Consumer Preference in Politics: Polarization in the US Two-Party System

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Consumer Preference in Politics:
Polarization in the US Two-Party System

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Abstract

This paper uses marketing analytics to analyze the current segmentation and positioning of the US two-party political system. In the literature review, the political parties will be illustrated as they exist in 2024 after a brief historical outline beginning with party politics post WWII. The current 2024 platforms and most polarizing issues will also be outlined in this section. This research aims to answer the following questions. Can marketing segmentation and positioning reveal the most and least polarizing party issues in the United States today? How do current presidential front runners fit into the larger US two-party system? Do their values align or are they detached from traditional party belief systems? Is there a way to reduce party polarization? How are the Republican and Democratic parties most similar? Three studies with varying demographic makeups have been analyzed resulting in the overarching conclusions that marketing analytics can be used in this way to reveal where Democrats and Republicans from various generations most differ, and which issues can pull them back together. This information is today more critical than ever, as the 2024 US presidential election cycle rapidly approaches.

Keywords: Political Parties, Political Ideology, Political Issues, Political Polarization, Marketing Analytics
Consumer Preference in Politics:

Polarization in the US Two-Party System

The political climate in the United States today may be more turbulent than ever before. Republicans and Democrats grow ideologically farther apart by the minute and utilize strong rhetoric to further polarize supporters. Democrats push farther to the left, and Republicans to the right, causing an ever-increasing political divide and making it harder for leaders to compromise. As a presidential election fast approaches, it appears voters are dissatisfied with both the Democrat incumbent and the anticipated Republican nominee and are unhappy with the state of the US government today.

In this paper, I will be applying marketing analytics to investigate the current state of voters’ perceptions of key political issues within the US two-party system. Marketers commonly use segmentation and positioning to gain a better understanding of the marketplace and to increase their chances of a successful drive to purchase. Marketing segmentation is a method for dividing consumers into subsets that share common needs, wants, characteristics, and/or behaviors and then targeting these segments by creating offerings that are specifically tailored to the segments (Kardes et al. 2024). Positioning is a strategy that is designed to differentiate an offering from its competition and communicate this difference in a way that provides a competitive advantage. The true measure of positioning is how the consumer perceives the offering (brand) compared to the competition (Kardes et al. 2024).

From a political perspective, the voter can be viewed as the consumer, and the political parties and candidates can be viewed as the offerings or brands. As a result, it should be useful to use segmentation techniques to better understand what issues are important to voters and how similarities or differences separate voters into different segments. Furthermore, positioning
analysis provides important information about how consumers perceive political parties and candidates in relation to the important political issues.

In this paper, I will first review the historical background of the two major US political parties and describe how they exist today. I will briefly discuss segmentation and positioning analyses before using these analytical methods to position and segment the defined US political parties from a marketing perspective.

Literature Review

To evaluate the political parties and candidates of today, a historical look at how these ideologies shifted and formed over time provides important context. Before creating this timeline, each party will be broadly defined as described by US embassies to those abroad in basic and easy-to-understand terminology.

Party Definitions

The Republican Party is considered the traditionally conservative party. Broadly, Republicans advocate for more classically “traditional values” while encouraging a lower degree of government involvement. Family and individual freedoms rest at the forefront of policy, and state or local rights are more often promoted over federal involvement. Republicans are “pro-business-oriented” meaning they are promoters of free market capitalism and oppose tight government regulations. While not all members of the Republican party support its entire platform, generally, Republicans are in support of “pro-life” or anti-abortion legislation and are opponents of strong gun regulation in favor of safeguarding the individual right to bear arms and the second amendment (Presidential Elections and the American Political System, n.d.).

Democrats lean left, in favor of a more liberal interpretation of regulation. Democrats generally advocate for strong government involvement and the strong regulation of business.
Democrats advocate for social responsibility and feel the government holds this responsibility to create equity and welfare for all individuals. Democrats generally favor the women’s right to abortion and promote tighter gun regulation (*Presidential Elections and the American Political System*, n.d.).

