



Politics, *schadenfreude*, and ingroup identification: The sometimes happy thing about a poor economy and death

David J.Y. Combs*, Caitlin A.J. Powell, David Ryan Schurtz, Richard H. Smith

Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40513, United States

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ABSTRACT

Political campaigns are often characterized by the various events occurring that move the tide in favor of one candidate or another. Each event, depending on which candidate it favors or harms, produces either happiness or sadness for those who care about the outcome. This research examined whether such reactions would hold for events that are misfortunes for other people and even when they negatively affect society more broadly regardless of political party affiliation. Ingroup (i.e. political party) identification was examined as an important moderating variable. In four studies, undergraduate participants gave their emotional reactions to news articles describing misfortunes happening to others (e.g. poor economic news and house foreclosures). Party affiliation and the intensity of ingroup identification strongly predicted whether these events produced *schadenfreude*.

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When other people suffer misfortunes, observers usually feel sympathy and express it openly. But this is not always true. Sometimes, the misfortunes of others can be pleasing (e.g. Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Gorman, 2006; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). Although scholarly claims about this kind of feeling go back as far as the ancient Greeks (e.g. Aristotle, 350 BCE/1991) and have continued through the present (e.g. Portmann, 2000), the English language has no word for it. As a result, English speakers often borrow the German term *schadenfreude* (Ben Ze'ev, 2000), which derives from the combined terms *schaden*, meaning “harm,” and *freude*, meaning “joy.”

What circumstances most readily produce *schadenfreude*? Understandably, *schadenfreude* is more likely to arise when people deserve their misfortunes (Feather, 2008; Feather & Naim, 2005; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Portmann, 2000; Singer et al., 2006; van Dijk et al., 2005) and when misfortunes happen to people who are disliked (Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Heider, 1958). A less socially appropriate circumstance is when the suffering person is envied (Brigham et al., 1997; Smith & Kim, 2007; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006), though the evidence for this connection is inconsistent (e.g. Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008).

Schadenfreude as an intergroup emotion

Schadenfreude, as well as other emotions, can also occur at the intergroup level (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Harris, Cikara, & Fiske, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008; Leach et al., 2003; Spears & Leach, 2004). For example, a series of studies conducted by Leach et al. (2003) assessed the effects of domain interest and ingroup inferiority as possible predictors of intergroup *schadenfreude*. Soccer fans in the Netherlands rated their happiness when they read that a rival outgroup (i.e. the German national team) had lost a key match. As expected, the greater the participants' domain interest (i.e. “I enjoy watching soccer on television,” “I am interested in soccer,” “I have regularly watched/listened to the World Cup”) in soccer, the happier they were when reading about Germany's loss. Also, greater *schadenfreude* resulted when previous Dutch losses were highlighted beforehand, making the inferiority of the Dutch team salient. Although there was no obvious ingroup benefit for the Dutch ingroup as a result of the German team's defeat, this defeat may have allowed Dutch participants to feel less inferior in terms of their social identity (Leach, 2008; Leach & Spears, 2008; Tajfel, 1981), and, therefore, to be more pleased by the defeat.

In a theory developed by Smith and his colleagues (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004) known as Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET), identification with one's ingroup is a key predictor of how and when intergroup emotions occur. According to the theory, when people strongly identify with an ingroup they commonly appraise events from an intergroup rather than interpersonal perspective. Specifically, Mackie et al. (2004) suggest that “when social identification occurs, appraisals are intergroup, rather than personally

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: djamescombs1@yahoo.com (D.J.Y. Combs).

concerned. Emotions are experienced on the behalf of the group” (p. 229) rather than the individual, and “arise as a result of events and interactions that reflect the relative well-being of the group independent of [one’s] personal involvement in the event” (p. 227). Ingroup identification is key to the occurrence of intergroup emotions, because when individuals strongly identify with their group they become a part of the group, and the group becomes a part of the self, consequently, events that affect the group, for good or for ill, “acquire affective and emotional significance” (p. 229). A number of studies have tested Smith’s framework and have generally (e.g. Garcia, Tor, Bazerman, & Miller, 2005; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) but not always (Gordijn, Yzerbyt, Wigboldus, & Dumont, 2006) been supportive. Although previous research has not found support for IET with regard to intergroup *schadenfreude* (see Iyer & Leach, 2008, for a review), theoretically, one would expect individuals that identified strongly with an ingroup to experience greater pleasure when a misfortune event would serve to benefit the group, even if the event may be harmful to innocent others or harmful for the individual themselves.

Politics and intergroup *schadenfreude*

Politics is one arena where the outcomes of ingroups and outgroups may be so closely linked that an ingroup member might appraise an outgroup setback as directly benefiting the ingroup. Politics is often a kind of “blood sport” in which party affiliation and partisan instincts carry the day more often than bipartisan sentiments. In the context of a political campaign, particularly as election night approaches, all events (misfortunes or otherwise) may largely become appreciated for their implications for victory or defeat of one’s own party (especially for those who strongly identify with their party) – *even though* there may be otherwise negative, undeserved consequences for others. For example, a downturn in the economy would seem to have no positive effects for anyone, and yet for partisans rooting for their challenger to defeat an incumbent President, it might be good news indeed. Bad news for the political leader of the outgroup is good news for one’s ingroup. This should especially hold true if the opponent is an incumbent and thus is attributed a certain amount of responsibility for the state of the economy. The “objective” negative features of the event, whether it is an economic downturn, missing explosives in Iraq (McIntyre, Malveaux, Labott, & Neisloss, 2004), or a national shortage of flu-shots (Sanger & Harris, 2004) may be beside the point, politically. Even if an outcome may be objectively negative for all involved, including the individual, there are times when such an outcome may signal a potential political windfall for that individual’s group looking to gain an advantage – and, thus, produce *schadenfreude*.

Of course, when such objectively negative events occur, norms of appropriate emotional reactions dictate that people should feel sad not happy. Regardless of who is gaining or losing politically, all are required to show genuine concern and to put on a long face (their actual feelings notwithstanding). The suspected inconsistency between actual and presented feelings is probably why politicians and their allies sometimes accuse their opponents of actually experiencing unseemly pleasure when negative events bring good political news. In her recent book, the ultra-conservative columnist and author Coulter (2006) went as far as to suggest that several women widowed on September 11 partly enjoyed their husband’s deaths, presumably because the deaths of their husbands brought forth a good deal of fame and political capital for the widows. Coulter further suggested that the widows were using their husband’s deaths to score political points. Coulter’s brand of commentary is beyond the pale by most standards; however, this repellent case aside, it may be true that political motiva-

tions can often produce hidden *schadenfreude* that is, masked by mock concern.

People are likely to resist admitting any semblance of pleasure as a result of obvious tragedies. Nonetheless, we suspect that events containing objective misfortunes might produce *schadenfreude*, provided the misfortune also brings with it the possibility of ingroup benefit, and especially for those who strongly identify with their ingroup. The primary purpose of the present research was to examine this possibility.

In four studies, we assessed participant’s political party affiliation and their strength of identification with their party. We also assessed their reactions to news articles detailing misfortunes happening to others of their own or opposing party. The misfortunes described were objectively negative and hurtful to innocent bystanders (e.g. a downturn in the national economy, US troop casualties), or were more narrowly embarrassing to either the Republican or Democratic Party (e.g. President George W. Bush falling off a bicycle or John Kerry wearing an unbecoming NASA space suit). In Study 1, the reactions were reported just before the 2004 US Presidential election; in Study 2, reactions were reported just before the 2006 US midterm election. Studies 3 and 4 were both conducted during the 2008 US Presidential primaries. In each of the studies, we expected that party affiliation and level of party identification (Mackie et al., 2004), would predict the amount of *schadenfreude* felt by participants.

