# Lesser of Two Evils? Political Organization–Public Relationship in the 2016 Election

**SAGE**

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## Abstract

Using a national sample of first-time voters ($N$ = 1,465), this online survey investigated relationship theory in political public relations. Looking at one's relationship with both major U.S. political parties during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, this study seeks to determine the level of relationship and variables that might predict it. Results indicate that these first-time voters had moderate-to-low relationships with the parties. Even so, relationship with one's party is predicted by authenticity of your party's candidate and the level of credibility you assign your party.

Even from the early days during the presidential primary season, the 2016 election appeared to be like none the nation had seen in sometime. As the pool of candidates narrowed, media coverage portrayed heightened anxiety both within and across the two major political parties. To this point, a January 2016 Pew Research report (Doherty, Kiley, & Johnson, 2016) found that voters were skeptical that any of the 2016 presidential candidates (on both sides) would make good presidents. Their data showed every single candidate had more people asserting the candidates would be "poor" or "terrible" presidents than did "good" or "great."

These tensions intensified past the primary into the general election, leaving questions about how perceived quality of candidates may have weakened voters'

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relationships with their chosen political parties. Focusing on first-time voters during the general election, a national online survey examined the political organization–public relations (POPR) between the voter and that voter's chosen political party. Examining concepts such as reputation, credibility, and authenticity provided a more holistic view of POPR than in previous research. Results will show the relationship between these constructs and tease out the differences in POPR based on political party affiliation. While previous research has examined POPR among first-time voters (Sweetser, 2015), none have examined the interrelatedness of these concepts in such a way or done so during an election so heated.

The 2016 election was framed, repeatedly, by media using a horse race theme. In doing so, the media pitted career politician Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton against the politically inexperienced Republican candidate Donald Trump (Poniewozik, 2016). A key refrain in this coverage was what CNN called voters having to choose between "the lesser of two evils" (Long, 2016). But with only Pew data (Doherty et al., 2016) and numerous anecdotal media reports to support this stance, empirical data are needed to truly understand voters, their choices, and how they made those choices during the 2016 presidential election.

## Literature Review

Political public relations is a growing area, combining the traditional fields of political communication and public relations scholarship (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). For the most part, political public relations focuses on the campaign itself, as a political campaign is similar to a public relations campaign. Sweetser and Tedesco (2014) note "political public relations is still a very traditional form of public relations" (p. 791). Within political public relations, relationship theory has been one of the most heuristic theories for examining the campaigns (Sweetser, 2015).

### Relationship Theory

When it comes to political public relations, scholars have noted the reliance a practitioner places on the success of the campaign is often heavily invested in the concept of *relationship*. Given the relatively short time frame of a political campaign (compared with a corporate branding campaign), political public relations practitioners must rely on the publics' relationship with the political party to quickly build the momentum needed. As such, POPR (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011) research focused on this area provides a helpful lens for understanding how voters come to connect with individual candidates so quickly.

Research on POPR has both focused on the candidate as well as the political party (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser, 2015; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014). Both perspectives are indeed helpful in understanding how voters come to know and support a candidate. On one hand, the public relies on their existing, previous relationship with their political party, which allows the voter to transfer the benefits of the relationship with the party to that party's chosen candidate. This can arguably facilitate that voter's

acceptance of the candidate in adopting the party's candidate as one's own chosen candidate. On the other hand, the voter builds a distinct relationship with the candidate. This becomes an important element in the campaign when candidates are trying to win voters from across party lines, or win over undecided and Independent voters. As further noted by Sweetser, English, and Fernandes (2015), "To be successful, politicians, candidates, political organizations, and other political players all have to identify their publics and then establish and maintain relationships with them" (p. 103). Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011) push this point, and contend that success in both public relations and political public relations relies on the quality of that relationship, be it with the political party or the candidate specifically.

Looking at the relationship with the party, application of the work of Ledingham, Bruning, and Wilson (1999) further suggests the importance of political parties to establish a relationship with young voters as quickly as possible. Ledingham et al. (1999) "recommends that public relations practitioners initiate mutually beneficial relationships with key publics at the earliest possible time" and that they work to "sustain loyalty toward the organization" (p. 167). Ledingham (2001) later asserted that relationship can lead to loyalty in the long-term, which would seemingly benefit the organization during difficult times for the organization.