**Historical Context**

Democrats and Republicans haven’t always existed at political ends. How have these parties developed over time? When did polarization begin to grow and how do they exist today?

The most relevant historical context to the current parties begins post WWII with a brief discussion of the New Deal Coalition and its connection to Civil Rights. The coalition began in the 1930s and continued into the 60s but was pivotal to shifting Republican values towards less government involvement and regulation. African Americans were first integrated into the Democratic Party at this time. The New Deal, the solution to Post WWII struggles, became associated with the new idea of racial liberalism which caused many Republicans to begin to support less government regulation relating to racial inequality. Civil rights issues steadily grew more polarized in the 1940s, and a critical juncture came when Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater took drastically different stances on the Civil Rights Act in 1964, causing polarization on policy and civil rights. Therefore, “The Civil Rights case is often taken as a leading example for the idea that public opinion generally follows cues from national party elites, with mass partisans polarizing on issues when these elites provide clear, distinct cues” (Schickler, 2013, p. 76).

The Civil Rights issue spans additional presidencies, and Harry Truman’s presidency provides a piece of context to ever-increasing polarization, in this case within the Democratic Party. Southern Democrats were enraged by Truman’s support for Civil Rights legislation and
created an additional faction momentarily called the “Dixiecrat Faction” who argued in strong favor of states’ rights, which eventually becomes a strong point of the Republican Party. Truman won due in large part to old support from the New Deal Coalition, thus proving that old party support can remain strong, and revealing the importance of the coalition to the foundation of the Democratic Party (The Election of 1948 | Harry S. Truman, n.d.).

As revealed through Truman’s election and the New Deal, Democrats at this point supported a wider government response to the war and were beginning to position themselves as the Civil Rights party. This support grew in the 50s and 60s. In this same historical period, the Korean War was a prominent point of conflict between parties, shaping ideology. The Republican Party initially supported US involvement in this war, but flipped, providing insight into current Republican views towards US involvement abroad. At this point in time, both parties united in a similar way to WWII, in opposition to violence and the expansion of communism (Caridi, 1968).

At this same time, another prominent political issue begins brewing: The War on Drugs, “the modern drug war began in the 1950s, with liberals—not conservatives—leading the charge. In California, the epicenter of the early war on narcotics, white suburban grassroots movements prodded liberal politicians like Governor Pat Brown into action. They blamed “pushers,” usually perceived and depicted as people of color, and demanded that elected officials crack down on the drug supply” (America’s War on Drugs Was Always Bipartisan—And Unwinnable, 2023, para. 4). Similarly to the Republican stance during the Korean War, Democrats grow to switch sides. Early opposition provides relevant background context to the parties as they exist in current capacities.
It would be remiss to refrain from discussion of the Cold War, a widely known and extremely significant historical moment to US politics. It is important to note that Democrats originally supported military spending, while Republicans were critical of it, but by the 60s, these policy points had evidently swapped (Fordham, 2007). John F. Kennedy then quickly inherited the idea of containment or “mutually assured destruction.” He created a somewhat flexible defense response, led through the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam, and focused in many ways on minority populations. The Kennedy/Nixon election is the moment when politics first becomes televised, and the Republican weakness at this time was a downplaying of party attachment. “Nixon downplayed his party attachment while Kennedy stressed his – a clear indicator of the labels’ contrasting value” (Mason, 2011, p.148). This is another pivotal moment; politics is suddenly televised, and national party leaders are beginning to strongly align themselves with wider reaching party beliefs. The political parties become more defined at increasingly opposing points.

After Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, and the Watergate Scandal, Gerald Ford succeeds Nixon to become President and quickly pardons him before Jimmy Carter takes over in the aftermath. President Carter acts as a competent and compassionate president, and “his approach emphasized the maintenance of peace, the pursuit of human rights, the achievement of nuclear non-proliferation, the necessity of international cooperation, and a focus on the developing world rather than on East-West concerns” (Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian, n.d. para. 4). Carter represents a compassionate, human rights focused Democratic leader, crucial to the development of the larger Democratic party and the stereotypes often associated with it.
The next point of historical interest to this research is the September 11th attacks during the presidency of George W. Bush. Pew Research (https://www.pewresearch.org/) suggests an interesting trend; George W. Bush saw his approval rating skyrocket 35% in just three weeks. After the attacks, 86% of all adults, including 96% of Republicans and a majority 78% of Democrats approved of Bush (Doherty, 2021). This is another pivotal historic moment and possibly one of the last large events that unifies rather than polarizes Democrats and Republicans. Moments like the initial onset of the Cold War and the end of WWII had similar impacts, but Bush provides a last significant instance of unification across party lines as America shifts to more modern history with the presidencies of Barak Obama, Donald Trump, and now Joe Biden.

Brack Obama being the first African American president highlights an additional voter segment rising in importance today. Obama’s presidency creates a unique critique of the Democratic party, that being that Democrats are “too weak” or “too liberal” to handle foreign threats. His election also introduces the idea of the “wine track” voter in contrast to Clinton’s “beer track” which is essentially the liberal youthful voter or “urbanites and college educated whites and supports from African Americans” (Schaller, 2010, p. 33). Obama’s election represents shifting voter segments and populations; younger voters may be shifting the ideologies of the larger Democrat and Republican parties. It’s possible a discernable shift may surface in further analysis.

The election and presidency of Donald Trump was a defining moment for the current state and makeup of the Republican Party. He has once again risen to popular attention as the likely nominee for the next upcoming 2024 election in the fall. The January 6th insurrection was a pivotal moment, and even while facing criminal and civil charges, he continues to trend in
polling. There’s no doubt he has changed the face of the Republican Party, by turning supporters to distrust the media, by attacking his opposition and government institutions, and by raising skepticisms about the reliability of elections (Greenwood, 2022).

This finally leads to present day and current party polarization under President Joe Biden. Recent Pew Research finds that Democrats and Republicans are farther apart today ideologically than at any time over the last fifty years. Individually, the current parties are more ideologically cohesive than ever before while moving farther from the so-called ideological center. Research proves that “the middle” has essentially vanished from present politics (DeSilver, 2022). NPR research further breaks all voters into nine categories being “Faith and Flag Conservatives (10%), Committed Conservatives (7%), Populist Right (11%), Ambivalent Right (12%), Stressed Sideliners (15%), Outsider Left (10%), Democratic Mainstays (16%), Establishment Liberals (13%), and Progressive Left (6%) (Montanaro, 2021). The parties are broken apart, ideologically at ends far from each other just as an election fast approaches.

Past research provides background for the development of survey questions and terminology which is further explained in the methods section of this paper. Abortion and reproductive rights currently stand at a 42-point partisan gap, farther than any point in history, with each party supporting drastically different yet specific clarifying points (Hartig, 2022). This divide is referred to as a “culture war”, stating those who support abortion access share little to no moral beliefs to those against it (Mouw & Sobel, 2001). Other significant polarizing issues include climate change (Kennedy, 2023), racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement (Rose, 2020), gun regulation (Center, 2021), news and media coverage (Vasist et al., 2023), distrust in the government (Who’s Suppressed Next? Partisan Polarization and Voter Suppression
in Post-Trump America, n.d.), border control and immigration (Immigration, Race & Political Polarization, 2021), and international threats (Heath, 2018).

As described, the parties have over time shifted and positioned themselves at specific points that today exist at a heightened distance from one another. Throughout history and across presidencies, specific issues and differences have been utilized to gain or detract voters leading to their current ideological positions at present.

