Domestic Politics Survey: Polarization on Dickinson's Campus

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Introduction

In today's political climate, it may come as no surprise that Democrats and Republicans are more ideologically divided than they were in the past. As of 2014, research shows 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the media Republican, respectively (Pew Research Center). Citizens find it increasingly important to live in communities with those who share their political views, and often find themselves associating more frequently with like-minded individuals (Pew Research Center). The 2016 election contributed to even more political polarization, as former President Donald Trump has been deemed an especially polarizing figure. Statistics show that he has set a new standard for political polarization, with approval ratings of merely 7% from Democrats in his last year in office (Gallup). Thus, it is important to understand the role polarization will have on the future of American politics as well as in our daily lives. Here, we attempt to analyze political polarization on Dickinson College's campus. Importantly, we discuss the effect party identification has on forming relationships with college peers, forming opinions on presidential decisions, and forming opinions of those on the other side of the aisle. Our results suggest that party identification undoubtedly plays a role in developing relationships and opinions, but to what extent that is true differs by political party.

Methods of Interviewing

All surveys were conducted anonymously online. Student researchers sent out the survey to student organizations (including, but not limited to, Hillel, Delta Nu, Delta Sigma Phi, Mock Trial), classmates, and group chats by class year. If students agreed to complete the survey, they clicked on a Microsoft Forms link where they were instructed to answer a series of questions. 154 respondents completed the survey questions unless indicated otherwise. Our survey has a margin of error of +/-8% and was in the field from March 24, 2021 to April 1, 2021. We asked respondents a series of questions including but not limited to "Have you unfriended or blocked someone on social media because of their political beliefs?", "Would you consider having a romantic relationship with someone of a different political affiliation?", and "Agree or Disagree: The political party I identify with has the moral high ground." We also asked demographic information to better understand who our population sample was, which included questions regarding race/ethnicity, gender, class year, and major. The results of our survey are explored below.

Univariate Statistic and Analysis

WHAT POLITICAL PARTY DO YOU MOST CLOSELY IDENTIFY WITH

■ Democrat   ■ Independent   ■ Republican   ■ Other


5.48%

18.49%

54.79%

21.23%
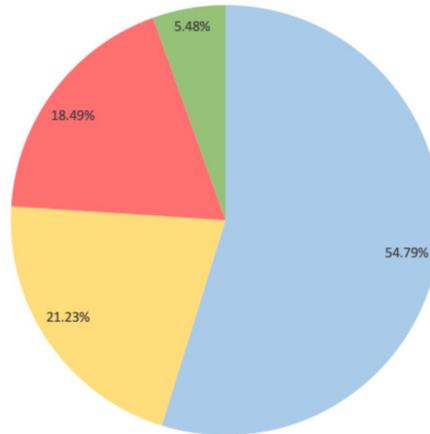
We chose to use the question "What political party do you most closely identify with?" as our univariate statistic because we wanted to better understand two things: first, to know the political ideology of our survey respondents and second, to explore how political affiliation affects an individual's relationships with and opinions about the other side. The results indicated that over half (54.79%) of our survey respondents were Democrats. The second largest group of respondents were Independents at 21.23%, followed by Republicans at 18.49%. The "Other" category makes up a very small pool of our respondents at 5.48% and includes individuals who identified with parties including but not limited to the Libertarian Party, the Socialist Party, and No Party. Because the sample size of "Other" is so small, most if not all of the subsequent analysis omits discussion of that category. In subsequent analyses, we compare respondents' answers to this question with other questions of interest. It serves as our independent variable throughout the entirety of our analysis of the survey results.

<u>**Bivariate Statistics and Analyses**</u>

Part 1: Party and Political Superiority

In this section of our analysis, we attempted to measure feelings of party superiority and sense of belonging to a particular political party. To do this, we asked respondents two questions: "I wish everyone supported the political party I identify with" and "The political party I identify with has the moral high ground". We asked respondents to respond to these questions on a scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The results are detailed below:
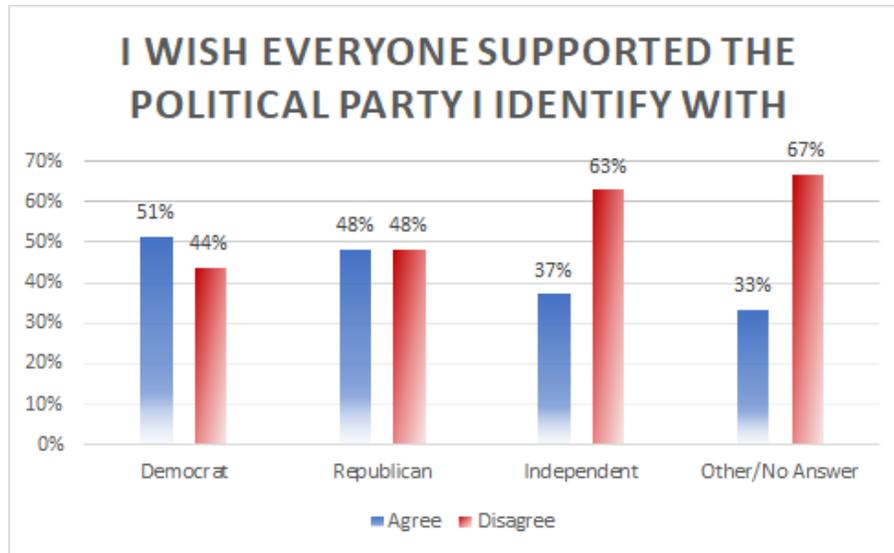

