

Nostalgia Isn't What it Used to Be: Partisan Polarization in Views on the Past*

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Objective. In this article, we seek to extend our understanding of the partisan lenses through which Americans view politics by investigating if there is partisan polarization in views of the past. Current political issues are frequently contextualized with references to the past. Despite these frequent evocations of the past, public opinion scholars' knowledge of how citizens view earlier eras is incomplete. *Methods.* We evaluate competing explanations of the effect of the past on present political attitudes: generational effects, partisanship, and ideology. To do this, we administered a novel battery of questions to a nationally representative sample drawn from the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project. *Results.* The data show evidence of generational effects, but also of partisanship in the case of opinions of governmental performance, and of ideology in the case of evaluations of culture and quality of life. *Conclusion.* This study suggests that Americans are divided not just in their views of the present, but also in their views on the past. To the extent that peoples' evaluations are shaped by how well government is performing relative to some past era of good performance, polarization in views of the past could have long-lasting effects on how Americans evaluate the government.

One of the most pressing problems in contemporary American politics is the rising political polarization in the American public. Not only are Democrats and Republicans more ideologically distant than they once were, but partisans seem to have developed a strong distaste for those following the opposite party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). This growing discord in the American people has troubled many scholars. It is well documented that Democrats and Republicans disagree in their policy positions and their evaluations of the jobs Congress and the president are doing, but might these partisan differences run deeper than evaluations of contemporary politics?

In this article, we seek to extend our understanding of the partisan lenses through which Americans view politics. We are specifically interested in whether partisanship shapes not just evaluations of the current government, but also evaluations of past eras in American politics. Much political rhetoric employs the past, either to make a point or to place the present into some kind of context. The market crash of 2008 led to "the worst economy since the Great Depression." Iraq was "another Vietnam." The Occupy Movement was repeatedly compared to the anti-war protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Parallels between the movement for gay rights and the civil rights movement are suggested and

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refuted with equal vigor. As politicians and pundits make these associations regularly, we think it is important to analyze, systematically, how the American people view the past. To the extent that the recent rise in polarization has led to different evaluations not just of the present, but also of the past, there may be fundamental and irreconcilable disagreements about the proper role and goals of government. What may be viewed as “good old days” for some citizens make actually be “dark times” for others.

Public Opinion on the Past

Looking broadly, there are several strands of literature that have the potential to shed light on how people view the past. Perhaps the most directly applicable comes from research in sociology on generational effects. Mannheim (1952) defines generations as distinct groups of people bound together by time, location, and social context. Eyerman and Turner (1998) further refine this definition by adding that generations are “a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, nexis, and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time.” The effect of these common bonds is persistent through time, makes generational groups distinct from each other, and colors how these groups view and internalize contemporary events.

Generational effects have been discovered in how people view important political issues such as civil rights (Griffin, 2004), how people form political attitudes (Mishler and Rose, 2007), how people learn about and engage in politics (Braungart and Braungart, 1990; Tilley, 2002; Bartels and Jackman, 2014; Grasso, 2014; Smets and Neundorf, 2014), and in public opinion about politics and political issues (Steeh and Schuman, 1992; Scott, 2000; Lee, 2011). One area of study that is related to generational effects, but distinct in its approach to how we view those effects, is the study of the role of nostalgia in decision making.

Nostalgia was originally studied exclusively as psychological pathology. The earliest work on nostalgia was carried out by Johannes Hofer in 1688. Hofer observed an intense home sickness among Swiss mercenaries serving abroad, which led them to “wander about sad” (Hofer, 1688). Over the last half-century, views of nostalgia have broadened considerably. Nostalgia no longer refers to “home sickness,” but has expanded to encompass a general longing for past experiences that allow for the maintenance of identity in the face of changing circumstances (Davis, 1979).

Political Nostalgia

When public opinion research has examined the past it has generally been with isolated questions placed on surveys in an ad hoc manner. This approach has been informative on the narrow questions being investigated (e.g., feelings of personal security before and after 9/11), but it cannot shed light on more general questions. For this article, we are interested in how individuals’ political nostalgia shapes their evaluations of present-day politics. Nostalgia can be defined broadly as a sentimental longing for the past. We view political nostalgia as a sentimental longing for the past specifically within the political sphere. We take this definition to encompass both a longing for past political outcomes, as well as the nonpolitical outcomes shaped by the political sphere.