Segmentation and Positioning Analysis

As discussed in the introduction, segmentation analysis is a marketing analytics methodology that uses multivariate statistical techniques (e.g., cluster analysis) to segment the consumer market based off consumer similarities and differences. For example, using a survey, consumers would be asked to rate how important specific attributes are to a product category. The analysis would then use these responses to group the consumers into different market segments. The results of the analysis can be displayed on a segmentation map, which aides in interpretation of the findings. Positioning analysis is a marketing analytics methodology that also uses multivariate statistical techniques (e.g., multi-dimensional scaling) to identify how different offerings (brands) are perceived to be similar or different by the consumer on various important attributes. It also allows researchers to identify important dimensions relevant to consumer perception. The results of the analysis can be displayed on a perceptual map, which aides in interpretation of the findings. Again, in this paper, we will be viewing voters as consumers and political parties and candidates as offerings or brands. (Hair et al, 2010; Lilien et al, 2013).

In this paper, a segmentation analysis will be used to identify different voter segments based on their views of important political issues, and a positioning analysis will provide
important information about how consumers perceive political parties and candidates in relation to the important political issues. Segmentation and positioning allow marketers to better define consumer groups across various demographics and dimensions. Consumer patterns and preferences are often generationally very different, and marketers face the issue of utilizing various tactics to reach generations with different wants and needs. From a political perspective, voters are drastically different on a generation scale, and research highlights some of these differences, including how older voters are more often Republican and more strongly identify with party affiliation, while younger voters are more Democratic and have weaker party affiliations (Nadeem, 2024). Looking at the political parties through a marketing lens with a focus on generational differences will provide valuable context to how political parties and candidates are currently perceived by those with the power to vote. In this paper, I will be providing multiple analyses using several different samples populations to investigate the following research questions.

- Can marketing segmentation and positioning analysis help to reveal the most and least polarizing party issues in the United States today?
- How do current presidential front runners fit into the larger US two-party system? Do their values align or are they detached from traditional party belief systems?
- Is there a way to reduce party polarization? How are the Republican and Democratic parties most similar?

**Methods**

Research was conducted via the survey platform Qualtrics and distributed via the national survey database Prolific. Segmentation and positioning analyses were conducted via the marketing analytics software Enginius (https://www.enginius.biz/). Three different generational
samples were collected utilizing the same survey methods. As mentioned in the literature review, segmentation via cluster analysis was used to identify the two parties, while multidimensional scaling created the perceptual map based on political party and presidential nominee on a 2-dimensional plane. Study 1 focused on a national adult sample, with no age restriction. Study 2a and 2b focused on the youngest voter population, Generation Z, while study 3 sampled the oldest voter population, Baby Boomers, with the intent of identifying whether generational differences have a strong impact on party perception.

Participants

Respondents were gathered via the online survey platform Prolific and an additional sample was a student sample collected via word of mouth from a university in the northeastern United States.

Procedure

Survey questions were developed to analyze 20 political issues developed from a research study run by the Pew Research Center analyzing the top problems in the US today as defined by Democrats and Republicans (Nadeem, 2023). These issues were listed as problems and are as follows: gun violence, construction of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure, illegal immigration, the affordability of healthcare, the federal budget deficit, climate change, violent crime, the quality of public k-8 schools, inflation, international terrorism, the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together in Washington, the state of moral values in the country today, racism, unemployment, domestic terrorism, and drug addiction. In addition to the original sixteen issues developed via Pew, four additional issues were added and analyzed due to current media attention and current events including reproductive rights, mental health, US involvement in foreign conflict, and government involvement in educational curriculum.
The segmentation question read “How much of a problem do you think each of the following are in the country today?” (5-point scale ranging from 5 = a very big problem to 1 = not a problem at all). The positioning questions read “what is your perception of how concerned [The Republican Party, The Democratic Party, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden] is with the following? (5-point scale ranging from 5 = extremely concerned to 1 = not concerned at all). Addition questions included questions about respondents’ feelings on the current state of the government today, and questions about voter affiliation and the upcoming election.