The results are rather telling. As we can see from the chart, most Democrats (51%) either "Somewhat Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that they wish everyone supported their political party. Republicans, on the other hand, were *evenly* divided, with 48% saying they somewhat or strongly agreed and the other 48% saying they somewhat or strongly disagreed. Independents (63%) and most of those who elected not to answer or fell into an "other" category (67%) either somewhat or strongly *disagreed* with that statement. This may suggest that partisan sorting could impact how polarized an individual is, especially when taken into conjunction with the other questions and responses.

One aspect that is especially fascinating is the relative division of Republicans on this statement. With Democrats, there is a clear majority of individuals who say they wish everyone supported their political party; yet with Republicans, that isn't quite the case. This lends itself to the idea that perhaps young Democrats on our liberal arts college campus could be exhibiting more polarized behavior.

Something that becomes important to keep in mind throughout the analysis of this question is what exactly the question is implying. While the following question which I will detail momentarily is a bit more direct in seeing polarized behaviors, this question sets the necessary

foundation. It is one thing to suggest that everyone could agree with you; it is another thing entirely to claim your party is superior, which is why these results become so interesting when we examine the data from the following question.

We asked people, on a scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree", their level of agreement with the following statement: "The political party I identify with has the moral high ground". This question sought to measure specifically whether respondents believed their political party had the moral advantage, thus implying that they were superior to the opposing party. The results are detailed below:
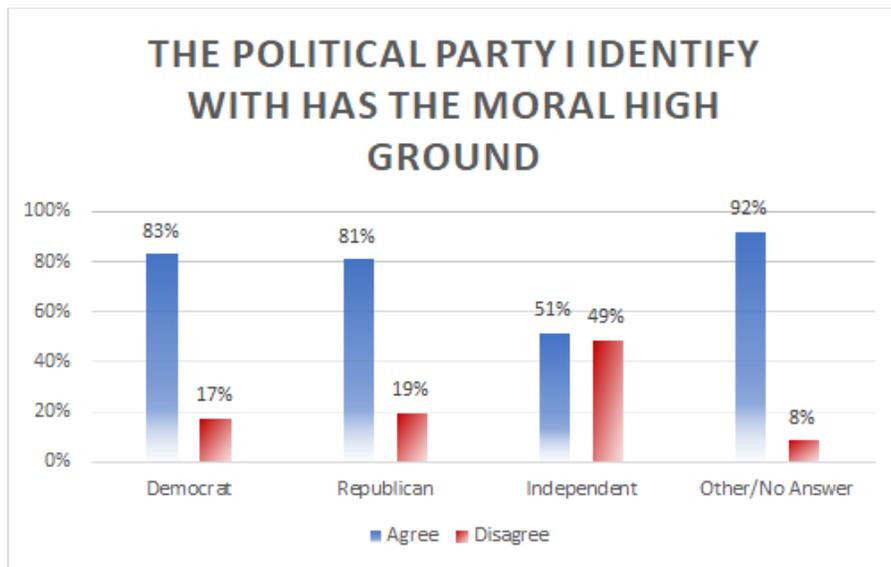

As we can see from the graph above, the results are much more party-oriented than the previous question, meaning that among Democrats and Republicans, the results were nearly unanimous. 81% of Republicans either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, along with 83% of Democrats. Independents, however, were rather divided on the issue, which suggests that polarization plays a bigger role among partisans than it does among independents.

When taken into conjunction with the data from the previous question, it is interesting to examine how these two statements differ and the different answers that were elicited from respondents. For example, the difference between Democrats and Republicans is striking; when the data is broken down, 49% of Democrats *somewhat agreed* with the statement, compared to 62% of Republicans who said they *somewhat agreed*. An additional point of interest is the *strength* to which each partisan agreed to the statement; more Republicans were likely to say they *somewhat agreed* compared to Democrats who were more likely, compared to Republicans, to say they *strongly agreed*. The strength of their answer is also an indicator of polarization; the more extreme your   position,   the   more   polarized   you   are   likely   to   be.