To measure respondents’ political nostalgia, we administered a novel battery of questions to a sample drawn from the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project. Our sample

includes a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Americans. We asked respondents to rank the decades of the 1900s on three different dimensions: overall quality of life in the United States, performance of the federal government, and the overall quality of American culture. Respondents were given nine time periods to rank: the 1920s (and earlier), the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the period from 2000 to the present. The use of decades as the primary unit of time has several potential limitations. Decades represent very large amounts of time and it is likely that some people have more nuanced attitudes (e.g., “the early 70s were great, but the late 70s were terrible”) than what we can capture here. However, it seemed prudent to us to begin with time periods that are likely to have meaning for most citizens, and decades suit this purpose nicely.¹

Our measure of respondents’ political nostalgia provides us with a picture into how American citizens collectively remember the past. Past work on collective memory by Olick (1999) distinguishes between two types of memory, which Olick labels “collected” and “collective” memory. Collected memory is the aggregated memories of individuals, while collective memory is the public manifestation of social memory (see also Aden et al., 2009). Our present approach measures memory with survey responses and thus places us squarely in the collected memory tradition, but it is important to recognize how the two forms interact. On the one hand, public manifestations of memory (collective memory) can be seen as the product of aggregating collected responses. This view would suggest that collected memories are the building blocks that construct collective memory. However, it could also be the case that the opinions of our respondents are directly shaped by accepted public narratives interpreting the past. The reality is almost certainly a mixture of the two. Disentangling the mutual causal influences of collected and collective memory is beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to situate our approach into a theoretical context. Though we focus specifically on collected memory, our findings shed light on the public interpretations of the past most prevalent in the public mind.

Do People Differ in Their Attitudes Toward the Past?

Generational Model

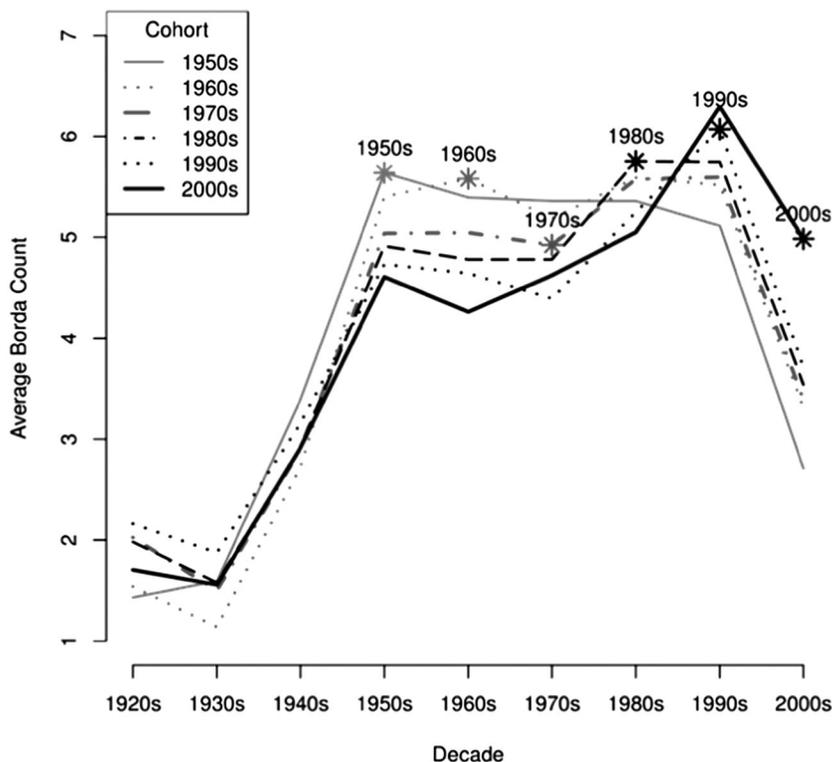
Existing research on nostalgia has focused on generational effects and the importance of coming of age. To examine if generational effects are sufficient to explain political nostalgia, we begin by investigating the role of age. Research on nostalgia, cited above, makes clear that people have a strong tendency to view the events of their youth (through young adulthood) more favorably than other time periods. In particular, if the decade in which a person came of age is an overwhelming force in explaining attitudes toward the past, we would expect a generational model to fit the data best, with each generation looking back fondly on a different time period.

To investigate the effect of one’s generation on nostalgia, we use a Borda Count (scored 0–8) to compute each decade’s ranking separately for quality of American culture, government performance, and quality of life. The Borda Count assigns scores to each decade based on

¹We investigated the possibility that respondents have more nuanced feelings than decades can capture using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk by asking respondents to identify a particular time period where they thought American culture, overall quality of life, and performance of the government were at their best. Rather than respondents having more narrowly construed time frames in mind than what we allowed in our original survey, respondents tended to identify somewhat longer stretches of time. Further analysis can be found in the online appendix on the corresponding author’s website.

FIGURE 1

Average Borda Count for Quality of Life by Cohort



SOURCE: CCAP (2012).

its ranking, such that high scores correspond to more nostalgic rankings. We then compute average scores based on cohorts. Cohorts were defined based on the decade in which respondents turned 18. Figure 1 shows the average Borda Count ranking of each decade for each coming-of-age cohort. Each line represents one age cohort. The decade in which that cohort turned 18 is marked on the line with a star, and the decade is labeled. The *y*-axis of this figure has been compressed from 0–8 to 1–7 in order to distinguish the lines more clearly.