Sometimes, these organization relationships, however, are not made directly with the political party. For example, a related form of POPR with an organization is illustrated through the relational perspective formed with a proxy group of the party, such as a political action committee. In looking at the impact of engagement from a Super PAC through digital political public relations, Sweetser et al. (2015) found that tweeting at an organization, even if done over a short time span, can create and improve POPR between the voter and the organization. A relationship, presumably, should also be formed with the candidate if the campaign is to be successful. Sweetser and Tedesco (2014) researched this type of POPR, finding that some POPR factors are more influenced than others by a public relations tactic from a political figure. For example, in their experiment, Sweetser and Tedesco (2014) found that those who listened to an election victory speech displayed higher levels of positivity/optimism and human voice with regard to POPR. Given that this POPR research is an emerging theoretical lens for political public relations research, the current study seeks to extend the relational paradigm by looking at first-time voters.

## Credibility and Authenticity

Kim, Kiousis, and Molleda (2015) consider credibility and authenticity to be "critical" factors related to success of public relations efforts. To this point, these concepts have been investigated as antecedents to POPR. Intertwined as they are, the concepts will be examined in this study.

Rawlins (2009) suggested that authenticity plays a key role in organizations maintaining quality relationships with their publics. Direct communication can aid in creating authenticity, especially when political candidates communicate via social media such as Twitter (Lee & Lim, 2016). Shen and Kim (2012) presented truthfulness,

transparency, and consistency as markers of authenticity in public relations. Molleda (2010) submits that to be authentic, the subject—whether it be an organization or a public figure—must match its conduct with its values, beliefs, mission, and so on. According to Men and Tsai (2014, p. 421), the definitive attributes of authenticity are the concept "is grounded in truthfulness and consistency." In their study examining the interplay between POPR and authenticity, Men and Tsai (2014) note the cycle of the public's engagement with an organization, their perception of authenticity, and relationship.

## Research Questions

The following research questions are posed:

> **Research Question 1:** How strong, or weak, is the POPR for first-time voters with their own political party?
> **Research Question 2:** How credible do first-time voters find the two main U.S. political parties?
> **Research Question 3:** How do first-time voters' perception of their party and candidate, if at all, predict POPR?

## Method

This study is a national online survey of first-time voters in the United States during the hot phase of the 2016 presidential election.

Relationship was measured here using Sweetser and Kelleher's (2016) abbreviated 11-item organization–public relationship scale. This scale is a reduced battery, built from extensive relationship research. This scale was presented to all respondents twice—once to measure his or her relationship with the Democratic Party and once to measure his or her relationship with the Republican Party. As such, respondents not only completed the scale potentially for their own party but also the opposing party (and Independents completed for the major parties).

Because this scale includes both in- and out-group determinations of relationship, the scale was summed into a single relationship index instead of using the traditional factor analysis method. A factor analysis for both Democratic Party and Republican Party relationship indicated that the scales can both be considered either unidimensional or multidimensional. The unidimensional solution for relationship with the Democratic Party explained 60.60% of the variance, with a second factor only adding an additional 10.49% of the variance. The unidimensional solution for relationship with the Republican Party explained 62.71% of the variance, with only an additional 8.60% of variance being added by second (forced) factor. Given that the common threshold of explaining at least 60% of the variance was obtained for both relationship series, for parsimony sake, the analysis continued with a single, unidimensional factor for each separate political party POPR.

Four items measured credibility for the each political party on believability, accuracy, fairness, and depth on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Reliability for respondents'

assessment of credibility for the Democratic Party ($\alpha = .89$) and Republican Party ($\alpha = .92$) were reliable. The four credibility items were summed into a single index to separately represent credibility for the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.

Authenticity was measured on a 10-item, 5-point Likert-type scale (Louden & McCauliff, 2004; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014) for each candidate. The scale was reliable for both Hillary Clinton ($\alpha = .89$) and Donald Trump ($\alpha = .82$). Items in this scale included, for example, agreement that the candidate is "transparent in revealing its operations," "going to do what he or she says he or she will do," and "consistent between presented positions on issues and actual actions taken," among others. These 10 items were summed into a single index for analysis, as previously done with these measures.

Additional demographic questions, such as political party identification, strength of affiliation, support for candidates, opposition for candidates, and so on, were asked of respondents in the survey.

## Results

The survey was completed by 1,465 respondents in the months and days leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Respondents indicated that they were from California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, among other locations. The respondents were 65.2% ($n = 955$) female, 28% ($n = 410$) male, with the remainder indicating transgender or declined to provide gender. The respondents were, on average, 20 years old ($M = 20.78$; $SD = 4.52$), indicating that this data set properly targeted the first-time voter.