Part 2: Politics and Social Life

In this section of the survey, we asked respondents to identify how certain aspects of social life on campus have been affected by their politics. To do this we tried to cover two important aspects of college social life, friendship and relationship. We asked respondents if they would consider either being friends or being in a romantic relationship would subscribe to a different political affiliation than the one that you did. The results are detailed below:
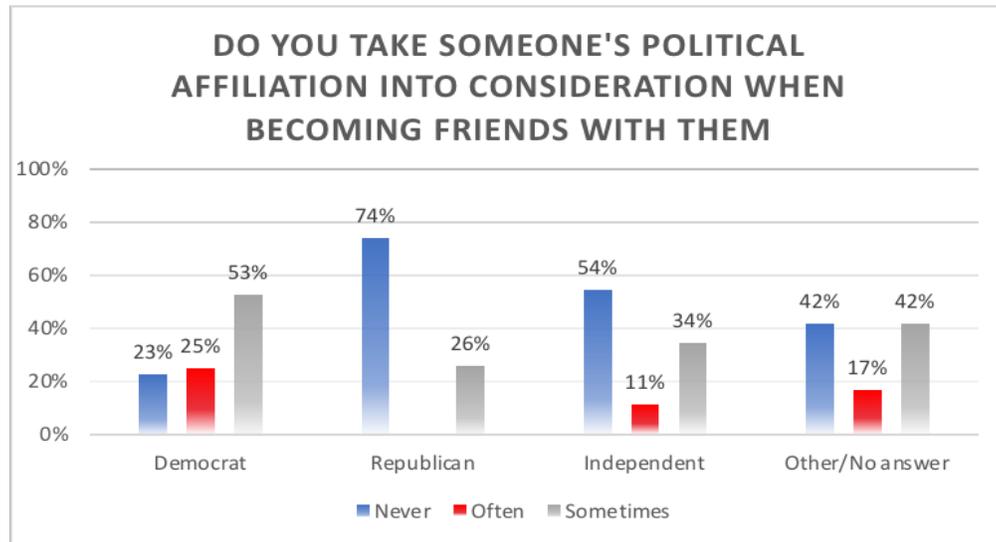
In another part of our survey, we asked respondents how domestic politics affected their social life on campus. On question six of our survey, we asked respondents to identify whether or not one's political party would affect whether or not they become friends with such a person. In this survey, we can see that 74% of republicans said that they never take this into consideration, while only 25% of Democrats never take this into consideration.

It is important to note that Democrats, in this case, were the most likely to take political affiliation into account when befriending someone at 78%. This is an interesting result as Republicans exhibited the exact different result. The Democratic respondents had more diverse responses with 23% answering never, 25% often, and 53% sometimes. As for the Republicans, there was never a case where a respondent felt like they "often" considered someone else's political affiliation before becoming friends with them. This is particularly interesting as our sample size was relatively similar in regard to age. Respondents were of the Dickinson student body, so age only varied by 4 years. Yet the responses based on party allegiances suggest drastically different levels of polarization.

In this case, we asked respondents to tell whether they would consider having a romantic relationship with someone of a different political affiliation by either answering with a simple Yes or No. The results are indicated below:

WOULD YOU CONSIDER HAVING A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE OF A DIFFERENT POLITICAL AFFILIATION?
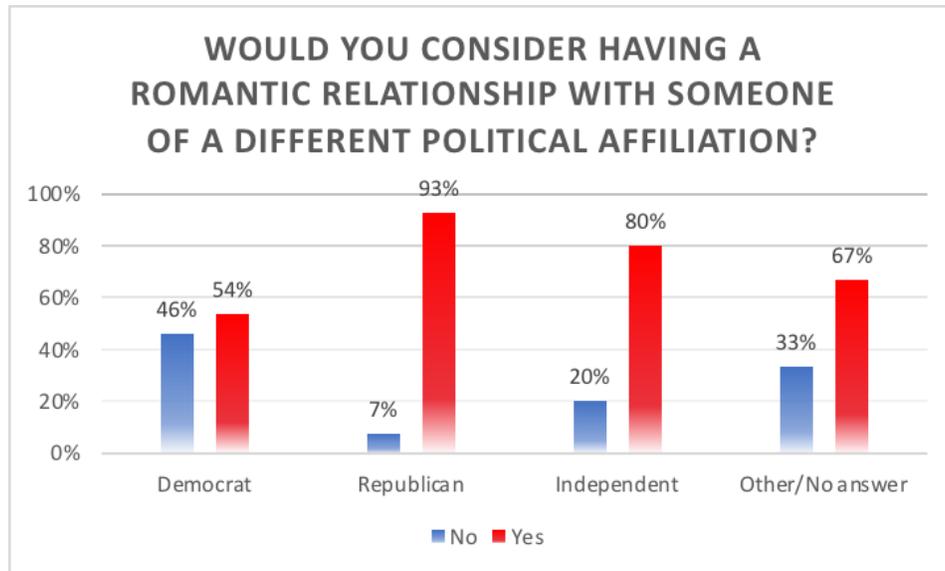
The survey found that among the Dickinson student body, 46% of Democrats said they *would not* consider a romantic relationship with someone of a different political affiliation. While on the other hand 93% of Republicans indicated that they would consider having a romantic relationship with someone of a different political affiliation.
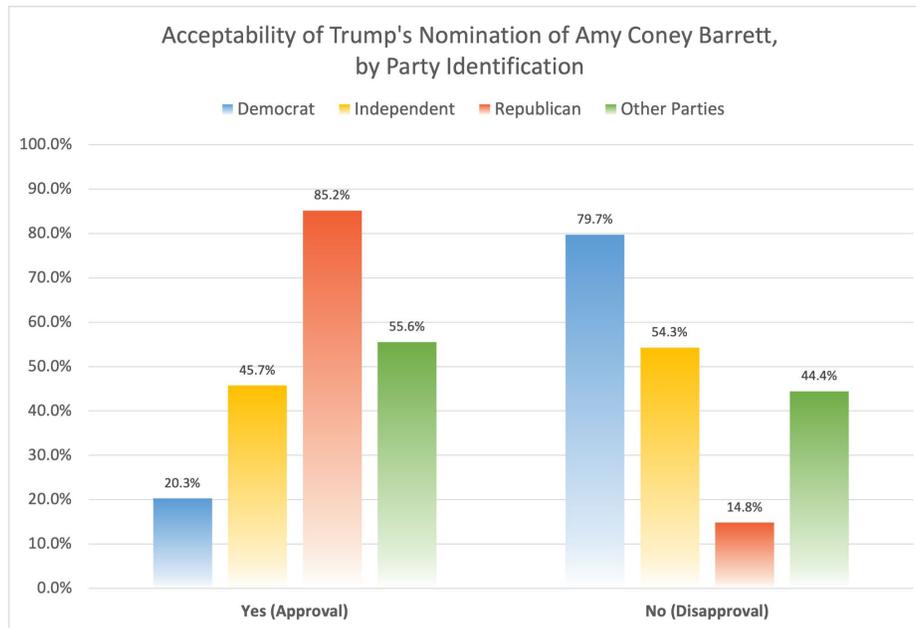
These findings are like the previous graphic in that they suggest a stark difference in polarization between the two parties. Why is it that we are finding that the Democrats on campus are more polarized than Republicans? Noting that our sample size of Republicans is particularly low would this change if there were more Republicans. Looking at our other graphs, they don't necessarily support the same findings. Is it the case then that Republicans on campus cannot afford to be picky about who they are friends with or who they date? Would they become pickier if they had more Republicans to choose from, or are young Republicans simply more liberal than their older counterparts. The actual answer cannot be determined until more data is collected.