The generational model would predict that those who grew up or came of age in the 1950s would be most nostalgic for that time, which is exactly what we find. Those who turned 18 in the 1950s ($N = 86$) were more nostalgic for the government, culture, and quality of life of the 1950s than were those who came of age in any other era.²

The support for this generational model could help explain the fact that there is no clear consensus on which decades were the best for quality of life, culture, and government performance. There are clear cohort effects, leading people to be more nostalgic for the decade in which they entered adulthood. But this generational model is not the only

²This difference is significant for all but one cohort (1940s) for culture, three cohorts (1940s, 1960s, 1970s) for government, and two cohorts (1940s, 1960s) for quality of life. Figures for culture and government performance are available in the online appendix on the corresponding author's website.

plausible explanation for individual-level differences in political nostalgia. We now turn to the relationship between political orientation and nostalgia.

Political Models

It seems likely that a citizen's political views will influence how he or she perceives the past (especially in terms of government performance), but there are at least two different competing models of how this influence manifests. One model, which we call the partisan bias model, would suggest that citizens selectively remember only the positive events from their party in power, while only remembering the negatives of their rival party's administrations. This expectation is supported by the voluminous literature on partisan bias in political perceptions (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Bartels, 2002; Tilley, 2002; Mishler and Rose, 2007).

An alternative model of political influence would be that people differ in their views toward the past based on ideology. This ideological model suggests that liberals and conservatives have different attitudes toward the past, and these differences are rooted in how they view the world (Jost et al., 2003). Conservatives tend to value continuity and tradition, whereas liberals tend to embrace novelty and change. If these general tendencies shape attitudes toward the past, we might expect liberals to be more likely to perceive conditions as improving with each passing decade, while conservatives might be more prone to seeing present day society as diminished from some earlier, bygone era.

We turn first to the partisan bias model. In order to test for partisan differences in nostalgia, we split our sample into Democrats, independents, and Republicans (with 458 Democrats, 135 independents, and 376 Republicans).³ If the partisan bias model is correct, we should expect to see decades evaluated more favorably by partisans whose party controlled the White House, whereas decades controlled by the out party should be evaluated less favorably.

Our results lend significant support to the partisan bias model. In Figure 2, we present the proportion of Democrats, Republicans, and independents who rated each decade as the best for government performance. As you can clearly see in Figure 2, respondents' evaluations of the performance of American government were highly dependent upon their party identification.

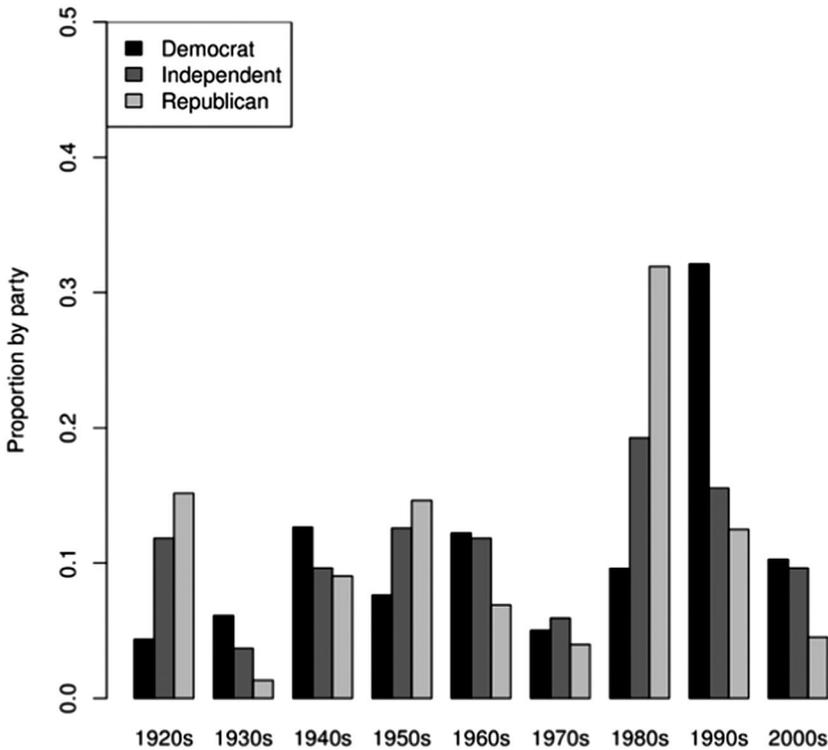
The plurality of Democrats viewed the 1990s as the best decade for American government performance. A nearly identical plurality of Republicans identified the 1980s as the best decade for American government performance. Moreover, these two decades have the largest gap in the share of partisans rating the decade as best. Thirty-two percent of Democrats rated the 1990s as the best decade for government performance, compared to only 12.5 percent of Republicans. And 31.9 percent of Republicans rated the 1980s as the best decade for government performance, compared to only 9.6 percent of Democrats. These gaps of 19.6 percent and 22.3 percent suggest that the 1980s and 1990s were the most polarizing decades in terms of partisan nostalgia.