Results

Study 1

Study 1 consisted of 302 respondents from the US split evenly between male and female respondents, with English as a first language, and were selected from a pool of 53,191 potential respondents. In total, 50% of respondents were female, 48% were male, and the remaining 2% answered “other.” Household income was generally spread across the scale with no clear disparities, and the largest segment at 40% of respondents had completed a four-year degree at time of response. Most respondents, 80%, identified as white. A total of 50% of respondents identified as Democrat in some way across a scale of strong to leaning while only 20% identified as Republican in some capacity, and the remaining 28% identified as independent. It is important to mention this disparity, which lead to an adjustment in the additional two studies to increase Republican respondents.

Segmentation Analysis

The segmentation analysis was performed using Enginius Marketing Engendering software (https://www.enginius.biz/). The analysis initially divided the voters into four general segments. Although in this type of analysis, the number of segments is initially determined based
on statistical fit, it is often altered to match with what is theoretically relevant. Since the US is a two-party system and to aid in interpretation, the data was forced into two distinct segments. The results are shown graphically in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

Respondents grouped in red generally hold more traditionally liberal values, while those in blue generally hold more traditionally conservative values. The top four most important issues to respondents overall regardless of segment were gun violence, the affordability of healthcare, the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together, and mental health. The liberal leaning segment (Segment 1) ranked gun violence, affordability of healthcare, climate change, and reproductive rights as most important. By contrast, the conservative leaning segment (Segment 2) ranked illegal immigration, the affordability of healthcare, the federal budget deficit, and inflation as most important. For the total overall rankings, see Figure 2.
Those in the liberal leaning segment overall ranked on a more drastic scale, meaning they had stronger negative or positive associations with the issues than conservatives did overall. In addition, the social facing issues tended to be more closely associated with the liberal leaning segment, while economic issues were closer associated or more important to the conservative leaning segment.

Positioning Analysis

The positioning analysis was performed using Enginius Marketing Engendering software (https://www.enginius.biz/). The results are displayed in Figure 3. When interpreting the results of this and the remaining additional studies, two arrows pointing in the same direction are positively correlated, while arrows perpendicular to one another are uncorrelated, and arrows running in opposite directions are negatively correlated. In addition, the longer arrows are better captured by the two-dimensional scale, so arrows closest to each axis will therefore be longest.
As seen in Figure 3, the red labeled Democrat, Republican, Joe Biden, and Donald Trump, represent where each fall based on how respondents perceive them to feel about the importance of the 20 surveyed issues. Issues were automatically split by dimension based on how close they were associated with each other. The horizontal axis is the liberal leaning axis and tends to associate more with social facing issues, like reproductive rights, gun violence, or quality of schools. The vertical, conservative axis includes more economic facing issues including inflation or the budget deficit.

Based on the data and Figure 3, Donald Trump is the perceived by respondents as an outlier, significantly removed from the perceived issues of the Republican Party and very negatively correlated with the issues important to the Democratic Party. Joe Biden on the other hand, falls much closer and is positively correlated to the values perceived important by the Democratic Party. Issues that appear neutral, or equally distant from Republicans and Democrats
include drug addiction and unemployment which are most negatively correlated with Donald Trump. In contrast, the issue most closely perceived as associated with Donald Trump, illegal immigration, is Biden’s most negatively correlated attribute.

**Study 2a**

Study 2a and 2b specifically investigated a younger Generation Z demographic. Study 2a used a student sample from a university in the northeastern United States. It consisted of a total of 83 respondents, split 48% male and 52% female. The overwhelming majority of the sample were business students (88%), with an additional 11% of respondents from various majors. The student sample had higher rates of independents at 34%, while 37% identified on a Democratic scale and 29% answered on a Republican scale. Due to the lower numbers of respondents and a business school bias, an additional study was run via Prolific to target this same demographic. That study will be presented separately as Study 2b below.