Part 3: Partisan Views on Judicial Nominees

About halfway through our survey, we asked respondents to classify the acceptability of the presidents nominating justices to the Supreme Court in their last year in office. This scenario occurred both with President Obama nominating Merrick Garland in March 2016 and President Trump nominating Amy Coney Barrett in September 2020, and both situations became explicitly partisan fights. In asking about the acceptability of each scenario, one after the other and using identical wording, we sought to gauge how polarized Dickinson students are, highlighted by whether they answered differently versus similarly to the two questions. Following the question pair, we asked respondents to explain their answers:
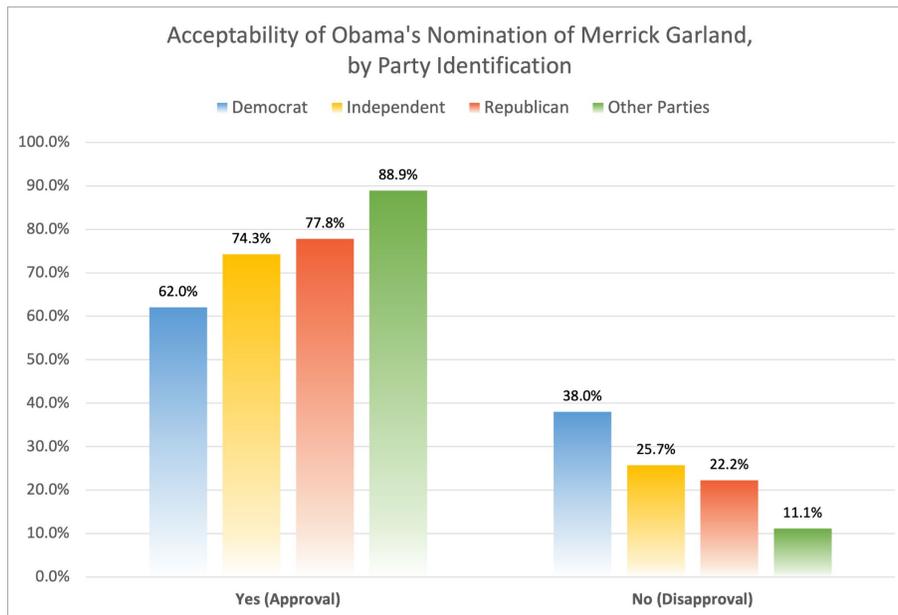
In the first of these two questions, respondents overwhelmingly approved (69% of all respondents) of Obama's nomination of Merrick Garland across all political groups. However, Democrats expressed the most disapproval (38%) of the nomination, rather than Republicans (22.2%) as would otherwise be expected. This is especially interesting considering Democrats represent that largest portion of our respondents, which is reflective of the campus population. Hypothetically, if Democrats on campus maintain political views that are more left-wing than center-left, this could provide indications of dissatisfaction with politics as a whole. This also suggests that Republicans at Dickinson may be more moderate than Republicans in America overall. The results of this question show little polarization among students across political parties by itself, though it does suggest there may be a significant amount of polarization amongst Democrats on campus.

