Veterans’ Party Identification, Candidate Affect, and Vote Choice in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election

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The 2004 U.S. presidential election was a wartime contest that entailed a great deal of discussion about the role that previous military service plays in elections for both candidates and the electorate. Using polling data throughout 2004, this article examines party identification, candidate affect, and vote choice preferences among veterans and nonveterans in the electorate. Despite widespread assumptions depicting the veteran population as deeply Republican, those with military experience in 2004 largely mirrored their nonveteran peers in terms of partisan identification, warmth toward candidates, ballot intentions, and vote choice. One important exception manifested after the “Swift Boat” advertisement in September, which impelled significant numbers of veterans who identify with the Democratic Party to express the intention to vote for George W. Bush.

Keywords: veterans; military service; 2004 U.S. presidential election; military socialization

In 2004, Americans cast ballots during a wartime presidential election, and among these voters were men and women who once served in the military. While these veterans represent a smaller share of the electorate than in past eras, they compose a proportionally large share of the voting population. Electoral candidates’ military service has been a political touchstone in recent and earlier American elections, yet it is important to understand the degree to which military service engenders men and women in the electorate to vote differently later in life. More than 24 million veterans in the United States currently share this military experience, spending years imbedded in an insulated institution that makes specific efforts to inculcate its members with patriotism, esprit de corps, conformity, and other values. Recent

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scholarship has identified a palpable conservative slant to today’s officers, and the Republican Party is often recognized as stronger than Democrats on matters of defense and national security. Together, these two facts undergird a perception that the veteran population identifies more with the Republican Party and prefers Republican candidates. This work uses the recent 2004 presidential election, saturated with issues of military service, to evaluate the political preferences of America’s veterans. Examining partisanship, candidate affect, and vote choice, this analysis finds that veterans predominantly mirror the nonveteran population. However, evidence also demonstrates that campaign events can galvanize veterans’ vote choice rapidly.

This article analyzes political behavior and attitudes during the 2004 U.S. presidential election. By focusing on the American public’s partisanship and candidate preference across the span of a presidential election with a critical eye on differences between veterans and nonveterans, we can measure the existence and potential size of distinctions therein. The analysis uses 2004 polling data to measure for veteran distinctiveness vis-à-vis three important electoral phenomena: allegiance to political party, affect for candidates, and vote choice. Evidence from these data indicates that veterans and nonveterans in the civilian population do not exhibit significant differences in 2004. Instead of paralleling the distinctiveness of the military recognized by the gap literature, military veterans largely exhibit political similarities with nonveteran civilians. While the current military population may maintain Republican proclivities, partisan differences between veterans and nonveterans are trivial in magnitude. One important exception during the election manifested in September, when veterans demonstrated strong affinity for Bush following the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” advertisements, portending possible future attempts at specific veteran persuasion using service-related campaign stimuli.

There are good reasons to study the politics of the veteran population that are not specific to a given election. Scholars have noted that Republican elites “own” issues related to security and national defense, enjoying generally higher levels of credibility than do Democrats.¹ We know about the role that military absentee ballots played in the 2000 presidential contest in Florida.² Another reason to expect political distinctions among military veterans stems from scholarly depictions of the military as increasingly conservative and Republican since the 1990s. In terms of attitudes and partisanship, experts have characterized a “huge partisan gap” between civilians and the military based on recent polling data,³ whereas older scholarship saw veterans without many political distinctions.⁴ However, these general conceptions aside, the 2004 election provides researchers with a critical case to investigate the relationship between electoral politics and previous military service. The candidates, the campaigns, the conventions, interest groups, and the media together made military service a repeated subtext of the election. As such, it is difficult to imagine a more fitting election to evaluate the political nature of former military members within the electorate.
Historical Background: The 2004 Presidential Election

Candidates need votes to win elections, and one way to attract support is to draw straightforward links between the candidates and potential voters. Throughout American electoral history, political candidates have waved their military service before the electorate, specifically to veterans, to demonstrate service, sacrifice, and patriotism. Before exploring the political partisanship, opinions, and vote preferences of the electorate, it is necessary to provide the context of the 2004 election and the specific focus on the military service of the candidates involved. The service records of three candidates became a large part of the campaign dialogue—specifically, George W. Bush, Wesley Clark, and John Kerry. The presidential campaign spent as much emphasis on advertisements, rhetoric, airtime, and newspaper column inches dealing with a thirty-year old conflict in Southeast Asia as it did with the conflict waging during the campaign against insurgents in Iraq. The 2004 election, with its candidates in the primary and general election, along with the campaign advertisements, provided an environment infused with the theme of military service.