Study 1

The main purpose of Study 1 was to conduct a preliminary examination of our hypotheses. We took advantage of the 2004 Presidential election season to conduct an in-class exercise in which we asked participants to complete a political affiliation and strength of identification measure at the beginning of the fall semester. Two months later, just prior to the election, they gave their reactions to a series of news articles detailing recent political misfortunes. Two of these articles were largely embarrassing in nature, either linked with incumbent Republican President George W. Bush (his falling off a bicycle), or Senator John Kerry (a photo of him wearing an odd-looking NASA outfit), the challenger for the Democrats. A third article was objectively negative (a downturn in the economy) and was damaging to the Republican cause. During this time period, because Republicans controlled both branches of the elected federal government, we were unable to find naturally occurring events that clearly hurt the Democratic cause which could then be causally linked to Democrats. We expected that Democrats would report more *schadenfreude* over the economic downturn than Republicans, given that the misfortune could be expected to help their ingroup. Also, as would be predicted by IET, we expected that Democrats who were highly identified with their political party would report more *schadenfreude* than would individuals less strongly identified with the party. We expected a similar pattern for Democrats when reacting to the Bush mishap, and for Republicans when reacting to the Kerry photo.

Method

Participants

Participants were approximately 80 Introductory Social Psychology students from the University of Kentucky. However, 35 participants were dropped from the analysis because they either forgot their code names used to link the two parts of the exercise, did not attend class on both days the study was conducted, or were members of minor political parties. Thus, 45 undergraduates, 23 Republicans, and 22 Democrats were included in the analysis.

Procedure

Approximately two months before the US Presidential election of 2004, participants completed a questionnaire relating to course material but voluntary in nature. The voluntary nature of the activity was emphasized. A short section of the questionnaire contained a measure of party affiliation and a measure of party identification. Other parts of the questionnaire, which took approximately 20 min to complete, contained individual difference and attitude measures unrelated to the focus of the present research. Once all participants had completed the questionnaire, they were asked to think of a code name that they could remember but would not identify them. They wrote this name on an interior page of the questionnaire. Then, two weeks before the election, participants completed a second voluntary questionnaire. They read and gave their reactions to several recently appearing newspaper articles which detailed two negative, but humorous occurrences relating to the Presidential candidates: George W. Bush (falling off his bicycle; Milbank, 2004), and John Kerry (dressed in an unusual looking outfit during a tour at NASA; <http://blogsforbush.com>, 2004). In addition, they read one article featuring objectively negative news detailing poor job creation and linking it to an economic downturn (www.usatoday.com, 2004). The articles were presented in counterbalanced order. Upon completion, they were asked to write their code names on the questionnaire. Finally, they were thanked for their participation, and the focus of the study was discussed in terms of the general topic of social emotions, the lecture topic for that day.

Measures

The initial survey contained a single party affiliation item (i.e. "Please indicate your political party affiliation") and a single strength of party identification item (i.e. "If you are a Republican, how strong a Republican are you?" or "If you are a Democrat, how strong a Democrat are you?").

After reading each article, participants completed a number of measures designed to measure their reactions to the content of each article on 0 (none at all) to 11 (a great amount) Likert-type scales. Each article contained a set of similar items which tapped general feelings of *schadenfreude* and concern for the victim of the misfortune. The items were adjusted slightly in some cases to match the different content of the individual articles. For the article about the economic downturn, we included four *schadenfreude* items ("amused," "secretly happy," "secretly happy because this could help Kerry," and "excited because this could help Kerry," $\alpha > .80$), three negative affect items ("concern for unemployed," "upset," and "worried," $\alpha > .80$), and a negative affect item relating to political concerns ("concern for Bush").

For the article describing President Bush falling off of his bicycle, we included four *schadenfreude* items ("amused," "tickled," "pleased," and "secretly happy," $\alpha > .80$) and two negative affect items ("sympathy for Bush," and "concern for Bush," $\alpha > .80$). For the article about Senator Kerry in a NASA suit, we included three *schadenfreude* items ("amused," "couldn't resist a smile," and "thinking the photo was funny," $\alpha > .80$) and a single negative affect item ("concern for Kerry").

Results

Poor economic news

For the article detailing weak job growth, a *t*-test on the overall *schadenfreude* index revealed a significant difference between Democrats and Republicans for feelings of *schadenfreude*. As expected, Democrats ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 2.30$) reported significantly more *schadenfreude* than Republicans ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.87$), $t(43) = 6.01$, $p < .001$, $r = .65$. A *t*-test on the overall negative affect index revealed that Democrats ($M = 6.70$, $SD = 2.70$) also felt significantly more

negative affect than did Republicans ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 2.39$), $t(43) = 3.30$, $p < .001$, $r = .43$.

A *t*-test on the single "concern for Bush" item revealed a significant difference between Republicans and Democrats. As expected, Republicans ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 2.64$) felt significantly more concern for Bush regarding the poor economic news than did Democrats ($M = 0.77$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(48) = 6.53$, $p < .001$, $r = .68$.

Finally, we also conducted an ANCOVA on the *schadenfreude* measure while controlling for feelings of negative affect. Doing so did not remove the significant effect for party affiliation, $F(1,42) = 24.35$, $p < .001$.

President Bush's bicycle riding mishap

Analysis of participant responses to the article detailing President Bush's bicycle accident indicated that, as expected, Democrats ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 3.45$) were more amused than Republicans ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(48) = 3.72$, $p < .001$, $r = .47$. For the single "concern for Bush" item there was a significant difference such that Republicans ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 2.32$) reported significantly more concern for Bush than did Democrats ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.75$), $t(47) = 2.25$, $p < .05$, $r = .31$.

Senator Kerry's NASA experience

Analysis of participants' responses to the article detailing Senator Kerry's NASA tour revealed that, as expected, Republicans ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 2.83$) found the Senator's unflattering picture to be significantly more amusing than Democrats ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 2.43$), $t(48) = 3.12$, $p < .01$, $r = .41$. There were no effects for the single "concern for Kerry" item.

Correlations between party identification and affective measures

We correlated party identification with the measures of *schadenfreude* and of negative affect for Democrats and Republicans separately (see Tables 1 and 2). As anticipated, Democratic strength of party identification was positively and strongly correlated with *schadenfreude* as a result of the economic downturn. Party identification was unrelated to feeling pleased over President Bush's bike mishap (though the correlation was in the expected direction). Pleasure over this mishap was positively correlated with pleasure over the economic downturn.

For Republican participants, party identification was not correlated with *schadenfreude* over Kerry's NASA experience. However, feeling concern over the economic downturn or feeling concern for Bush because of this downturn was positively correlated with feeling negative affect over the bike mishap and *schadenfreude* over Kerry's NASA experience. Also, feeling negative affect over the Bush's bike mishap was positively correlated with *schadenfreude* over Kerry's NASA experience.

Table 1

Correlations between Democratic strength of party identification and related items (Study 1).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Strength Dem	–							
Econ Schaden	.55*	–						
Econ NegAff	–.04	.21	–					
Econ ConcBush	–.00	–.08	–.42	–				
Bike PosAff	.23	.64**	.33	–.14	–			
Bike NegAff	.28	–.26	–.06	.26	–.39	–		
NAS PosAff	–.03	.19	.13	.06	.15	.15	–	
NAS NegAff	.19	.01	.14	–.06	.24	–.09	–.19	–

* $p < .05$ (2-tailed).

** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 2
Correlations between Republican strength of party identification and related items (Study 1).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Strength Rep	–							
Econ Schaden	.12	–						
Econ NegAff	.17	.33	–					
Econ ConcBush	.15	–.06	.25	–				
Bike PosAff	–.28	.06	.14	–.07	–			
Bike NegAff	.12	.33	.68**	.57**	–.04	–		
NAS PosAff	.23	.11	.59**	.27	.18	.48**	–	
NAS NegAff	.02	.64**	.21	.09	.10	.38	.01	–

^p < .05 (2-tailed).