Acceptability of Trump's Nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, by Party Identification

Legend: Democrat, Independent, Republican, Other Parties

Yes (Approval): Democrat 20.3%, Independent 45.7%, Republican 85.2%, Other Parties 55.6%

No (Disapproval): Democrat 79.7%, Independent 54.3%, Republican 14.8%, Other Parties 44.4%

Responses to this additional question are more closely aligned with a significant party divide. In asking about Trump's nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, an overwhelming portion of Republicans (85.2%) approved, whereas a similarly overwhelming portion of Democrats (79.7%) disapproved. Notably, more Democrats expressed disapproval of Barrett's nomination than expressed approval of Garland's nomination, another sign of a potential intra-party divide, at least on campus. Additionally, both Independents and those belonging to Other Parties expressed similar amounts of approval versus disapproval on this nomination, whereas they were much less divided on the prior one. The results of this question only somewhat suggest that students at Dickinson remain polarized, as similar trends were not seen in the previous question and Trump is notably an abnormally polarizing figure.

Only lukewarm levels of polarization are also suggested when analyzing response patterns between the two questions. 38% of respondents approved of both nominations and 30% disapproved of both. That leaves 32% who split their answers and remain polarized, effectively signally that approximately one-third of campus is likely highly polarized. Of those who were split, only 4.2% disapproved of Garland's nomination and approved of Barrett's. Both of these respondents identified as "Very Conservative" and "Republican," but did not provide an explanation. Of the remaining 95.8% who approved of Garland's nomination but not Barrett's, 51% attributed their split answers to the difference in time-frame between the nominations—as noted above, Garland was nominated seven months before the 2016 election, whereas Barrett was nominated several weeks before the 2020 election, including after residents in some states already began early voting. Furthermore, 24% justified a split response as due to the setting of a new precedent in 2016 that should have been followed in 2020, and 17% argued that their split response was due to their perceptions of each nominee's qualifications.