Although the partisan bias model is most applicable to nostalgia for government performance, we also investigate whether this model holds for more general ratings of quality of life. As Figure 3 shows, these partisan trends remain in effect for evaluations of the quality of life, albeit less strongly. Democrats again are especially nostalgic for the 1990s,

³Given the literature suggesting that "independent-leaners" act more like partisans than do weak partisans, we include independent-leaners with the party toward which they lean.

FIGURE 2

Nostalgia for Government Performance by Party



SOURCE: CCAP (2012).

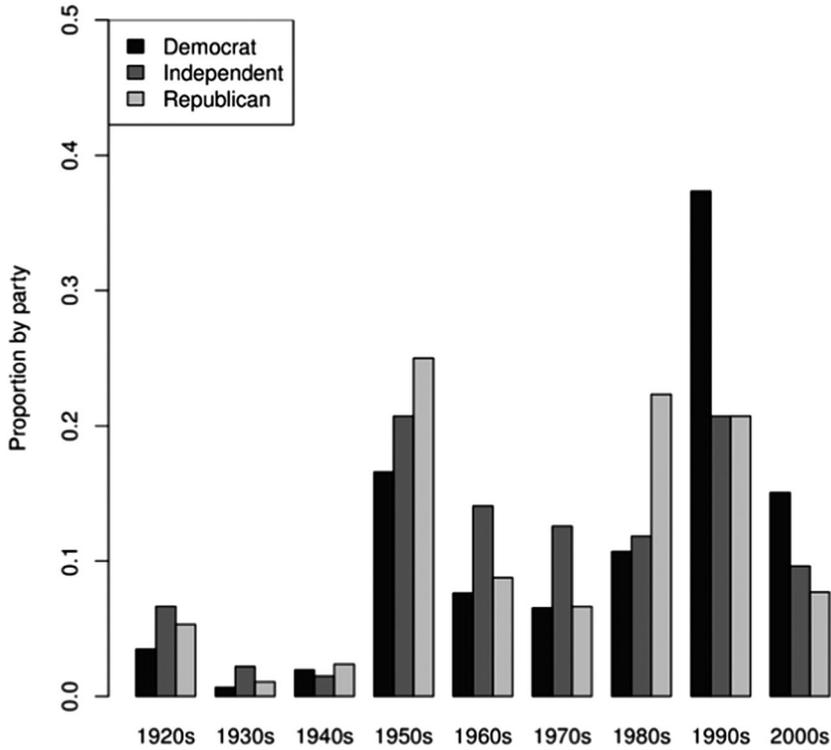
whereas Republicans are more nostalgic for both the 1950s and 1980s. As was the case with evaluations of government, independents fall somewhere between these two partisan extremes.

Republican nostalgia for the quality of life in the 1950s and Democratic nostalgia for the 1990s is an initial suggestion that the ideological model might also affect evaluations. But looking only at the decade rated highest might obscure some of the details of political nostalgia. In particular, it might be the case that while Republicans tend to be nostalgic for the 1980s, their second and third most-favored decades might be bygone eras. To investigate this, we also examine average Borda Count scores for each decade based on party.⁴

Figure 4 shows the average Borda Count ranking of each decade by self-identified partisanship. As we have seen in Figure 2, Republicans tend to be most nostalgic for government performance in the 1980s ($\mu = 5.63$) when the “Great Communicator” occupied the White House. The reverse trend appears for Democrats. As Figure 2 shows, Democrats are the most nostalgic for the 1990s ($\mu = 5.60$), but they are much more nostalgic for recent decades than are Republicans. Democrats are more nostalgic than Republicans for the

⁴We also ran this analysis using a five-point ideology scale. The results are substantively identical. We present party results here for consistency.

FIGURE 3
Nostalgia for Quality of Life by Party



SOURCE: CCAP (2012).

1960s, 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s. In contrast, Republicans are significantly more nostalgic for the 1920s (and earlier), 1950s, and 1980s. This supports the idea that Republicans (and conservatives) are more likely to value continuity and tradition than are Democrats (and liberals).

Overall, the political models combine to explain much of citizens' political nostalgia. The partisan bias model seems particularly apt for explaining nostalgia for government performance while the ideological model seems to hold especially well for evaluations of culture and quality of life.