** ^p < .01 (2-tailed).

Discussion

The results for Study 1 strongly supported our primary hypotheses. Even for the misfortune that had objectively negative characteristics for everyone (i.e. economic downturn), those whose party stood to benefit from the misfortune (i.e. Democrats) reported significantly more *schadenfreude* than those whose party did not stand to benefit from the misfortune (i.e. Republicans). Correlational analysis also indicated that strength of Democratic Party identification was linked to the degree of *schadenfreude* reported: the greater participants' party identification, the more *schadenfreude* they reported. As the IET framework (Mackie et al., 2004) would predict, intergroup emotions were more intensely felt by those who strongly identified with their ingroup. Thus, these findings provide novel support for IET by extending it to the intergroup emotion of *schadenfreude*.

It is important to emphasize that the *schadenfreude* participants reported was spurred by an event that was objectively negative in its effects on others. Democrats reported considerable negative affect in reaction to this event, even more so than Republicans. Thus, they seemed to feel substantial ambivalence about the economic downturn. They probably recognized the potential political windfall as a result of the poor economy, yet still had to wrestle with the fact that in general the news was bad for the country as a whole. And yet, despite these concerns over bad news, the reaction was clearly overlaid with *schadenfreude*, so much so that the effect of party affiliation on *schadenfreude* persisted after controlling for this negative affect. Thus, these findings suggest that the fact that an event causes people harm will not prevent people from also having a pleased emotional reaction, provided the event brings with it some ingroup benefit.

The results for the embarrassing misfortunes, which did not contain broader, negative features, also largely fit expectations. Participants reported *schadenfreude* when a political nemesis was placed in an embarrassing light. Not only did Democrats experience more *schadenfreude* than Republicans when reacting to the Bush bicycle mishap, but Republicans reported more *schadenfreude* than Democrats in reaction to the embarrassing photo of John Kerry. Although strength of party identification was not significantly correlated with these reactions, perhaps due to the low number of participants, descriptively the pattern of correlations fit expectations.

Overall, the correlational analysis indicated that participants' reactions to events were linked to party identification and the implications of the events for the party. The more Republicans felt concern over the impact of the economic downturn, either in general or for Bush in particular, the more they also tended to feel bad over Bush's mishap and feel pleased over Kerry's embarrassment. And, if they felt bad about Bush's mishap, they tended to feel good about Kerry's embarrassment. Democrats who felt pleasure over the economic downturn also tended to feel pleasure over Bush's mishap.

Study 2

The findings from Study 1 suggest that intergroup related *schadenfreude* can result not only from events that simply have embarrassing features but also from those that are more objectively negative. Furthermore, such *schadenfreude* can be strongly linked with the implications of the event for the group to which people are affiliated and to which people identify. The validity of these findings is enhanced, in our view, by the way in which the responses were obtained. The socially undesirable nature of *schadenfreude* probably decreases peoples' willingness to report it (Powell, Smith, & Schurtz, 2008; Smith & Kim, 2007). However, the anonymity of responses was highlighted in our instructions to participants, and the large group setting probably enhanced the sense of anonymity as well. Moreover, since we measured party affiliation at an earlier time and as part of a longer questionnaire, our interest in the role of party affiliation in influencing their affective reaction to the articles was well hidden. Thus, we have reason to assume that participant's responses were close to how they actually felt.

Our initial study had a number of features that we aimed to adjust in Study 2. In Study 1 we used an objective misfortune (a mild economic downturn) that was far from severe. In Study 2 we explored whether *schadenfreude* would also result from a more severe and permanent general misfortune. Even if a severe negative misfortune might lead to potential ingroup political gain, would people actually feel happy because of it? In order to explore this question, we chose to assess responses to American troop casualties in addition to another article describing a problem with the economy.

For our purposes the painful and tragic reality of troop casualties had a number of useful features. First, this type of event is so manifestly negative in nature that it is difficult to imagine any American citizen anywhere reporting that it could bring pleasure. Second, it was an issue that loomed large in the run up to the 2006 midterm election, which was the time period of our second study. Casualty figures, arguably, played a crucial role in swinging the results of the election. In fact, a number of polls suggested that as the midterm elections approached Americans were far and away more concerned with news out of Iraq than they were with economic news (e.g. Nagourney, Thee, Connelly, & Stefan, 2006). In many instances, both sides of the political spectrum were accused of "politicizing the war" for personal (i.e. party) gain (Clift, 2006). For Republicans, good news out of Iraq was used for the purpose of showing that the status quo in Washington was best for the country. For Democrats, bad news out of Iraq was used to show that a change in leadership was necessary. One strategy employed from time to time by Democrats was to cite the number of American casualties in the war as rationale for leadership change (e.g. Reid & Pelosi, 2007).

However abhorrent it might be to find pleasure in troop deaths, we suspected that reports of an increase in the number of American casualties might be cause for some form of muted pleasure on the part of Democrats. Such reports could help swing American sentiment in their favor. *Schadenfreude* resulting from this type of event may go underreported, of course. In the instance of the Iraq War, both Democrats and Republicans typically denied using the war to score political points (Wilson, 2003). Nonetheless, as the results of Study 1 indicated, individuals may well react with a certain amount of pleasure as a result of bad news, provided it carries with it the potential for ingroup political gain.

A second adjustment in Study 2 involved the items selected for measuring *schadenfreude*. In Study 1 our composite *schadenfreude* measure noted the implications of the event for Kerry. In Study 2, for our main measure of *schadenfreude*, we used items that tapped various pleased reactions to the event, but eliminated

references to a particular candidate or party. Also, we enlarged the number of scale points used to report emotional reactions in order to enhance the possibility of capturing the potentially more subtle feelings associated with reading about troop deaths.

As in Study 1, we expected that objectively negative misfortunes would be a noticeable source of *schadenfreude* for ingroup members whose ingroup the misfortune might ultimately benefit. We also predicted, as outlined by IET, that this effect would be moderated by intensity of party identification, such that ingroup members who strongly identify with their party should experience more intense *schadenfreude* as a result of an objectively negative event than would ingroup members who did not strongly identify with their party.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 107 undergraduates (52 Republicans and 55 Democrats) who participated in the study as part of an Introductory Psychology course requirement.

Materials

Materials included the same political affiliation survey detailed in Study 1, as well as several recently appearing newspaper articles (in counterbalanced order) which detailed 6 instances of misfortunes. The two articles of interest detailed misfortunes that had objectively negative characteristics: one article detailed a number of American soldiers who had been killed by a roadside bombing in Iraq (Abdul-Zahra, 2006), and another reported poor economic news (Aversa, 2006).¹

Procedure

At the beginning of the 2006 fall semester, the political affiliation questionnaire was distributed to participants as part of an extensive mass screening questionnaire containing multiple measures given during class sessions to all Introductory Psychology students at the University of Kentucky. As in Study 1, participants were asked to report their political affiliation and strength of their party identification. Then, several weeks later but before the elections, participants signed up for a subsequent study, in groups of about 50. Upon arrival, participants were told that the researchers were conducting a study of people's affective reactions to news articles. Participants were next given a packet consisting of the news articles described above presented in counterbalanced order. Participants were instructed to read each of the articles and to answer several brief questions on the bottom half of each page. After the participants had finished, they were thanked, given more information about the study, credited, and dismissed. After collecting participant responses, their reactions to the misfortune articles were matched with the political affiliation data they had provided earlier in the semester using the last four digits of the participant's student identification number.

Measures

The items presented after the articles were adapted to match the details of the individual events. We also attempted to create items that would measure reactions in a non-reactive way. All items were measured on a 21 point Likert-type scales ranging from 0 (not at all), to 20 (very much).