Part 4: Stereotypes and Perceptions of Political Parties

To analyze this section, we focused on the effect political affiliation has on five potential stereotypes and perceptions of Democrats and Republicans. To gather results, we used a Likert scale where we asked the question "Republicans are generally…" followed by five potential stereotypes. Subsequently, we asked respondents "Democrats are generally…" followed by the same five potential stereotypes, following the same question format. The five characteristics we asked respondents about were Racist, Sexist, Homophobic, Xenophobic, and Anti-Semitic. Respondents were asked to respond on a scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" with "Somewhat Agree" and "Somewhat Disagree" in between. For purposes of the graphics, we consolidated "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree" and "Somewhat Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree." The graphics are shown below:
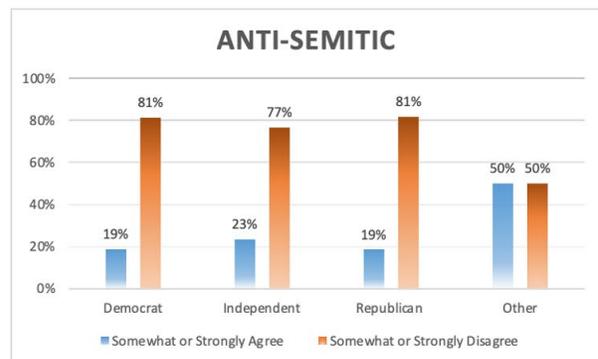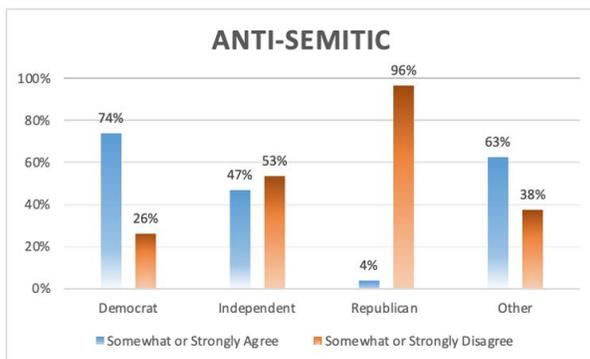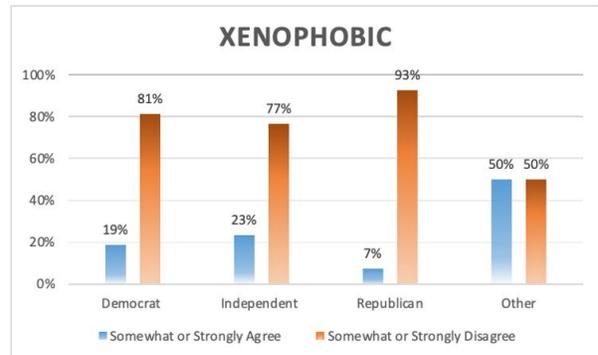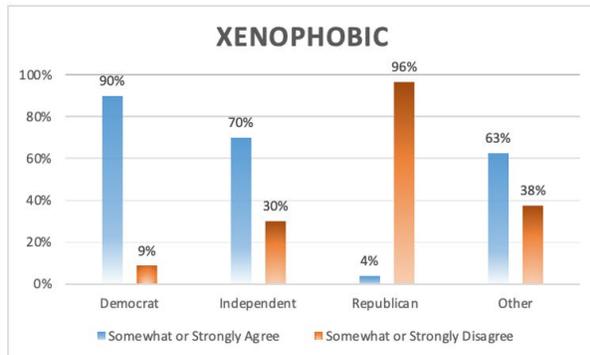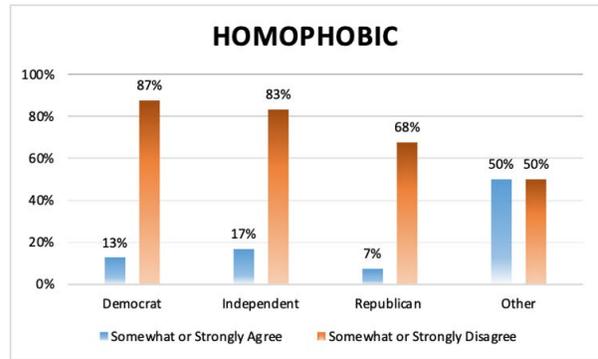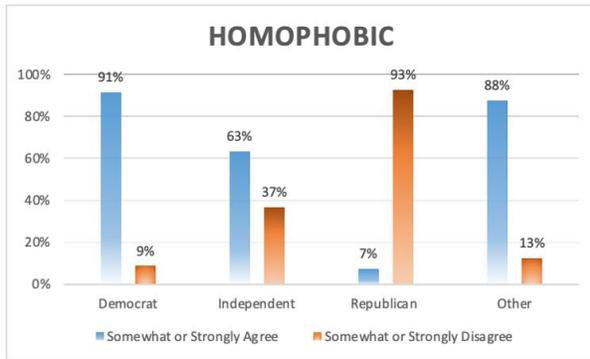
REPUBLICANS ARE GENERALLY...   **DEMOCRATS ARE GENERALLY...**
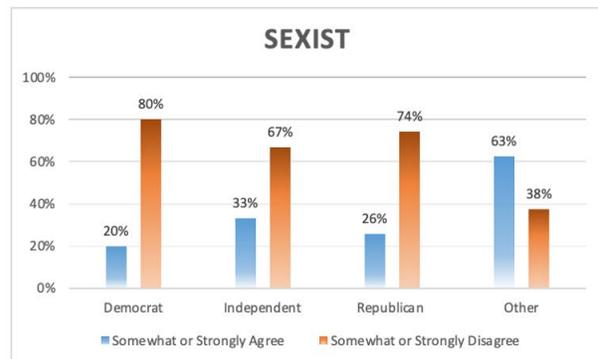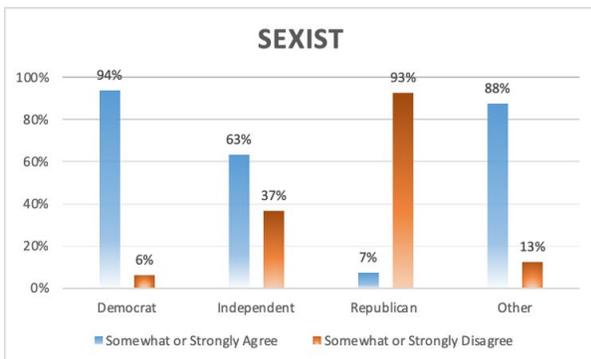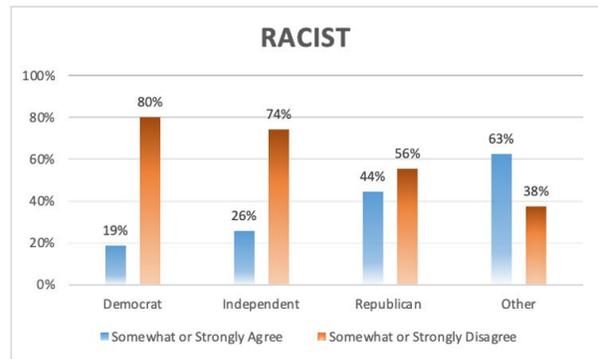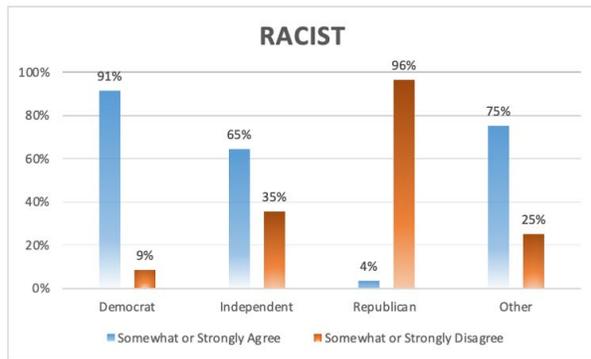
Continued...