### Respondent Voting Behavior

A majority of respondents were registered voters at the time of taking the survey (78.8%; $n = 1,155$). Given that those living in the United States—whether registered voters—are affected by the political parties and the eventual successful candidate, all respondents surveyed were used in the data analysis. Different from traditional political communication research where only actual voters may be of interest, political parties and candidates must create relationships with supporters and nonsupporters throughout the campaign cycle.

More than half of respondents said that they had never voted before in an election (52.8%; $n = 773$), and nearly a third indicated that they had last voted in the most recent presidential primary (31.7%; $n = 465$). These findings indicate that the first-time voter demographic was well-represented in the data.

### Political Party and Candidate Preferences

Respondents indicated their political party identification, choosing from the researcher-provided options of Democrat (40.6%; $n = 596$), Independent (19.6%; $n = 287$), Libertarian (5.1%; $n = 74$), Republican (23.4%; $n = 343$), or "other" (5.1%; $n = 74$).

With regard to vote choice, a majority of respondents indicated that they most wanted Hillary Clinton to be president (51.2%; $n = 750$), followed by Donald Trump (21.4%; $n =$

314), Gary Johnson (14.1%; *n* = 206), and Jill Stein (4.9%; *n* = 72). The remainder of respondents did not indicate presidential choice. The candidates for vote choice were provided by the researcher, based on the four most popular candidates during the hot phase of the campaign, and included two main party candidates (Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party and Donald Trump for the Republican Party) as well as the top two third-party choices (Gary Johnson for the Libertarian Party and Jill Stein for the Green Party).

Knowing that the 2016 Election served as a unique time in that voters were said to be choosing from candidates they did not like verses those they did not like even more, respondents were asked to rate both their support and opposition for each of the main four candidates on a 7-point Likert-type scale. With regard to support, respondents said that they most strongly supported Hillary Clinton (*M* = 4.13; *SD* = 2.23), followed by Gary Johnson (*M* = 3.52; *SD* = 1.68), Jill Stein (*M* = 3.15; *SD* = 1.51), and Donald Trump (*M* = 2.63; *SD* = 2.04). Note that even the highest level of support here is lukewarm. Focusing next on how strong respondents opposed candidates, they indicated that they most opposed Donald Trump (*M* = 5.36; *SD* = 2.07), Jill Stein (*M* = 4.33; *SD* = 1.49), Gary Johnson (*M* = 4.07; *SD* = 1.59), and Hillary Clinton (*M* = 3.98; *SD* = 2.29). These findings indicate that while respondents indeed preferred Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump, their support for Clinton was overall neutral.

## Relationship

Relationship was treated as a unidimensional construct separately for both relationship with the Democratic Party and relationship with the Republican Party. For both parties, respondents indicated neutral-to-low levels of relationship, as seen in Table 1.

Focusing on the relationship one has with one's own political party revealed somewhat better results, though still short of being a "good" relationship. In answering Research Question 1, which asked about the strength of POPR first-time voters have with their own political party, the data were separated for within group analysis.

For self-identified Democrats (*n* = 595), the overall relationship index score was 3.75 out of 5 (*SD* = 0.80). Understandably, these Democrats indicated that their relationship with the Republican Party was much lower (*M* = 2.21; *SD* = 0.78). For self-identified Republicans, they reported their relationship with their own party to be neutral (*M* = 3.52; *SD* = 0.78). The Republicans then indicated their relationship with Democratic Party as low (*M* = 2.67; *SD* = 0.74).

## Credibility

Research Question 2 asked about the level of credibility respondents held for each party. Credibility was measured among all respondents, separately, for the Democratic Party (*M* = 3.15; *SD* = 0.95) and the Republican Party (*M* = 2.58; *SD* = 1.01), using a 4-item, 5-point Likert-type scale. The Democratic Party credibility score was 3.78 (*SD* = 0.68) by Democrats and 2.31 (*SD* = 0.78) by Republicans. The Republican Party was rated 3.64 (*SD* = 0.84) by Republicans and 2.07 (*SD* = 0.78) by Democrats. As such, it appears first-time voters, regardless of party affiliation, view their party as nearly