President George W. Bush served in the Texas Air National Guard from 1968, flying F-102 interceptors. His military record did not play out as a campaign asset, and those seeking to replace him criticized his service on two grounds. First, records indicated that he allowed his flight status to lapse by failing to acquire medical qualification and then sought a transfer to Alabama to aid a Senate campaign in 1972, provoking doubts about the commitment of Bush’s service.5 Another criticism concentrated on the fact that Bush had served in the National Guard rather than in a unit bound for Vietnam. This criticism suggested that Bush’s father, then-congressman George H. W. Bush (R-TX 7), used political connections to ensure his son a spot in the National Guard rather than one that rotated men and resources to combat in southeast Asia—an echo of claims from the 1988 presidential election about Dan Quayle’s service in the Indiana National Guard.6 The lieutenant governor of Texas at the time of Bush’s assignment, Democrat Ben Barnes, disclosed during the 2004 campaign that he had improperly used his office to appoint Bush and other sons of prominent Texans to the safe assignment, a point that both Bush and his father deny.7 Rather than allowing him to demonstrate his military experience, the dubious nature of the incumbent’s service record generated criticism instead of advantage.

Following in the footsteps of Dwight Eisenhower and a host of nineteenth-century presidential candidates, Wesley Clark attempted to make the leap from high-ranking general to president. In essence, his military service became his campaign. It did not last much beyond January after it became clear that John Kerry was dominating the Democratic primaries, but from his candidacy until Election Day 2004, Clark’s involvement in the race was a clear attempt to wrest national security and defense issues away from the Republicans during a wartime election. Clark’s campaign began late and somewhat reluctantly. Rather than the usual exploratory statements and tentative
temperature taking, the Clark campaign initially took the shape of a grassroots effort to convince him to become the tenth candidate in the race to unseat George W. Bush. 

Supporters sporting “Draft Clark!” signs and bumper stickers impelled the retired general, who had apparently been undecided, to run. Media accounts describe the campaign in New Hampshire as composed of both nonveterans and veterans but definitely borrowing military themes in its organization. Between announcing his candidacy and the New Hampshire contest, Clark had the unique opportunity to highlight the fact that he had been the supreme commander of NATO and “faced down a dictator” in Slobodan Milošević. In mid-December, only a month before the New Hampshire contest, Clark traveled to The Hague to testify at Milošević’s ongoing war crimes trial, giving him some valuable free media coverage that further spotlighted his extensive military career. Clark explicitly connected his experiences as an Army general to desirable political attributes, vital for serving as president. The advertisements that his campaign fielded in New Hampshire avoided domestic-issue specifics and instead featured Clark as a leader with images highlighting his military career.

While Bush and Clark provided examples of the confluence of military service and electoral politics during a wartime election, John Kerry’s complicated military record attracted the most attention. Media coverage of the candidate, from a year before Election Day all the way to November 2004, used the senator’s military service in Vietnam and antiwar protest activity after the war as a frame to portray Kerry. In the preprimary period, the Kerry campaign brandished his Vietnam service to parry Dean’s attacks from the left on Kerry’s vote authorizing the war in Iraq and continued to use the senator’s veteran status as a campaign vehicle at the convention and during the general election campaign against Bush. The following is one example of typical media accounts characterizing Kerry’s use of his military vita as a campaign tool: “Kerry … trumpeted his decorated service as a Vietnam veteran, showcasing credentials he said would enable him to stand toe-to-toe with Bush on foreign policy and the fight against terrorism.”

Kerry’s use of his veteran status was more complex than previous generations of candidates serving in earlier wars. He was the first Vietnam veteran to earn a major party nomination. Bob Kerrey in 1992 and John McCain in 2000 had both attempted to obtain the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations, respectively, but Kerry became the first by successfully defeating Howard Dean, John Edwards, Wesley Clark, and others for the Democratic nomination in 2004. The Vietnam War was a politically polarizing event that divided the Democratic Party and the nation. Kerry himself exemplified this divide by serving in the Navy, receiving commendations for bravery, while also coming home to help found the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organization. Coverage of Kerry captured this dual image: he could be seen in mainstream media on the hustings surrounded by other veterans wearing VFW hats in 2004, while black-and-white images of Kerry from the 1960s with antiwar activist Jane Fonda circulated on the Internet. While enjoying front-runner status in the early
speculative period of the invisible primary, Kerry’s polling numbers in late 2003 sank as the Dean and Clark candidacies gained momentum. Kerry’s first-place finish in the Iowa Caucuses surprised the conventional wisdom while renewing his campaign, an effort that Kerry and his advisors credit in part to military veteran organizers on the ground.\textsuperscript{15} Kerry’s reliance on a group of fellow military veterans working in the campaign, whom he repeatedly called his “band of brothers,” dates to his past Senate campaigns but became an important and central fixture of his 2004 presidential run.\textsuperscript{16} The 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston, Massachusetts ended the summer with a political spectacle more imbued with military themes than recent conventions from either party.\textsuperscript{17} Kerry arrived at the convention by crossing Boston Harbor aboard a ship with a dozen fellow Vietnam veterans and comrades-in-arms.\textsuperscript{18} A host of former generals and military leaders lent their credibility to the Kerry candidacy by appearing together onstage before Kerry’s acceptance speech. Introducing Kerry was fellow Vietnam veteran and former senator, Max Cleland. The most memorable symbol that Kerry employed to communicate his military service was the opening line of his acceptance speech, given with a salute: “I’m John Kerry and I’m reporting for duty.”