REPUBLICANS ARE GENERALLY...   **DEMOCRATS ARE GENERALLY...**

HOMOPHOBIC (left)
Democrat: 91% Somewhat or Strongly Agree, 9% Somewhat or Strongly Disagree
Independent: 63%, 37%
Republican: 7%, 93%
Other: 88%, 13%

HOMOPHOBIC (right)
Democrat: 13%, 87%
Independent: 17%, 83%
Republican: 7%, 68%
Other: 50%, 50%

XENOPHOBIC (left)
Democrat: 90%, 9%
Independent: 70%, 30%
Republican: 4%, 96%
Other: 63%, 38%

XENOPHOBIC (right)
Democrat: 19%, 81%
Independent: 23%, 77%
Republican: 7%, 93%
Other: 50%, 50%

ANTI-SEMITIC (left)
Democrat: 74%, 26%
Independent: 47%, 53%
Republican: 4%, 96%
Other: 63%, 38%

ANTI-SEMITIC (right)
Democrat: 19%, 81%
Independent: 23%, 77%
Republican: 19%, 81%
Other: 50%, 50%

As shown above, the results indicate that party affiliation is strongly correlated with how individuals perceive Republicans and Democrats. First focusing on the graphics to the left of the document, we see a pattern in Republican responses. Republicans disagree with the generalization that Republicans embody any of the five characteristics. In fact, each answer shows that over 90% of Republicans either somewhat or strongly disagree with the above generalizations. However, on the contrary, over 90% of Democrats either somewhat or strongly agree with the above generalizations, with the notable exception of anti-Semitism. Even so, 74% of Democrats still find Republicans to be generally anti-Semitic.

On the right of the document, we see certain trends in the opposite direction. Over 80% of Democrats either somewhat or strongly disagree that Democrats generally embody the five characteristics shown above. However, interestingly, more Republicans somewhat or strongly disagree that Democrats embody the characteristics than somewhat or strongly agree that they do. More Republicans believe that Democrats are generally racist than any other characteristic, yet

even still the majority of Republicans do not believe this is the case (56% do not believe this is the case). Thus, the results indicate Democrats are more likely to think Republicans embody these stereotypes than vice versa.

Independent results are much more divided than either Democrats or Republicans, which is in keeping with Independents remaining more moderate on issues, or swinging right or left depending on the issue at hand. Even still, it is worth nothing that more Independents think Republicans embody these stereotypes than the other way around, with around to 60% agreeing thet Republicans are generally racist, sexist, and homophobic. More than 60% of Independents think Republicans are xenophobic (70%) and fewer Independents think that Republicans are anti-Semitic (47%). As far as Independents' generalization of Democrats, around 20% think they embody all five characteristics, give or take a few percentage points.
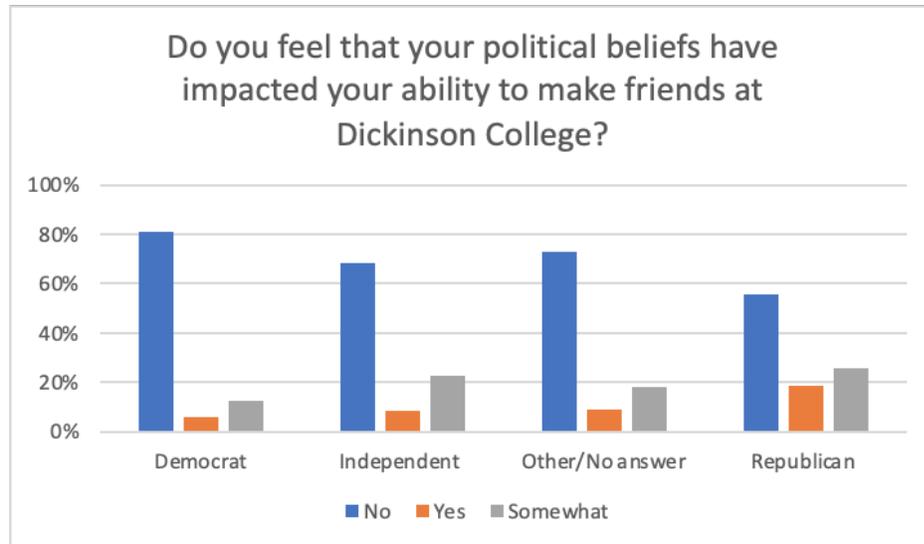
Part 5- Impact of Political Beliefs