**Table 1.** First-Time Voters' Relationship With the Two Main Political Parties.

| Item | Democratic Party | Republican Party |
|---|---|---|
| Communicates desire to build relationship with the public | 3.69 | 3.02 |
| Implies relationship has future/long-term commitment | 3.62 | 3.05 |
| Uses a positive/optimistic tone | 3.60 | 2.50 |
| Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a relationship | 3.53 | 2.89 |
| Expresses cheer and optimism about the future | 3.68 | 2.71 |
| Provides prompt/uncritical feedback when addressing criticism | 2.96 | 2.40 |
| Positively address complaints or queries | 3.07 | 2.37 |
| Would admit mistakes | 3.63 | 2.28 |
| Makes communication enjoyable | 3.15 | 2.55 |
| Uses a sense of humor in communication | 3.28 | 2.80 |
| Provides connections to competitors | 3.13 | 2.79 |

*Note.* The statistics in this table include all respondents to the survey (not subsets for one particular political party). The Cronbach interitem correlation coefficient alpha for the relationship with the Democratic Party was .934 and the alpha for relationship with the Republican Party was .940.

equally credible and rather neutrally in that regard. Members of each party, additionally, find the other party to not be credible though the difference is not as large of a gulf as one would expect.

## Authenticity

The concept of authenticity was measured for each of the two main party candidates, using a 10-item, 5-point Likert-type scale. The overall set of respondents found Hillary Clinton neutral with regard to authenticity ($M = 3.05$; $SD = 0.85$). Democrats raised their opinion of her authenticity only slightly ($M = 3.52$; $SD = 0.72$) where Republicans found her to be inauthentic ($M = 2.41$; $SD = 0.69$). Respondents overall found Donald Trump to be similarly authentic ($M = 3.29$; $SD = 0.81$). Republicans found their own candidate to be more authentic ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 0.71$) than the Democrats rated him on authenticity ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 0.76$). As such, it appears that both Republicans and Democrats alike rated Trump as more authentic than Clinton, though such ratings remain a neutral score for authenticity.

## Predicting Relationship With Your Own Party

Research Question 3 asked how first-time voters' perception of their party and candidate might, if at all, predict POPR. To answer this, a series of linear regression

equations were run for each of the two main political parties to determine whether their level of credibility for their own party, strength of their own political party affiliation, perception of authenticity for their party's candidate, or support for their party's candidate might predict relationship with their party. As such, relationship served as the dependent variable and the aforementioned perception factors served as independent variables. Identical regression analysis were run for Democrats and Republicans, to focus on in-group predictors.

The regression equation for Democrats statistically significantly predicted relationship with the Democratic Party, showing perceived authenticity of Hillary Clinton ($\beta$ = .112, $p$ = .023) and credibility of the Democratic Party ($\beta$ = .346, $p \leq$ .001) play a role (adjusted $R^2$ = .193, $p \leq$ .001). The respondent's support for Hillary Clinton and respondent's strength of affiliation with Democratic Party are not significant predictors.

Looking at Republicans, a linear regression predicting relationship with the Republican Party yielded similar yet stronger results (adjusted $R^2$ = .503, $p \leq$ .001). As in the case with the other main political party, Republican's relationship with their political party were predicted by perceived authenticity of their party's candidate (Donald Trump; $\beta$ = .107, $p$ = .028) and their assigned level of credibility toward the Republican Party ($\beta$ = .575, $p \leq$ .001). Support for the party's candidate (Donald Trump) and the respondent's affiliation with the Republican Party were not significant predictors.

In both cases for predicting one's relationship with their own political party, adding opposition to the other main party's candidate as a dependent variable did not affect the results. That is, including a Republican's level of opposition to Hillary Clinton as a means to predict one's relationship with the Republican party, and vice versa, did not provide significant results.

### Predicting Candidate Support

As a post hoc investigation, a linear regression was run on each set of respondents from the two main political parties to investigate whether support for their party's candidate could be predicted by strength of affiliation with their party, perceived level of credibility of their party, relationship with their party, and level of opposition to the other party's candidate. The dependent variable was support for the respondent's own candidate, and the predictor independent variables dealt with perception of one's own party as well as opposing the other party's candidate.

For Democrats, support for Hillary Clinton could be predicted (adjusted $R^2$ = .341, $p \leq$ .001) by strength of affiliation with the Democratic party ($\beta$ = .231, $p \leq$ .001), credibility of the party ($\beta$ = .365, $p \leq$ .001), and opposition to Donald Trump ($\beta$ = .159, $p \leq$ .001).

For Republicans, support for Donald Trump could be predicted by all of the independent variables, including relationship with the Republican Party (adjusted $R^2$ = .398, $p \leq$ .001). That is, for first-time voting Republicans support for Donald Trump was significantly predicted by strength of affiliation to the Republican Party ($\beta$ = .198, $p \leq$ .001), credibility of the Republican Party ($\beta$ = .322, $p \leq$ .001), relationship with the

Republican Party (β = .142, *p* = .018), and how much the respondent opposed Hillary Clinton (β = .179, *p* ≤ .001).