Schadenfreude

The measures following each article contained a number of *schadenfreude* items. For the troop casualty article there were three items ("secretly pleased," "part of me is glad as this supports my position on the war," and "happy if this helps get troops home faster," $\alpha = .60$), and for the economic downturn article there were four items ("couldn't resist a smile," "pleased," "partly glad," and "almost delighted," $\alpha = .85$). Both sets of items were averaged to form an overall composite index of *schadenfreude* for each story.

Negative affect

The measures following each article also contained a number of general negative affect items that were combined to form overall general negative affect indices. These four items were: "distressed," "upset," "worried," and "sad," ($\alpha > .80$).

Results

American troop casualties

A *t*-test found that Democrats reported feeling significantly more *schadenfreude* ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 4.57$) than Republicans ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 3.09$) when reading about the increase in US troop deaths in Iraq, $t(105) = 2.69$, $p < .01$, $r = 0.26$. Republicans ($M = 14.71$, $SD = 4.73$) and Democrats ($M = 14.47$, $SD = 3.88$) reported equally high levels of general negative affect, $t(105) = .28$, $p = .78$, $r = .03$.

As in Study 1, we also conducted an ANCOVA on feelings of *schadenfreude* while controlling for negative affect. The ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect for party affiliation, $F(1,102) = 9.37$, $p < .005$, such that Democrats reported significantly more *schadenfreude* than Republicans.

Economic downturn

We hypothesized that Democrats might experience *schadenfreude* as result of a downturn in the housing market. However, this was not the case. Democrats ($M = 1.01$, $SD = 1.88$) and Republicans ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 1.66$) reported equally low levels of *schadenfreude*, $t(103) = 0.82$, $p = .43$, $r = 0.08$. Similarly, Democrats ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 3.83$) and Republicans ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 3.50$) experienced nearly equally high levels of negative affect, $t(104) = 0.19$, $p = .84$, $r < .001$.²

Regression analyses

We next examined the potential moderating effect of strength of party identification on the relationship between party and emotional reaction to the news stories. We created a strength of identification variable by combining two items – "If you are a Republican, how strong a Republican are you?" and "If you are a Democrat, how strong a Democrat are you?" – into a single indicator, using Democrat's scores on the first item and Republican's scores on the second item. The "strength of identification" variable was then centered, and party affiliation was coded so that Democrats = 0 and Republicans = 1. These were entered in the first step of the regression, and the interaction term was entered in at the second.

Each of the articles was analyzed for potential interactions between party membership and strength of identification, both on feelings of *schadenfreude* and on feelings of negative affect (see Table 3). To summarize, a significant interaction was found for feelings of *schadenfreude* in the article about troop deaths (see Fig. 1) and a marginally significant interaction was found for the

¹ The remaining articles were, generally, more embarrassing in nature and were not of primary interest. These articles included stories about a botched joke told by Democratic Senator John Kerry, a "family values" Republican being caught in an extramarital affair, bribes taken by a Democratic congressman, and a relationship between a Republican Senator and a corrupt lobbyist.

² Results for the more embarrassing misfortunes were generally as anticipated. Republicans reported significantly more *schadenfreude* than Democrats as a result of Sen. Kerry's botched joke, and Democrats reported significantly more *schadenfreude* as a result of a Republican congressman's affair being exposed and as a result of a Republican senator's relationship with a corrupt lobbying being exposed. All were significant at the $p < .05$ level at least.

Table 3

Feelings of *schadenfreude* and negative affect for Republicans and Democrats at high and low strength of affiliation (Study 2).

Article	<i>Schadenfreude</i>	Negative affect
Troop death	$\Delta R^2 = .044^*$	$\Delta R^2 = .014$
High strength	$B = -5.80^*$	–
Low strength	$B = -1.62$	–
Lobbying	$\Delta R^2 = .030$	$\Delta R^2 = .010$
High strength	–	–
Low strength	–	–
Kerry	$\Delta R^2 = .10^*$	$\Delta R^2 = .026$
High strength	$B = -8.93^*$	–
Low strength	$B = -1.72$	–
Affair	$\Delta R^2 = .025$	$\Delta R^2 = .060^*$
High strength	–	$B = 4.26^*$
Low strength	–	$B = .362$
Housing	$\Delta R^2 = .036^{**}$	$\Delta R^2 = .009$
High strength	$B = 0.95^{**}$	–
Low strength	$B = -0.41$	–

* $p < .05$.

** $p = .056$.

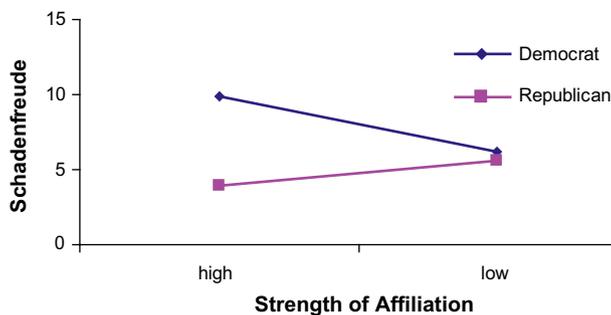


Fig. 1. Interaction for party affiliation and strength of party affiliation on feelings of *schadenfreude* reactions to America troop deaths in Study 2.

economic downturn article. Both interactions had similar patterns when probed further: at low levels of strength of identification, there were no significant differences between Republicans and Democrats on feelings of *schadenfreude*. At high strength of identification, however, there were differences such that when the article reported a misfortune ostensibly caused by Republicans (i.e. troop death or economic woes), Democrats reported higher amounts of *schadenfreude* than Republicans.³

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate and extend the results of Study 1. Democrats, whose ingroup stood to gain from American troop casualties, reported more *schadenfreude* as a result of American troop casualties than did Republicans. The regression analysis revealed that this effect was especially pronounced for Democrats who strongly identified with the Democratic Party. That our participants were willing to report feeling any semblance of pleasure over the deaths of American soldiers is particularly striking.⁴ It is important to emphasize, however, that these feelings were marked by ambivalence. As with the findings for the economic downturn

³ Results were largely the same for the articles having embarrassing content such that at high levels of identification, Republicans and Democrats reported more *schadenfreude* as a result of reading these articles than they did at low levels of identification. See Table 3 for all results.

⁴ Given the low reliability of the composite *schadenfreude* measure it is reasonable to interpret the results with some caution. It is also useful to note that each of the other composite *schadenfreude* measures in Studies 1, 3, and 4, have more acceptable reliability levels and replicate the findings from Study 2.

in Study 1, Democrats also reported a considerable amount of negative affect as a result of the troop casualties.

Democrats were also marginally more likely to report *schadenfreude* as a result of the economic downturn, provided they also reported strong party identification. As noted previously, in the run up to the 2006 midterm elections, economic concerns were not generally at the forefront of political discourse, and as a result, economic news may simply not have had the same “bite” as news regarding the war in Iraq. Finally, Republicans generally reported considerable negative affect regardless of which objectively negative event they read about.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 provided clear evidence that people will report *schadenfreude* as a result of misfortunes with objectively negative features, especially if they strongly identify with their political party. However, a limitation of both studies was the lack of an objectively negative misfortune that could be attributed to Democrats and thus could be seen as hindering *their* winning the election. This limitation was partly because during the period of data collection, Republicans held control of both houses of Congress and the Presidency, and as result, most objectively negative misfortunes could be “pinned” on Republicans. There is every reason to suspect that if the political tables had been turned and Democrats had been in power, Republicans would have also enjoyed, at least in the mixed sense, any objectively negative misfortunes. One main goal of Study 3 was to find a way of balancing these findings by having Republicans and Democrats react to an objectively negative event ostensibly caused by Democrats. This would allow us to make more general claims about how group affiliation and identification are linked with *schadenfreude*. Another distinctive feature of Study 3 involved a further adjustment to how we measured *schadenfreude*, specifically, we attempted to avoid any items that suggest specific political reasons for feeling *schadenfreude*.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 50 (25 Republicans, 20 Democrats, and five independents) University of Kentucky undergraduates who participated in the study in order to fulfill part of an Introductory Psychology course requirement. Participants completed the study in groups of approximately 10. The five independents were dropped from the analyses because of our focus on ingroup affiliation and identification.