In this part of the survey, our group analyzed the impact of political beliefs on social life at Dickinson. We wanted to measure the effects of student's political beliefs on their friendships at Dickinson as well as on social media. We analyzed the results and classified them based on the student's political identity or affiliation. We were able to accomplish this by asking two questions: "Have you unfriended or blocked someone on social media because of their political beliefs?" and "Do you feel that your political beliefs have impacted your ability to make friends at Dickinson College?" Both graphs below represent the results and are color coordinated to reflect the answer selections:
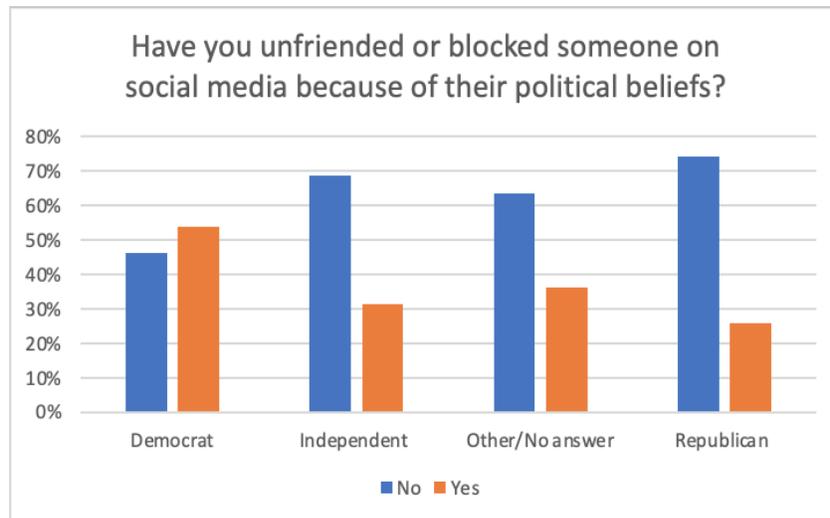
Above, you can see the visual representation of question ten of the survey and the results. In this part of the survey, we looked at the relationship between Democrats and Republicans, and how their political beliefs affected their activity on social media. For this question we asked, "Have you unfriended or blocked someone on social media because of their political beliefs?". Our findings suggest that most people have not unfriended or blocked someone on social media. However, the majority of Democrats responded "yes" to this question. Indicated in our results, 54% of Democrats answered "yes". On the other hand, a small minority of Republicans responded "yes' to this question. Only 26% percent of Republicans answered "yes" to this question.

For our study, our group was able to infer that democrats are more likely than Republicans to block or unfriend someone on social media because of their political beliefs. If you look at the graph on the right, you can see when asked this question, Republicans answered "no" significantly more than Democrats. This coincides with the notion that students on campus are polarized. Democrats are more likely to be affected by someone's political beliefs on social media than Republicans:

Do you feel that your political beliefs have impacted your ability to make friends at Dickinson College?

For an additional assessment on the social impact of political beliefs on political parties, our group asked respondents, "Do you feel that your political beliefs have impacted your ability to make friends at Dickinson?". In this part of our study, we can see that an overwhelmingly large number of respondents answered, "no" to this question. The graph on the above clearly illustrates the large number of "no" answers for this question among democrats, independents, and republicans. In the graph, the blue bars above each political identity and affiliation, represent responses of 70% of the total respondents that participated in our survey. Democrats had the largest number of "no" answers for this question with 81% compared to 56% of Republicans who answered "no".

Although more than half of republicans answered "no" to this question, 45% of republicans answered that their political beliefs have impacted their ability to make friends or has somewhat impacted their ability to make friends. Republicans are twice as likely than Democrats to feel like their political beliefs impacted their ability to make friends at Dickinson.

Conclusion

In our survey, we sought to answer the question of whether the Dickinson College Student body displayed polarized attitudes and behaviors. In analyzing our result to answer that question, we found four key takeaways:

1. An overwhelming plurality of each party—81% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats, respectively—believe their party has the moral high ground over the other side.

2. The vast majority of Democrats (75%) on campus take political affiliation into consideration when becoming friends with someone. In contrast, similar numbers of

Republicans (74%) did *not* take political affiliation into consideration when becoming friends with someone, practically a complete flip.

3. The majority of Democrats believe common stereotypes about Republicans, whereas the reverse was not true for Republicans.

4. Regarding how students interact on campus, we found that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to feel that their political beliefs have impacted their ability to make friends on campus.

These takeaways, as well as our data, show that both parties display relatively polarized attitudes. However, based on our data, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to exhibit affective polarization, which indicates that Democrats were more likely to display negative feelings towards members of the opposing party, as highlighted in takeaways 2-4. This likely has to do with the number of Democrats on campus. Because Democrats form a significant majority on Dickinson's campus, they have more choice, and have the luxury of being selective in who they befriend and form romantic connections with. In regards to takeaway 3, this caveat also means that Democrats have less interaction with Republicans, or in other words, opportunities for stereotypes to potentially be proven wrong, whereas the opposite is not true of Republicans—they have no shortage of interactions with Democrats on campus.

Moving forward, the results of this survey sparked our interest in a few other questions, especially considering whether or not the trends we discovered would hold true in other places. For example, *are there similar trends on other campuses? Would these results be different if you compared a liberal arts school to a state school or research university? Additionally, does age play a factor in the results of this survey? Would we have seen different results if we studied older individuals, or college-aged individuals who elected not to go to college? Are Gen-Z Republicans more liberal than older Republicans?*

While there is much more to be discovered as we move forward with polarization data and research, we think our research shows it is a salient issue on Dickinson's college campus, an issue that truly affects interpersonal relationships on campus. And we think acknowledging polarization is the first step in coming together to fix it or help reduce it.

Works Cited

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(2) Jones, Jeffrey M. "Trump Third Year Sets New Standard for Party Polarization." *Gallup.com*, Gallup, 23 Mar. 2021, news.gallup.com.