## Discussion

While the media portrayed the 2016 election options as making voters choose between the "lesser of two evils," it appears that first-time voters did not have a pessimistic view. While a seemingly sematic difference, it instead appeared that voters had to choose between two candidates about whom they were unenthusiastic. While opposition to the other party's candidate did appear to play a role in predicting one's support for one's own party candidate, the data showed that comparisons of support for a particular candidate was close in-line with opposition for that same candidate. Furthermore, these first-time voters generally towed the party line in support of their own party's candidate. This finding stands out amid the data to reveal that even with overall weak-to-moderate relationships with one's party, the first-time voters are still taking cues from their party about candidate choice.

Further focusing on relationship with first-time voters, both of the U.S. main political parties appear to be lacking. Consider Seltzer and Zhang's (2011) assertion that the length of time a relationship is established matters in a POPR. It appears here that political parties are not doing well with regard to building that relationship, which may have resulted in lower assessments and lack of enthusiasm for their candidates. The perceived party relationship for Democrats was 3.75 and for Republicans 3.52, out of 5. Certainly, Seltzer, Zhang, Gearhart, and Conduff (2013) argue that relationships take time to develop which may mean that with these first-time voters as being new to the system, their relationship begins at a lower point and it will potentially grow. That said, Sweetser (2015) takes a more interpersonal communication approach noting that most relationships go through a "honeymoon" phase. In this case, the data for these first-time voters would optimistically be interpreted using the Seltzer et al. (2013) notion that the relationship will grow or, more pessimistically using the Sweetser (2015) view, that the relationship is off to a rocky start.

With regard to credibility and authenticity, these variables have been said to be key attributes of POPR. Here, the data revealed that first-time voters, regardless of party affiliation, held nearly equal views of their own party's credibility. Those assessments were noted to be rather neutral, not breaking into the "agree" range for agreement that their party is credible. Comparing the difference between credibility of one's own party with one's similar ranking for the other party, the findings reflect the expected lower level of credibility. However, the difference between the credibility of one's own party and the opposing party is not as large of a gulf as one would expect.

Focusing only on authenticity, both groups rated Donald Trump as more authentic. Reflecting on the media coverage of the candidates, media reports often echoed this by calling Clinton out as being too "robotic" and Trump as "tweeting what he thinks as he thinks it." As such, these findings are in line with what the popular view of the candidates was at the time. The larger question, however, remains: How important is it for a presidential candidate to be authentic? Is that level of transparency and genuineness

more important than experience and political prowess? The data here do not attempt to dig into those questions, but future research should further examine.

In predicting both POPR as well as support for one's party's candidate, there were nearly identical results for both the Republican and Democratic first-time voters. This suggests that regardless of party affiliation, first-time voters respond to the same cues as they enter into their first election cycle. In these data, one of the most interesting findings was that opposition for the other party's candidate nearly equally played a role in support for one's own party's candidate.

## Limitations

This study is not without limitation. The focus on the first-time voter, while interesting in establishing a baseline for how relationship with one's political party may evolve (or devolve) over time, is in itself a limitation. These voters have limited ability draw on their experiences to assess relationship. A panel study involving more data points along the life span of the relationship with one's party may be better suited for revealing truths about the complex phenomenon and how it plays into voting and political participation.

## Future Research

The results here about the lackluster relationship but continued reliance on the party's candidate deserve more attention from scholars. From the moderate levels of POPR, to the lackluster assessment of credibility and authenticity, it appears as if first-time voters are not enthusiastic about the options presented in terms of party and candidates. More research should be done to track cohorts as they gain political participation experience to see if POPR or perceived credibility and authenticity toward the party wane or strengthen.

The media coverage—and political polls—during the 2016 U.S. presidential election portrayed the race as one for which voters would have to choose the lesser of two evils. Such framing of the election for first-time voters may have created an anticlimatic effect, paralyzing them from truly getting excited about their chosen political party and their party's presidential candidate. Rather than an electrically charged first-time voter, these data portrayed a group who appeared to be unimpressed and uninspired by their party's candidate. Contrary, however, to the media's horse race portrayal, these first-time voters were not exceptionally opposed to the other party's candidates. Given the moderate levels of POPR with one's political party seen in these first-time voters, it appears that weak relational maintenance on the part of both parties may have been involved in voters' overall lackluster feelings toward the party and candidate this election cycle.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

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