Materials

Participants reacted to a (fictitious) news article that was created and presented to appear like a real news article printed from the New York Times website. The article detailed a story in which then Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama had caused a considerable misfortune in his time in the Illinois state senate.⁵ The misfortune described in the article reported that Obama had authored and campaigned for a statewide wage increase that had ended up costing thousands of residents of Illinois their jobs and potentially their homes. Specifically, the article suggested that “tens of thousands” of Illinois residents had lost their jobs as a result of a bill that Obama wrote and sponsored because businesses could not afford the wage increase and consequently ended up firing or laying off employees. As a result, many of those who had lost their jobs “have had to foreclose on their mortgages.” Participants also reacted

⁵ During this period, Obama’s background was comparatively unfamiliar to most participants, allowing this fictitious article to appear credible.

to two other filler articles (one about California Parks closing and another about the FDA) that were included as part of a cover story.

Measures

Using a 1 (not at all) to 20 (very much so) scale, participants responded to four items designed to measure *schadenfreude* (“happy in a way,” “kind of happy the program failed,” “secretly pleased about the economic problems,” and “maybe a little glad,” $\alpha = .78$), and four items designed to measure negative affect (“upset,” “gloomy,” “distressed,” and “miserable,” $\alpha = .75$). Each set of items was averaged to form overall composite measures for analysis.

Procedure

Participants were informed that the purpose of the experiment was to assess how people think and feel about the sorts of news stories that people encounter on a regular basis. Participants were told that the experimenters had put together a packet of news articles that were pulled at random from various news outlets (in actuality, with the exception of the stimulus article, the other articles were real and simply printed from the websites of various news outlets such as the New York Times and CNN). The packet of articles was presented in counterbalanced order, and participants were asked to read through the articles at whatever pace was comfortable. After they were finished with each article, they respond to several scale items. The final page of the packet contained the party affiliation and strength of party identification measures used in the prior studies. Upon completion of the packet, participants were thoroughly debriefed, thanked, credited, and dismissed.

Results

Schadenfreude

A *t*-test was conducted to examine Republican and Democrat responses to the article detailing the employment and housing woes. The *t*-test revealed a significant difference for feelings of *schadenfreude* such that Republicans ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 4.10$) reported considerably more *schadenfreude* than Democrats ($M = 0.97$, $SD = 1.33$) as a result of the employment and housing troubles ostensibly caused by Obama, $t(43) = 3.43$, $p < .001$, $r = .45$.

Negative affect

A *t*-test was conducted to examine Republican and Democrat responses to the article detailing employment and housing woes. The *t*-test indicated that participants from both parties reported equally high amounts of negative affect such that Republicans ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 3.52$) did not differ significantly from Democrats ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 3.80$), $t(43) = .43$, $p = .41$, $r = .10$.

As in our previous studies, we again examined feelings of *schadenfreude* while controlling for negative affect. An ANCOVA revealed a significant effect for party affiliation; Republicans reported significantly more *schadenfreude* than Democrats, $F(1, 42) = 10.72$, $p < .005$.

Regression analyses

We performed a series of regressions in order to test for interactions between party affiliation and strength of party identification on *schadenfreude* and on negative affect. As in Study 2, a strength of identification variable was created by combining two items (“If you are a Republican, how strong a Republican are you?” and “If you are a Democrat, how strong a Democrat are you?”) into a single indicator, using Democrat’s scores on the first item and Republican’s scores on the second item. The variables of party affiliation and strength of identification were also coded in the same way as they were for Study 2.

Table 4

Feelings of *schadenfreude* and negative affect for Republicans and Democrats at high and low strength of affiliation (Study 3).

Article	<i>Schadenfreude</i>	Negative affect
Obama mistake	$\Delta R^2 = .219^*$	$\Delta R^2 = .059$
High strength	$B = -6.80^*$	–
Low strength	$B = -0.048$	–

* $p < .05$.

Table 4 lists the results from the analyses. There was a significant interaction for feelings of *schadenfreude*, which followed a pattern similar to the interactions found in Study 2: at low levels of strength of identification, there were no significant differences between Republicans and Democrats on feelings of *schadenfreude* (see Fig. 2 for overall pattern). At high strength of identification, however, Republicans expressed more *schadenfreude* than Democrats. No effects occurred for negative affect.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 help complete the picture emerging in Studies 1 and 2 by showing that Republicans reported considerably more *schadenfreude* than Democrats as a result of an event with objectively negative features. In this instance, the event was caused by a member of the opposing Democratic Party, and therefore it could potentially bring ingroup advantage to Republicans. This effect was again qualified by a significant interaction: Republicans who strongly identified with their party were especially likely to report *schadenfreude* as a result of the economic downturn, while Republicans who did not strongly identify with their party were not. In fact, Republicans who felt low identification with their party responded similarly to Democrats. Thus, the capacity of party affiliation (and the ingroup identification usually implied by this affiliation) to predict *schadenfreude* in response to an event that has caused broad harm to others (yet benefits one’s own party) appears to be a phenomenon likely to generalize to members of any party.

Study 3 also replicated the findings for negative affect found in the first two studies as Democrats and Republicans reported similar levels of elevated negative feelings. Again, this suggests that

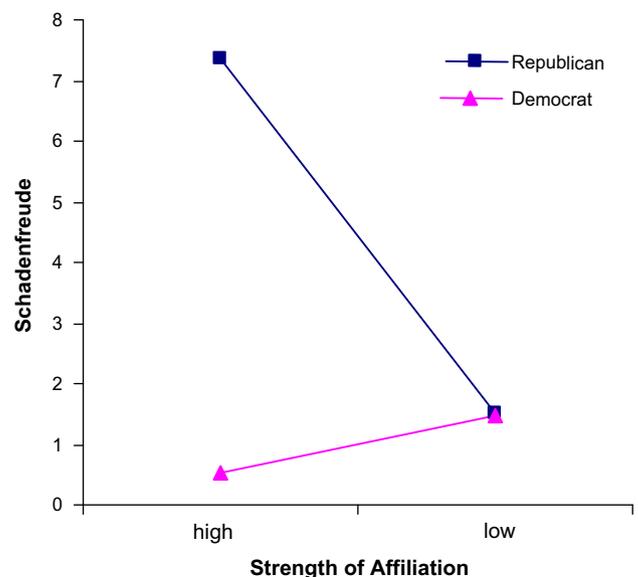


Fig. 2. Interaction for party affiliation and strength of party affiliation on feelings of *schadenfreude* reactions to Obama causing lost jobs in Study 3.

while individuals may feel good about objectively negative events which could bring ingroup gain, considerable feelings of ambivalence may also be present.

A noteworthy finding from Study 3 was the absolute magnitude of the effect for feelings of *schadenfreude*. Republicans in Study 3 reported considerable *schadenfreude* as a result of the economic downturn, while Democrats reported almost no *schadenfreude* (reporting a mean of less than 1 on the 20 point scale). Such results suggest that people's emotional lives may be heavily dependent upon their group identities. Given the number of group related events people witness in any given day, one's group identity may dictate the sorts of emotional reactions one may have as a result of any number of events.