**Segmentation Analysis**

The results are displayed in Figure 4. Unlike in Study 1, this sample did not need to be forced into two segments; it automatically resulted in just two segments. As in study 1, respondents grouped in red generally hold more traditionally liberal values, while those in blue generally hold more traditionally conservative values.
The student sample did however differ slightly from the national sample in terms of what issues they found most important. Across both segments, students generally ranked gun violence, healthcare affordability, climate change, and the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together as the most important issues. The liberal leaning segment ranked gun violence, healthcare affordability, climate change, and the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together as most important. The conservative leaning segment ranked healthcare affordability, inflation, the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together, and the state of moral values in the country as most important with full numerical breakdowns listed in Figure 5.
Positioning Analysis

The positioning analysis is presented in Figure 6. The student sample resulted in a somewhat different perceptual map than the national sample in Study 1. Students perceive both Biden and Trump to be outliers from the Democratic and Republican parties respectively. Biden is drastically removed from the Democrats and appears negatively correlated with a variety of issues, especially the state of moral values and inflation. Trump is also a perceived outlier with illegal immigration again being most closely associated, and reproductive rights or mental health being most negatively correlated. The dimensions are much more difficult to decipher here as all are spread widely across the horizontal and vertical axis. However, the horizontal axis still appears more closely associated with social issues, while the vertical appears more economically focused.
Figure 6

Study 2b

Respondents were gathered via the online survey platform Prolific. It consisted of respondents from the US split evenly between male and female respondents, with English as a first language, and were selected from a pool of 6,938 potential respondents. This sample consisted of 297 respondents between the ages of 18 and 24, of which 86% were planning to or had achieved a college degree in some capacity. Prescreen questions forced an even split male and female, 24% Independent, 43% Democratic leaning, and 34% Republican leaning.

Segmentation Analysis

The results are displayed in Figure 7. As in study 2a, this sample did not need to be forced into two segments; it automatically resulted in just two segments. Respondents grouped in red generally hold more traditionally liberal values, while those in blue generally hold more traditionally conservative values.
The national Generation Z sample did, however, differ slightly from the previous samples in terms of what issues they found most important. Across both segments, they generally ranked gun violence, healthcare affordability, inflation, and mental health as most important. The more liberal leaning segment ranked gun violence, healthcare, climate change, and mental health as most important. The more conservative leaning segment ranked illegal immigration, healthcare, inflation, and the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together as most important. See Figure 8 for remaining data.
Positioning Analysis

The positioning analysis is presented in Figure 9. The student and Generation Z sample had similar perceived positionings of Biden, as an outlier to the Democratic party. Biden is very strongly negatively corelated with inflation and the federal budget deficit, which are economically focused and commonly associated with the Republican party. Not surprisingly, Trump is most negatively associated with issues including reproductive rights and racism.
In general, the issues across both the younger samples are more widely spread, which will be further explained in discussion.

**Study 3**

In the final study, respondents were gathered via the online survey platform Prolific. This sample targeted the opposite end of the voter population and the oldest, Baby Boomers. It consisted of respondents from the US split evenly between male and female respondents, with English as a first language, and in addition between the ages of 60 and 78. Based on these specifications, they were selected from a pool of 2,327 potential respondents. This sample consisted of 272 total respondents.
Segmentation Analysis

The results are displayed in Figure 10. The Baby boomer sample automatically split into four segments but was manually broken into two.

The overall most important issues to respondents were gun violence, healthcare affordability, inflation, and the ability of politicians to work together. The liberal leaning segment ranked gun violence, climate change, the ability of politicians to work together, and reproductive rights as most important. The conservative leaning segment ranked illegal immigration, the federal budget deficit, inflation, and the ability of politicians to work together as most important. See Figure 11 for remaining data.
Positioning Analysis

The positioning analysis is presented in Figure 12. Baby boomers perceive Donal Trump to be the farther outlier from the Republican Party than Biden from Democrats, which is a varying conclusion across the selected samples. As expected, and similarly to the previously mentioned results, the dimensions of the perceptual map appear most aligned with social issues like reproductive health and climate change, while the Republican respondents perceive issues like inflation and the budget deficit most important.

