	0.858*** (0.010)
Out Party		-0.104*** (0.012)
Recall Order		-0.058*** (0.013)
Out Party x Recall Order		0.048*** (0.019)
Observations	1,715	1,715
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-977.095	-1,077.039
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	-960.754	-1,044.356
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	