Study 4

The success of Study 3 in creating a fictitious but believable article about then candidate Obama led us to conclude that we could do so for both political parties. This would allow us to manipulate the party linked with the misfortune while keeping other details of the misfortune constant. In Study 4, we created a news article which, again, detailed an economic crisis which was ostensibly caused by then Presidential candidates Barack Obama or John McCain. At the time of the study, it had become clear that McCain and Obama were the clear frontrunners for their respective party's Presidential nominations. Therefore, we were able to cross party affiliation of the participant with the party affiliation of the person associated with the misfortune.

Thus far, for each of the studies, the negative effects of the misfortunes were constrained largely to people other than the participants themselves (i.e. innocent bystanders). This was certainly the case with the troop deaths and the financial woes of the residents of Obama's district. Perhaps the most striking result of Studies 1 through 3 was participant's willingness to report *schadenfreude* as a result of an objectively negative event in which it was made clear that innocent bystanders suffered (because of the positive implications for the participant's ingroup). One goal of Study 4 was to expand the nature of the misfortune to events having implied negative consequences for the participants themselves. As noted earlier, Mackie et al. (2004) suggests that when individuals strongly identify with their ingroup, emotions are experienced at the group level, as opposed to the individual level. Importantly, they also note that such feelings would be expected *regardless* of whether or not the event observed has any direct effect on the individual. Such thinking is exemplified by cases of positive outcomes (e.g. a favorite team winning a game) that create strong intergroup emotions (especially for those who strongly identify with their team) even though there is no direct gain to the individual. It is also generally consistent with Garcia et al.'s (2005) work which found that ingroup members who strongly identify with the ingroup will sometimes choose options that limit the monetary resources of the ingroup, provided an outgroup's monetary resources are also limited. However, this general notion has not been applied to circumstances where an individual's ingroup may benefit while the individual could personally suffer. Study 4 examined whether the intergroup emotion (*schadenfreude*, in this case) might sometimes take precedent over the individual concern over one's own outcomes.

Study 4 was conducted during the 2008 US Presidential primary season, but a few months later than Study 3. Participants read and reacted to articles which described a misfortune that was ostensibly caused by either Democratic primary front runner Barack Obama or Republican primary front runner John McCain. The article described a scenario in which, depending upon condition, McCain or Obama voted against a measure which, had it passed, in all like-

lihood would have avoided a housing and mortgage crisis which was then affecting many citizens of the US and was likely to affect additional people in the future (e.g. Bajaj, 2008). The article described the crisis in a such way that it laid much of the blame for the people losing their jobs and homes on the candidate's misguided vote, and it emphasized that the economic ripple effects would likely be felt by *all* Americans (presumably including the participant).

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 50 University of Kentucky undergraduates. However, we eliminated participants who did not follow directions or who supported a candidate other than the two frontrunners (e.g. Democratic participants who supported Senator Hillary Clinton). Ultimately, we used 43 (23 Republicans and 20 Democrats) participants for analysis. Participants were compensated with a small reward for their participation (their choice of candy bars).

Materials

Participants read and reacted to a packet of 4 news articles; among them was a (fictitious) news article that was created and portrayed as a real news article printed from the New York Times website. The packet included the same filler articles as in Study 3 as well as another article regarding the then prominent news story about former New York Governor Elliot Spitzer's legal troubles.

The article of interest contained a story describing a bill that was ostensibly opposed by the candidate described in the story (McCain or Obama). The story suggested that had the bill passed, the economic and housing crisis which was then harming many Americans might have been avoided entirely. The article cited a supposedly prominent economist who had worked on the candidate's staff during debate on the measure and who had urged the candidate to support the measure, to no avail. The economist went on to say that the candidate in question had "really blown it on this thing." The article specifically stated that the bill was "vehemently opposed" by current Presidential candidate Barack Obama (John McCain), and would have "limited the ability of lenders to give Adjustable Rate Mortgages (ARMS) to borrowers with bad credit." The article described ARMS as "the primary force behind the current economic downturn." The article went on to report that many people "are hurting economically" because of housing problems, and that the problems caused by the housing collapse were so severe that "this really could affect all Americans."

Measures

After participants read the article, they were asked to react to 4 scale items designed to measure *schadenfreude* ("happy in a way," "kind of happy this housing problem occurred," "secretly pleased about the economic problems," and "maybe a little glad," $\alpha > .80$), 4 scale items designed to measure negative affect ("upset," "gloomy," "distressed," and "miserable," $\alpha = .75$), a single item to acknowledge that others were hurt ("a lot of people will be negatively affected"), and two items to acknowledge that the participants themselves might be negatively affected by the economic troubles ("in a way this could end up hurting me," and "this could even affect me negatively," $r = .82$). Each set of items was combined to form composite items for analysis. Finally, we included a demographic page on the last page of the packet which gathered information pertaining to party affiliation, strength of identification, and candidate support.

Procedure

Participants were approached on the University of Kentucky campus, in settings such as the main library or student union, and asked if they would be willing to participate in a study about people's reactions to news stories. If they agreed to participate, they were asked to sit in a quiet place and were given the same cover story as Study 3, a packet of news articles, and an envelope to seal the packet in upon completion before giving it back to the experimenter. After delivering the cover story the experimenter left the participant and sat alone a short distance away reading. The packet given to participants contained several articles, though the article of concern was always placed in the middle of the packet with the other articles counterbalanced. After participants completed the packet, they sealed the packet in an envelope provided by the experimenter and then notified the experimenter that they were through. They were then thoroughly debriefed, credited, and thanked. No participants expressed suspicion over the true purpose of the study.

Results

Schadenfreude

The composite *schadenfreude* measure was submitted to a two-way affiliation of participants (Republican and Democrat) \times candidate (McCain and Obama) ANOVA. There were no significant main effects; however, there was a significant participant party affiliation by candidate interaction, $F(1,39) = 18.28, p < .001$.

Follow up Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) tests revealed that Republicans ($M = 6.93, SD = 3.76$) who read an article detailing the misfortune caused by Obama reported more *schadenfreude* than Democrats ($M = 0.91, SD = 1.63$) who read the same article, $t(14) = 4.81, p < .005, r = .61$. Democrats ($M = 4.91, SD = 4.56$) who read an article detailing a misfortune caused by McCain reported more *schadenfreude* than Republicans ($M = 1.52, SD = 3.43$) who read the same article, $t(20) = 2.10, p < .05, r = .32$ (see Fig. 3 for overall interaction pattern and Table 5 for all Study 4 means).

Negative affect

The composite negative affect measure was submitted to an ANOVA. The only effect was as unexpected 2-way affiliation of participant \times candidate interaction, $F(1,39) = 6.75, p < .05$. Follow up Fisher's LSD tests revealed that participants reported greater negative affect when reading an article detailing a candidate of their party causing a misfortune. Averaging across parties, however, participants reported equally high levels of negative affect (see Table 5).

We also conducted an ANCOVA using the composite negative affect item as a covariate to assess whether reports of *schaden-*

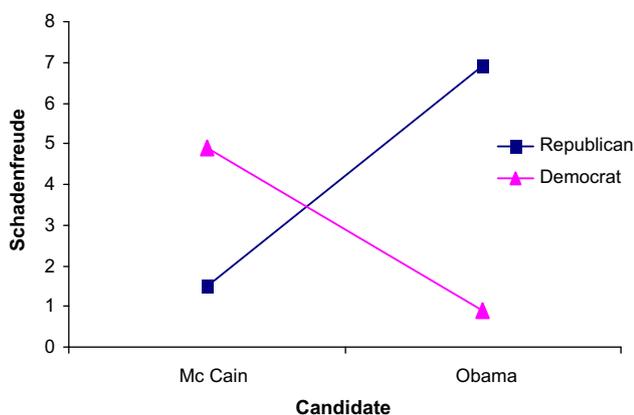


Fig. 3. Overall party affiliation \times candidate interaction in Study 4.

Table 5

Means and standard deviations for primary DVs by condition (Study 4).