**Figure 11**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Segment 1</th>
<th>Segment 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun Violence</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>3.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illegal Immigration</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>4.64</td>
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<td>Affordable Healthcare</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal Budget Deficit</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>4.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Climate Change</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Crime</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>4.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of K Schools</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Terrorism</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>3.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability of Dem and Rep to Work Together</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.33</td>
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<tr>
<td>State of Moral Values</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>4.12</td>
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<td>Racism</td>
<td>3.11</td>
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<td>Unemployment</td>
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<td>Domestic Terrorism</td>
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<td>Drug Addiction</td>
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<td>Government Involvement in Education Curriculum</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>3.82</td>
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</table>
Discussion

This research was designed to investigate polarization within the US two-party system through a marketer’s lens. By using the marketing analytical methods of segmentation and positioning, voters from various age groups were analyzed and positioned on a map to better understand their individual perceptions, and how these related to current US party platforms. Across generational samples and studies a few general conclusions can be drawn about in the context of the US two-party system.

Generally, running a marketing segmentation analysis led to easily recognizable segments on a liberal and conservative scale, confirming the current makeup of the US political system. In marketing terms, government policy can be “marketed” or presented to “consumers” or voters in two larger segments split by Democratic and Republican viewpoints. Across every study, gun violence and healthcare ranked in the top four most important issues. However, in every case,
gun violence was only a top four ranked issue for the Democratic segment and not the Republican segment. This and an analysis of the entire list of highest averages point to the conclusion that Democrats have stronger opinions associated with the issues they care most about; they are more willing to answer on the stronger ends of the ranking spectrum.

In contrast, inflation ranked as a top issue of importance across every Republican sample. Across the spectrum of generational segments, Democrats always care about climate change and gun violence, and Republicans always care about inflation. Of further interest, inflation was a top issue for the Generation Z and baby boomer samples across segments, which is unexpected, as these groups stereotypically have very little in common. Perhaps candidates should focus most on these issues, if attempting to market specifically to one party over the other.

As mentioned, Democrats and Republicans have different issues from each other that they value as most important in the US today, but how are these same issues perceived to be addressed by the parties themselves? From a perceptual mapping perspective, some interesting conclusions are important to note. The Generation Z and student samples perceive Biden as far removed from Democratic values, while the boomer and general sample instead perceive Trump as much farther removed from the Republican Party. Young people don’t seem to trust Biden, and don’t see him as a strong Democratic option, in contrast to older samples feeling Trump is the farthest removed candidate from the opposing party.

People perceive the parties to agree on very little, proving the point that voters perceive a polarized system even if both parties can agree on issues like the ability of the parties to work together or inflation. Segmentation analysis proves individuals are split ideologically while positioning proves a much more polarized perception, leaving little room for party collaboration.
Future implications are endless for this area of research. Samples here were only analyzed from a general perspective, and each could be further broken down to better understand how self-identified Republicans perceive Biden or how self-proclaimed Democrats view Trump. These answers are likely to vary and could further reveal whether polarization is truly prevalent or if it is simply perceived to be by opposing parties. In addition, phrasing manipulations could change the outcome of individuals’ perceptions. How might “abortion rights” rather than “reproductive rights” be perceived as issues by Democrats or Republicans individually? This research provides the framework for analyzing the current political landscape through a marketer’s lens.

This research is rich in data with room for further analysis and interpretation. Interestingly, the youngest and oldest samples were polled on who they planned to vote for in the upcoming 2024 presidential election. From the Generation Z sample, 33% plan to vote for Joe Biden, 27% plan to vote for Trump, and the remaining are undecided or voting third party. As for the Baby Boomers, 46% plan to vote for Biden, 36% for Trump, with the remaining unsure or voting third party. Only time will tell who the 2024 President elect will be, but based on this research, Biden appears victorious.
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