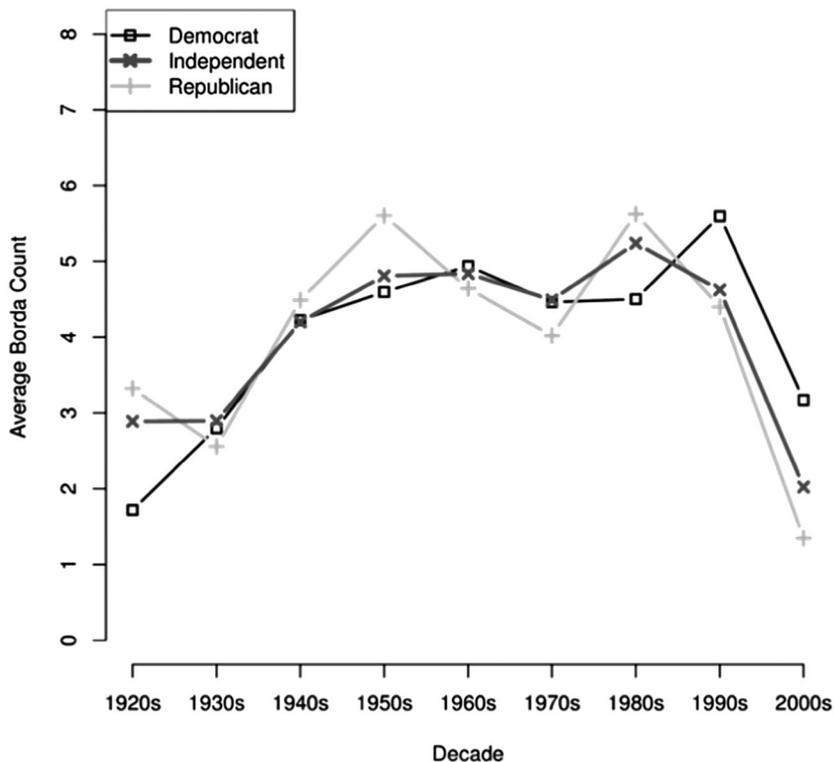
Multivariate Model

Thus far we have evaluated the individual determinants of political nostalgia in isolation, but it might be the case that the apparent effect of partisanship is actually just obscuring an enduring role for generational effects. To explore the multiple factors that influence political nostalgia, we ran a multivariate model predicting respondents' Borda Count ranking of each decade.

Since we are predicting each decade's rank, we run a separate model for each of our nine eras. Rather than running separate models for each of our three measures of nostalgia, for

FIGURE 4

Borda Count for Government Performance by Party



SOURCE: CCAP (2012).

the multivariate model we aggregate them into one index of political nostalgia. To create this index, each individual's Borda Count score for the decade on government performance, quality of life, and quality of culture were added together. The resulting index runs from 0 to 24.⁵ Although this index is not, strictly speaking, continuous, we model it using OLS rather than as an ordered logistic regression with 23 cutpoints for ease of interpretation.⁶ The results of this multivariate model are presented in Table 1.

For each model, we include a number of covariates. *Party ID* is a seven-point scale coded from 0 to 1, with 0 representing "strong Republican" and 1 representing "strong Democrat." *Ideology* is a five-point scale coded from 0 to 1, with 1 representing "very liberal." *Black*, *Latino*, and *Asian* are racial self-classification dummy variables, with *White* as the excluded category. *Gender* is coded as 1 for female, 0 for male. *Income* and *Education* are both ordered variables that run from 0 to 1, with higher numbers indicating higher income and education categories. Finally, the last six rows of Table 1 are indicator variables

⁵Cronbach's α for this index ranged from 0.50 in the 1930s to 0.71 in the 2000s, with an average α of 0.65. Because this is only a modest level of reliability, we also ran the analyses separately on each of the three measures of nostalgia (see online appendix). The main findings are generally consistent across these three measures.

⁶We also verified these results using separate logistic regressions for each of our three measures of nostalgia, since each measure has a more manageable eight categories instead of the 24 for our index.