	McCain caused	Obama caused
<i>Schadenfreude</i>		
Republicans	1.52 (3.43)	6.93 (3.76)
Democrats	4.91 (4.56)	0.91 (1.63)
<i>Negative affect</i>		
Republicans	6.77 (4.21)	3.36 (2.57)
Democrats	4.79 (3.45)	7.27 (4.33)
<i>Others harmed</i>		
Republicans	12.75 (3.57)	10.27 (6.70)
Democrats	10.90 (5.28)	11.77 (4.57)
<i>Self harmed</i>		
Republicans	10.33 (4.92)	7.90 (5.78)
Democrats	8.31 (5.52)	9.88 (5.47)

freude would still be significant while controlling for these negative feelings. The ANCOVA revealed a similarly significant affiliation of participants (Republican and Democrat) by candidate (McCain and Obama) interaction, $F(1,38) = 12.17, p < .001$.

Acknowledgment of bystander suffering

An ANOVA on the item assessing perceptions of innocent suffering revealed no significant effects. Regardless of party affiliation of participants or candidates, acknowledgment that other people were adversely affected by the economic woes was quite high on the scale (see Table 5).

Possibility of self suffering

An ANOVA on perceptions of self suffering also revealed no significant effects. Again, regardless of party affiliation of participants or candidates, acknowledgment that the self might suffer as a result of the economic problems was quite high on the scale (see Table 5).

Regression analyses

As in Studies 2 and 3, we performed a series of regression analyses examining the interaction between party affiliation and strength of party identification on *schadenfreude* and negative affect.

As before, we created a "strength of identification" item, and then ran two separate regression analyses for both dependent variables. The first regression analyzed Republican and Democrat responses to the article that indicated Obama was at fault for the economic problems, and the second regression analyzed Republican and Democrat responses to the article that indicated McCain was at fault for the economic problems.

The results (see Table 6) indicated a significant interaction for feelings of *schadenfreude* for the article with the Obama focus. The interaction had a similar pattern to the interactions found in Study 2 – at low levels of strength of identification, there were no significant differences between Republicans and Democrats on feelings

Table 6

Feelings of *schadenfreude* and negative affect for Republicans and Democrats at high and low strength of affiliation (Study 4).

Article	<i>Schadenfreude</i>	Negative affect	Self	Other
Obama mistake	$\Delta R^2 = .102^*$	$\Delta R^2 = .002$	$\Delta R^2 = .101$	$\Delta R^2 = .119$
High strength	$B = -8.95^*$	–	–	–
Low strength	$B = -2.03$	–	–	–
McCain mistake	$\Delta R^2 = .117^\dagger$	$\Delta R^2 = .356^*$	$\Delta R^2 = .020$	$\Delta R^2 = .026$
High strength	$B = 6.41^*$	$B = -6.87^*$	–	–
Low strength	$B = 0.37$	$B = 3.49$	–	–

* $p < .05$.

† $p = .096$

of *schadenfreude*. At high strength of identification, however, there were differences such that Republicans expressed more *schadenfreude* than Democrats (see Fig. 4). There was a marginally significant interaction for feelings of *schadenfreude* when McCain was the focus of the article such that at high strength of identification, Democrats expressed more *schadenfreude* than Republicans, while at low levels of identification there was no difference (see Fig. 5).

There was also a significant interaction for negative affect when McCain was the focus of the article, such that at low levels of strength of identification, there were no significant differences between Republicans and Democrats on feelings of negative affect, while at high strength of identification, Republicans felt more negative affect than Democrats.

Discussion

Study 4 replicated and extended the results of Studies 1 through 3. Participants reported *schadenfreude* as a result of the articles they read provided that the misfortune described in the article was caused by a politician of the opposing party and that it increased the likelihood of some ingroup benefit. Furthermore, as in Studies 2 and 3, Republicans who strongly identified with their party were more likely to report *schadenfreude* as a result of the objectively negative misfortune ostensibly caused by Obama than were Republicans who did not strongly identify with their party. This effect was generally similar for Democrats who read an article in which McCain had caused an objectively negative misfortune. In addition, these results were obtained under circumstances in which our participants acknowledged that innocent others as well as they themselves might be harmed. These results extend recent thinking about the primacy of ingroup membership in terms of emotional reactions to events. Even under circumstances in which a misfortune causes innocent bystanders as well as observers themselves to suffer, people can report feelings of *schadenfreude*, provided that they strongly identify with their ingroup and that their ingroup might benefit.

General discussion

The results of these four studies provide strong evidence for people's capacity to feel *schadenfreude* in response to negative

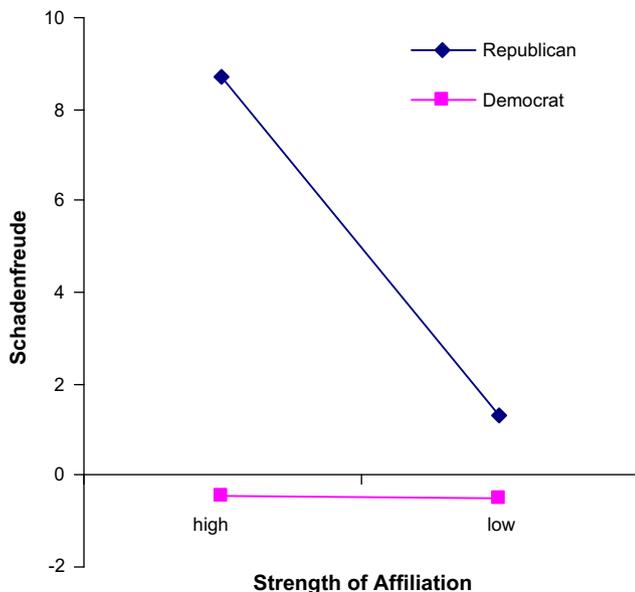


Fig. 4. Interaction for party affiliation and strength of party affiliation on feelings of *schadenfreude* reactions to Obama misfortune in Study 4.

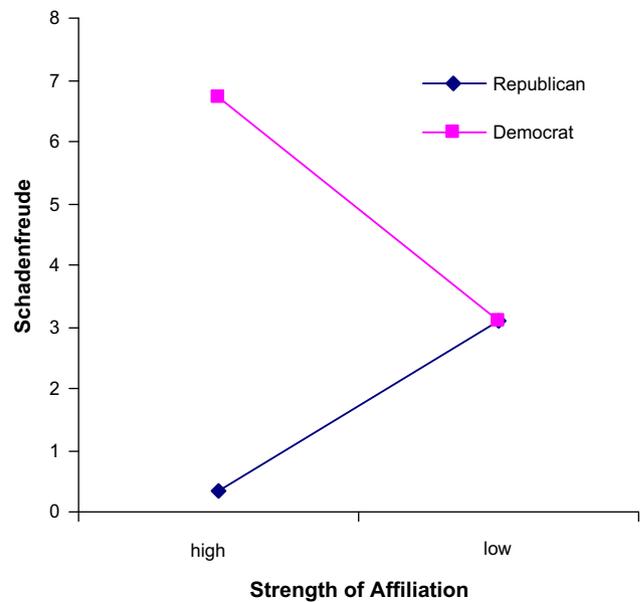


Fig. 5. Interaction for party affiliation and strength of party affiliation on feelings of *schadenfreude* reactions to McCain misfortune in Study 4.

events in the competitive arena of politics. The pattern of findings suggests that when there is potential gain for the political party to which one has allegiance and especially with which one strongly identifies, people may experience *schadenfreude* as result of a range of types of misfortunes. Those having embarrassing content are one type, whether they involve harmless pratfalls or someone placed in a foolish situation. *Schadenfreude* in reaction to such events is hardly surprising, exactly because they have ingredients that probably lend themselves to a humorous response.