The positive light surrounding his military service and its use as a campaign frame in summer darkened in autumn as competing voices entered the fray. Following the Democratic convention, an August advertisement ran in Wisconsin, Ohio, and West Virginia titled “Any Questions?” It was produced by a group that was to become the face of so-called 527 groups, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.\textsuperscript{19} The ad generated far more impact than any other did during the primary or general election because of heavy media coverage. Sharply critical of Kerry, the spot featured fellow Vietnam veterans stating that Kerry was unfit to lead and had exaggerated the events and wounds that underpinned his medals for bravery. The organization aired another ad in September focusing on Kerry’s antiwar activities after his return stateside despite criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike, including George W. Bush and John McCain.\textsuperscript{20} One of the leaders within the Swift Boat organization coauthored a book composed of attacks that paralleled the charges made by the Swift Boat ad.\textsuperscript{21} In the book, the authors alleged that Kerry’s medals were unwarranted. As evidence of the ad’s centrality to the election, many postmortem criticisms of Kerry’s failed presidential bid blame the campaign’s decision to wait and not immediately respond to the Swift Boat attacks.\textsuperscript{22}

Taken together, it is abundantly clear that the 2004 presidential contenders shared a belief with previous generations of candidates: military service is a useful political attribute for attracting electoral support. Candidates parade it when they have it, borrow it from proxies when they can, and have even exaggerated lackluster service records. Yet, these campaign events in 2004 and other races do not necessarily translate into generating votes from veterans or nonveterans, despite overwhelming prima facie evidence that the campaigns and candidates expressly court veterans as a group.
Effects of Military Service on Political Attitudes

The 2004 presidential contest featured a Democratic challenger seeking to defeat an incumbent with a closely divided electorate, and Kerry’s campaign imagery and theme suggested that veteran voters were sine qua non. Yet, many empirical signs indicate that his campaign’s attempts to attract veterans may have been an uphill struggle because of underlying Republican sympathies. While veterans are a symbolically potent electoral target during a wartime election and a higher-than-average turnout group, the Kerry campaign’s quest for the veteran vote ran counter to data indicating preference for Republican candidates, results that were published in the mainstream press.23 One poll taken by the National Annenberg Election Survey during the Democratic convention, and after the release of the Swift Boat ad, detailed strong bivariate evidence that veterans use their Republican partisanship as their main heuristic for candidate choice24 According to media interpretation of the data, Bush maintained demonstrably higher favorability ratings among veterans than did Kerry (+17 percent), and the survey analysts attribute their findings to the fact that underlying partisanship of veterans is Republican-skewed.25 The presumption, given these facts, is that 2004 veterans should favor George W. Bush and should self-report identification with the Republican Party. Our understanding of partisan loyalty stems from the beginnings of political behavioral research based on the 1950s presidential elections, establishing that party identification is a stable, enduring psychological bond with a party formed early in life.26 Earlier conceptions of vote choice saw the decision as a product largely of socioeconomic determinism.27 Both interpretations recognized important life-cycle events as having the potential to shape partisan loyalty. Military service immerses young adults into an institution that controls its members’ environment with near totality during the period in their life when attachments to party form. Indeed, a historical bond exists between the very essence of citizenship and the obligation of military service.28 Military training differs from high school, vocational training, or college as it provides both instruction of military skills and technical knowledge as well as an assimilating function into a “total institution” during a formative period of young adulthood—in many ways, the institution occupies a critical “turning point in life.”29 In an institution that values conformity and conservatism, and whose core value is national defense, attachment to the contemporary Republican Party seems a reasonable assumption.

Although not in relation to voting preferences, scholars have looked at the effects of military service because of its potential, enduring impact on veterans. The military experience is intentionally jarring, especially the initial phase of basic training. It takes individuals away from familiar settings and mixes them with others of different geographic origin, race, and ethnicity in a rigid, hierarchically organized war machine.30 Members’ appearance, travel, and even diet are circumscribed. Acculturation using patriotic elements, conformity, tradition, and team-oriented thinking fortifies a sense of membership and group consciousness while suppressing
individualism. Respect for superiors, all the way to the commander in chief, is a ubiquitous theme in military training. Ethics also constitute an integral part of military training, exemplified by West Point’s values of “duty, honor, country” as well as the behavioral prohibitions found in the Uniform Code of Military Justice that contrast with civilian equivalents. The military experience typically occurs during very early adulthood, when political attitudes solidify. This unique experience might engender attitudes distinctive from those found in the civilian population, so scholars from psychology, political science, and sociology have studied related political attitudes since after World War II. In addition to patriotic sentiment, these topics include authoritarian attitudes, political efficacy, trust in government, foreign policy views, and political participation.