TABLE 1
OLS Models of Average Borda Count Score by Decade

	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Intercept	10.71*** (1.20)	9.24*** (0.96)	13.58*** (0.94)	18.29*** (0.96)	12.15*** (0.91)	12.67*** (0.95)	15.47*** (1.05)	11.71*** (1.16)	4.18** (1.30)
Party ID	-1.86* (0.87)	-0.55 (0.70)	-1.50* (0.68)	-2.54*** (0.70)	0.64 (0.67)	1.38* (0.68)	-1.47 (0.77)	2.31*** (0.85)	3.60*** (0.95)
Ideology	-3.85*** (1.10)	-1.99* (0.88)	0.08 (0.86)	-1.23 (0.88)	1.19 (0.84)	0.23 (0.86)	-2.26* (0.96)	3.68*** (1.06)	4.14*** (1.19)
Black	-1.06 (0.72)	0.20 (0.57)	-2.07*** (0.56)	-3.15*** (0.58)	-0.80 (0.55)	1.30* (0.56)	1.69** (0.63)	1.17 (0.69)	2.72*** (0.78)
Latino	-0.34 (0.88)	0.48 (0.70)	0.04 (0.69)	0.52 (0.71)	-0.18 (0.67)	-1.12 (0.69)	-0.20 (0.77)	-0.15 (0.86)	0.96 (0.96)
Asian	-1.95 (1.78)	0.14 (1.42)	-2.47 (1.40)	-2.02 (1.43)	0.59 (1.36)	2.41 (1.39)	2.77 (1.56)	-0.87 (1.73)	1.41 (1.93)
Income	-2.89** (1.08)	-1.88* (0.86)	-1.08 (0.85)	-1.49 (0.87)	-1.77* (0.82)	-1.30 (0.85)	0.96 (0.95)	6.07*** (1.05)	3.37** (1.17)
Education	0.40 (0.78)	-0.79 (0.63)	-0.19 (0.62)	0.22 (0.63)	-0.15 (0.60)	-0.86 (0.61)	0.35 (0.69)	-0.17 (0.76)	1.18 (0.85)
Gender	-0.02 (0.43)	-0.12 (0.34)	-0.49 (0.34)	-0.29 (0.35)	-0.30 (0.33)	0.54 (0.34)	-0.07 (0.38)	-0.05 (0.42)	0.81 (0.47)
1940s cohort	-0.71 (1.74)	-1.87 (1.39)	0.92 (1.37)	1.48 (1.40)	2.93* (1.33)	0.87 (1.36)	0.95 (1.53)	-2.99 (1.69)	-1.58 (1.89)
1950s cohort	-1.62 (1.24)	-0.45 (0.99)	-0.10 (0.97)	0.69 (0.99)	3.72*** (0.94)	1.99* (0.97)	0.94 (1.09)	-1.93 (1.20)	-3.23* (1.34)
1960s cohort	-1.05 (1.12)	-1.23 (0.89)	-1.30 (0.88)	0.35 (0.90)	3.66*** (0.85)	1.44 (0.87)	1.70 (0.98)	-1.42 (1.08)	-2.15 (1.21)
1970s cohort	0.52 (1.07)	-0.24 (0.85)	-0.93 (0.84)	-0.27 (0.86)	2.50** (0.81)	0.70 (0.83)	1.16 (0.94)	-1.74 (1.03)	-1.70 (1.16)
1980s cohort	-0.08 (1.15)	-0.44 (0.92)	-1.23 (0.90)	-1.03 (0.92)	2.07* (0.88)	0.62 (0.90)	2.11* (1.01)	-0.25 (1.12)	-1.77 (1.25)
1990s cohort	0.31 (1.37)	0.30 (1.10)	-0.33 (1.08)	-0.90 (1.10)	2.18* (1.05)	0.43 (1.07)	1.60 (1.20)	-1.04 (1.33)	-2.56 (1.49)
N	739	739	739	739	739	739	739	739	739
R ²	0.11	0.05	0.06	0.15	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.16	0.20
Adj R ²	0.09	0.03	0.05	0.14	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.14	0.19

Standard errors in parentheses. Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
SOURCE: CCAAP (2012).

for respondents’ age cohort. The omitted category is the 2000s cohort, so each of these variables is the cohort’s nostalgia relative to “Millennials.”

Several interesting results stand out from Table 1. In line with our political models, there are some strong partisan and ideological effects. Democrats are significantly less nostalgic for the 1980s, 1950s, and 1920s and earlier eras. This is what the partisan bias model of political nostalgia would predict given Republican control of the White House during the Reagan and Eisenhower Administrations.⁷ Similarly, Democrats are significantly more nostalgic for the 1990s Clinton era, as well as for the 2000s to present era. This latter era is interesting, since it includes both the Bush and Obama Administrations. It is likely that Democrats are thinking about the current era, but this is not a distinction we can directly test. The partisan and ideological results also support the notion that liberals will tend to be far less nostalgic for bygone eras than will conservatives. Liberals and Democrats tend

⁷If we treat the “1920s and earlier” category as representing only the 1920s, this explanation holds. But it is not clear if respondents are thinking of the 1920s or some even earlier era.

to be less nostalgic in each era up until the 1960s, and more nostalgic in every decade since with the exception of the Reagan era.

Finally, the cohort dummy variables illustrate similar patterns to those discussed above with regards to generational effects. The excluded category in Table 1 is the 2000s cohort, so each coefficient represents how much more or less nostalgic members of that cohort are compared to Millennials. All cohorts are more nostalgic for the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s than the Millennial cohort. Given that Millennials would not have been alive during these eras, this is not particularly surprising. And as we have seen in Figure 1, cohorts tend to be most nostalgic for decades close to the one in which they came of age.