The more objectively negative are another type. Events such as troop deaths and mortgage foreclosing have no humorous content. They are exemplars of misfortunes having significant negative consequences, and, in the case of troop deaths, particularly heartrending consequences. In fact, they are events that should produce no *schadenfreude* at all. Politicians may find themselves accused of feeling *schadenfreude* in reaction to such events, but most would likely express outrage at being so accused. Indeed, our participants recognized the hurtful aspects of these events and reported feeling bad about them. However, as with the other events, party affiliation and party identification seemed to transform the nature of participant's full reaction to these types of events as well. Party affiliation and strength of party identification tended to predict whether and to what degree these events produced *schadenfreude*.

A third type of event was both objectively negative and also implied a more clear negative, personal consequence to the participant. As we have noted, Smith and colleagues (Mackie et al., 2004) suggest that when individuals are strongly identified with their ingroup, their emotional reactions are primarily generated as a result of ingroup considerations as opposed to self-related considerations more narrowly defined. However, this point has never been tested under circumstances in which the highly identified individual could suffer while the group benefits. Study 4 certainly offers up preliminary evidence for Smith and colleagues' claims, and suggests that this possibility deserves further testing.

It is important to reemphasize that Democrats and Republicans also experienced marked negative affect as well as *schadenfreude* in response to most of the events, which indicates that they experienced ambivalence about these misfortunes. Democrats and Republicans responded positively to the misfortunes while realizing and reporting that the misfortunes had clearly negative consequences

as well. This pattern of findings suggests that *schadenfreude* may be an example of an emotion that can be felt alongside a countering emotion. (see Shimmack, 2005, as well as Larsen, McGraw, Mellers, & Cacioppo, 2007, for useful perspectives on mixed emotions).

Alternative explanations

One possible alternative explanation for our findings is that our participants were not experiencing *schadenfreude* as a result of the misfortunes and the positive ingroup benefits those events might bring with them, but rather as a result of a presumed “net gain” for the country overall. That is, participants might have reported a sense of happiness as a result of economic troubles or troop deaths because they felt that the short term pain could produce better long-term prospects. Participants may have read such stories and reasoned that if the current administration continues its policies, then more of these troubles may be on the way. But, if such troubles are highlighted in the media, then the voting populace might elect new leadership that would right the ship. Such reactions may be a part of the overall emotional reaction reported by participants. It is possible that participants experienced happiness as a result of both the misfortunes and the positive ingroup benefits those events might bring with them as well as a presumed “net gain” for the country overall. Partisans may think that an outgroup-caused objective misfortune can bring ingroup benefit – as well as “net-gain” benefits for the country as a whole. Future research should examine to what extent the “net-gain” possibility explains people’s reactions to events similar to those used in the present research.

An additional alternative explanation for our findings comes from recent theory and research regarding intergroup inferiority and related hostility. For example, Leach and Spears (2008) suggest that the inferiority of an ingroup compared to some outgroup may create a sense of shame and frustration which ultimately cause a sense of anger and hostility toward the superior group. They suggest that such feelings are so unpleasant that ingroup members are “likely to take advantage of easy opportunities to feel more positively (p. 5).” As a result, when the outgroup (or even some 3rd party outgroup which has little to do with the creation of the ingroup’s inferiority) experiences some misfortune, members of the ingroup could experience considerable *schadenfreude*. Possibly, the results of our studies can be explained by taking into account feelings of ingroup inferiority. In Studies 1 and 2, Democrats were clearly the inferior ingroup as Republicans then possessed all branches of the elected federal government. Consequently, Democrats may have experienced ingroup inferiority which may well have driven their *schadenfreude* experiences. Oppositely, in Study 3, Republicans had recently become something of the inferior group as Democrats had soundly defeated them in the 2006 midterm elections. Therefore, Republican’s sense of ingroup inferiority may have driven their *schadenfreude* experience in Study 3. However, Study 4 allowed for a fully crossed comparison of Republican and Democrat participants. Given that Democrats could reasonably be considered the superior group at the time (given their electoral success in 2006, and their early successes in both Presidential polling and special elections in 2008) a sense of inferiority seems an unlikely full explanation for their *schadenfreude*.

Future research directions

It may be that most experiences of *schadenfreude* are examples of ambivalent or mixed feelings. Consistent with Wills’ (1981) analysis of downward social comparisons, well-socialized people are unlikely to feel fully comfortable with any person’s suffering, especially when they gain selfishly from it. And yet personal gain

seems an irresistible source of pleasure. It is difficult to know for sure how much self-report measures of *schadenfreude* are able to tap participants’ actual feelings. Even in private circumstances, these reports may be self-censored, perhaps unwittingly. Future research might employ fMRI approaches that assess pleasure-related emotions in ways that are less influenced by intentional or unwitting underreporting (e.g. Singer et al., 2006). Such approaches have great potential to better understand more precisely the nature of people’s reactions to the suffering of others.

Our research focused on the ultimate outcome of feelings of *schadenfreude* expressed by either Republicans or Democrats. However, there are several potentially interesting mediators of this outcome that have yet to be explored. Namely, Republicans and Democrats each have specific stereotypes associated with them (i.e. conservative and close-minded vs. liberal and elitist) which may in turn influence how members of the opposite party will react to their misfortunes. This would indicate, then, that *schadenfreude* may be expressed by Republicans towards Democrats (and vice versa) through different mechanisms depending on the stereotypes associated with each group. The Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) is a model that defines various emotions individuals can have in response to outgroups based on the various stereotypes associated with those outgroups. The model identifies two primary dimensions upon which individuals may classify various outgroups: warmth and competence. Certain outgroups, such as Asians, may be stereotyped as being low on warmth, but high on competence, while other groups, such as the elderly, may be considered to be high on warmth and low on competence. These combinations are also associated with a variety of possible emotional responses: Asians might elicit feelings of envy, while the elderly might elicit pity (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Harris et al., 2008). This model, or one like it, might help identify how perceptions of Democrats and Republicans are characterized by the stereotypes associated with the two groups, and how this in turn might lead to certain emotional responses, desire and trepidation, approach and avoidance.

Methodological issues

There are a number of methodological features of this series of studies that are worth emphasizing. First, we used a variety of misfortunes having an arguably natural link to *schadenfreude* for either Democrats or Republicans. Nonetheless, the findings that emerged across these events were consistent with our predictions. Second, we measured *schadenfreude* using a variety of combinations of items; from those that included more specific reasons for feeling *schadenfreude* to those that were more oblique in their emphasis. Here again, the findings were consistent with our predictions across these measures. Third, the timing of our assessing party affiliation was designed to minimize the possibility that participants’ reports of *schadenfreude* would be affected by their knowledge of this assessment. In Studies 1 and 2, the assessment was more than a month prior to participants reacting to the news events and in Studies 3 and 4 the assessment followed their reactions. Thus, participants would have had little sense that we were interested in examining the effects of party affiliation and identification on their emotional reactions to the articles when providing these reactions. Fourth, overall, our procedures included features aimed at reducing socially desirable responding, a problem that is unwise to ignore when studying an emotion such as *schadenfreude* (Powell et al., 2008). In debriefing participants there was little indication that they were either aware of the focus of the research or gave anything other than their genuine reactions to event that they assumed were real. Finally, we collected data in a variety of settings using variations in procedures.

Conclusion

The current studies suggest that the domain of politics is prime territory for feelings of *schadenfreude*, especially for people strongly identified with political parties. The likelihood of *schadenfreude* depends on whether one's own party or the opposing party is suffering the harm. This is clearly the case for events that simply embarrassing in nature, but also for events that are more "objectively" harmful all around, such as a downturn in the economy or the harm suffered by troops. Even for these latter events, it appears that the political gain brings about considerable *schadenfreude*, especially for people highly identified with their political party.

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