What is interesting, however, is how much weaker generational effects appear to be relative to partisan effects. Across most of the decades, with the exception of the 1960s, partisan identification remains a more robust predictor of evaluations than the decade in which someone came of age. This suggests that at least in contemporary politics, a person's nostalgia for the past is driven largely by partisanship and less by actual memory. To the extent that American politics remains polarized, this could have important consequences for how the American public evaluates government and society for decades to come.

Nostalgia and Approval of Obama

The results thus far provide an interesting look at the individual-level variation that exists in how people view the past in America. There are stark partisan and generational effects on how people view the past, and likely how they apply these interpretations of the past to present governmental performance.

As a practical application of the results found above, we investigate the relationship between political nostalgia and approval of President Obama. Approval of President Obama is measured using a standard five-category item that asks “[d]o you approve or disapprove of the way President Obama is handling his job as President,” coded from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). Since this item is explicitly related to government performance, we feel it is prudent to focus on people's nostalgia for past government performance.⁸ We then regress Obama approval on these measures of people's nostalgia for government performance in past decades as well as other standard control variables.

The first model in Table 2 shows the results of this regression.⁹ Of the standard control variables, there are clear and expected ideological and partisan differences, with liberals more approving of Obama, and both Republicans and true independents less approving of Obama.

This model also demonstrates that there is some evidence for nostalgia affecting evaluations of the incumbent government. Specifically, people's nostalgia for government performance in the 1980s and 1950s are associated with lower approval ratings for Obama, even after accounting for partisanship and ideology. Since these nostalgia items are Borda rankings for the decade, they range from 0 to 8. So someone who rated the 1980s the best decade for government performance would rate Obama about 17 percent lower compared to someone who rated the 1980s as the worst decade.

⁸Our substantive findings are identical when we use our index of all three items.

⁹We restrict our analyses here to whites for several reasons. First, as Table 1 shows, there are racial differences in patterns of nostalgia, with blacks less nostalgic than whites for all but the most recent decades. Because adequately capturing these nuances would likely require a fully interacted model, we choose instead to focus on whites (see Achen, 2002, for a justification of this). Second, because independents will be of particular importance here and we have only 13 black independents in our data, we lose very little in terms of explanatory power.

TABLE 2
Nostalgia for Government and Obama Approval

	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	0.70* (0.10)	0.50* (0.07)
Education	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Gender	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Ideology	0.33* (0.05)	0.32* (0.04)
True independent	-0.41* (0.03)	-0.25* (0.09)
Republican	-0.46* (0.03)	-0.45* (0.06)
Nostalgia for 30s	-0.01 (0.01)	
Nostalgia for 40s	-0.00 (0.01)	
Nostalgia for 50s	-0.01* (0.01)	
Nostalgia for 60s	-0.01 (0.01)	
Nostalgia for 70s	-0.00 (0.01)	
Nostalgia for 80s	-0.02* (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)
Nostalgia for 90s	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.01)
Independent × Nostalgia for 80s		-0.06* (0.01)
Republican × Nostalgia for 80s		-0.00 (0.01)
Independent × Nostalgia for 90s		0.03* (0.01)
Republican × Nostalgia for 90s		-0.00 (0.01)
<i>N</i>	697	697
<i>R</i> ²	0.68	0.68
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.67	0.68

Standard errors in parentheses. Significance at **p* < 0.05.

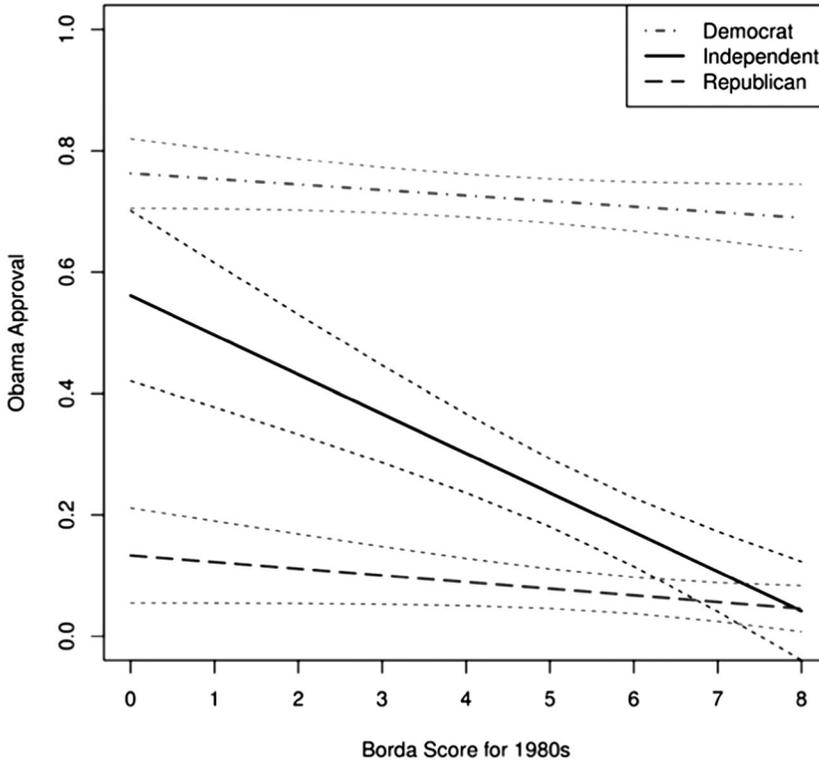
Although nostalgia for government performance in past decades is no substitute for simply taking partisanship into account, it is possible that nostalgia for past decades can tell us something meaningful for those who purport to have no attachment to either major party—independents.

The second model in Table 2 investigates this idea by interacting partisanship with nostalgia for the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰ Respondents who declared they had no partisan

¹⁰We chose these two decades for several reasons besides ease of interpretation. First, they are the most recent decades, and thus likely the freshest in peoples’ memories. Second, almost all of our respondents lived

FIGURE 5

Approval of President Obama by Party and Nostalgia for the 1980s



leaning whatsoever, yet were nostalgic for the government performance of the 1980s are significantly less approving of the job Obama is doing as president. Similarly, independents who were nostalgic for the 1990s were significantly more approving of Obama.

Figure 5 shows the substantive magnitude of the effect for nostalgia for the 1980s on approval of President Obama, holding all other variables at the mean for that partisan group. For independents—those who refused to espouse any party leaning whatsoever—ranking of government performance in the 1980s is highly predictive of evaluations of Obama. Independents who ranked the 1980s first in terms of government performance look essentially identical to Republicans in their evaluations of Obama, whereas those who ranked the 1980s close to last look much more similar to Democrats. We see a similar, albeit weaker, relationship when it comes to nostalgia for the 1990s in Table 2. As with independents who reminisce about the halcyon days of the 1980s, those independents who dislike the era of Clinton and the dot-com bubble very much resemble Republicans in their evaluation of Obama.

through at least part of both the 1990s and 1980s. Third, the 1980s had the largest and most significant effect in Model 1, and the 1990s were the only decade with a positive relationship with Obama approval. We also ran a fully interactive model with partisanship interacted with nostalgia for each decade. The size and direction of the effects of the 1980s and 1990s in this model are similar to those we present here, with the 1980s significant at $p = 0.006$ and the 1990s significant at $p = 0.06$. Nostalgia for the 1930s had a positive effect and was significant at $p = 0.09$.

Discussion

Americans clearly think about the past in greater than two- or four-year increments. Respondents in our survey hold differing levels of nostalgia for the past. Some look back fondly to the era of Eisenhower and James Dean. Others view modern America as the pinnacle of quality of life, culture, and government performance. These variations provide an interesting insight into how Americans conceptualize the past.

We present several models here of how to think about levels of political nostalgia. Far from there being a single “golden age” of American culture or quality of life, there is more variation within evaluations of a single decade than there is variation across decades. When we begin to unpack these variations, several models are supported. The generational model, which predicts that individuals will look back fondly on the decade in which they came of age, finds consistently strong support. The partisan bias and ideological models both find support in our data. Partisans tend to remember much more favorably those decades in which their party was in the White House. And with the exception of the 1980s, conservatives and Republicans tend to be much more nostalgic for bygone eras than are liberals and Democrats. Taken together, these models suggest that peoples’ perspectives on the past differ in meaningful ways.

In addition to examining the basic contours of political nostalgia, we also demonstrated an application of political nostalgia to a commonly studied aspect of public opinion—approval of the president. We find that how people think about the past does have an effect on presidential evaluations, controlling for demographic characteristics, ideology, and partisanship. We also find that political nostalgia tells us something interesting about independents who ostensibly reject any partisan attachment.

This study suggests that Americans are divided not just in their views of the present, but also their views on the past. Although we lack the longitudinal data to determine if this is a new phenomenon that has occurred alongside rising polarization, this previously unknown area of polarization could be consequential in many ways. Initial evidence suggests that differences in perceptions of the past are related to evaluations of the performance of the current government. To the extent that peoples’ evaluations are shaped by how well government is performing relative to some past era of good performance, polarization in views of the past could have long-lasting effects on how Americans evaluate the government.

This research represents one of the first steps in exploring how Americans’ longer-term evaluations affect politics. The descriptive results here describe the landscape of political nostalgia among American citizens. Future work can and should build on this foundation to explore whether these variations in political nostalgia are predictive of other important attitudes and behaviors. In particular, understanding how Americans think about the past is an important antecedent to understanding how they think about the present. To the extent that people have become polarized in how favorably they view past decades, it may make it even harder to reach a consensus about when government today is governing well.

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