In the wake of World War II, concerns of authoritarianism and the military experience of the millions of men returning from Europe and the Pacific spurred investigation into the attitudes of veterans. Military service necessarily attenuates personal liberties and freedom, instead favoring unity, conformity, discipline, and role hierarchy; thus, service in a military environment might engender acceptance of authoritarian attitudes. Empirical studies of this hypothesis lack consensus. Some examinations of veterans found modest evidence of increased levels of authoritarian attitudes among men who had served in the military, though self-selection appeared to drive this effect rather than socialization. Others found contrary evidence, demonstrating nonexistent, contingent, or lower levels of authoritarian and conformist attitudes among those in the service or in military training. Scholarship using mid-1970s data found no discernable pattern to veteran distinctiveness on authoritarian attitudes in the United States. The question of authoritarian attitudes holds relevance for other countries, especially those with conscription, and some studies focused on West German soldiers and the Bundeswehr’s political effect on young men. It is difficult to infer a comprehensive conclusion from these works on authoritarianism and military service, not only because of their contrary findings but also because of the wide variety in method, data, and definitions of authoritarianism. With these difficulties in mind, the preponderance of evidence gives little or no indication that the military institutions of liberal democracies indoctrinate members with authoritarian attitudes or dispositions, and the linkage between authoritarian attitudes and voting habits is weak and uncertain at best.

A number of scholars have explored the notion that military experience affects perceptions of the government and citizens’ relationship with the government. Serving in the U.S. military establishes a much closer connection with the federal government than most civilians encounter, which may have an enduring effect on veterans’ views of government and their role in the polity. Different analysts arrived at conflicting conclusions. Some found evidence suggesting that military service, even service in Vietnam, augments trust in government and reduces levels of political cynicism, whereas other findings could not establish the same empirical link. A related question is whether veterans’ military experience affects feelings of political
influence, but one study concluded that Vietnam-era service depressed men’s feelings of political efficaciousness.39

It is reasonable to speculate that life experiences portend different views on foreign relations.40 Because of the inherent connection between the military and American influence abroad, several scholars have evaluated the difference between veterans and nonveterans in terms of attitudes toward the U.S. military and foreign policy questions. Some investigated the question of military experience driving foreign policy or international views, discovering no effects.41 Others did find distinctions between those with military experience and those without it, vis-à-vis aid to foreign countries, defense spending, and treatment of prisoners of war.42 Another study found distinctions on foreign policy in Vietnam, with veterans more likely to seek “vigorous, all-out pursuit of the war.”43 Rather than military training directly affecting foreign policy views, some scholars found evidence that military experience organizes a larger belief system within which foreign policy decisions emerge.44 After controlling for self-selection bias, one work found that increased time in military training corresponds directly with decreased support for peacekeeping operations.45 Another investigation found that ROTC training, rather than inculcating distinctive foreign policy views, simply insulated cadets and their a priori attitudes from the liberalizing influence of college.46

Attempting to synthesize these scholarly efforts evaluating differences in authoritarianism, efficacy, trust, and foreign policy engendered by military service is difficult. Several scholars have expressly found no evidence of distinction,47 and those cited above that do establish distinctions do not claim remarkable ones. Beyond the differing conclusions, too much of this scholarship is based on military training outside the active duty military. Looking over this literature, one may be surprised if any cadets since WWII completed their training without answering an attitudinal survey. ROTC cadets represent understandably accessible data for social scientists, but they share more with college students than soldiers, and they are heading toward the officer corps, not necessarily representative of the larger pool of veterans. Officer Training Corps students, reserve members, officers, preservice cadets, draftees, and volunteers are variously used as data, and the scholars use widely different survey instruments, methods, and definitions of authoritarianism. In addition, despite the number of veterans in the electorate and the recurring and large role that military service plays in electoral campaigns, the partisanship and voting habits of military veterans has attracted little scholarly attention.

Beyond the studies on veterans’ attitudes outlined above, other research has analyzed actual political behavior in the form of political participation, one step closer to our dependent variables of interest: partisanship, candidate affect, and vote choice. Several studies found that military experience stimulates later-life political activity. The evidence suggests that the relationship between previous military service and voting likelihood is intricate and context dependent, with varying turnout propensity within the veteran population stemming from differences in education.
and G.I. Bill usage, race and ethnicity, and cohort. Another study demonstrated evidence that military service depressed the tendency to participate in unconventional political behavior such as attending protests and rallies.

These examples of research investigating attitudes and turnout tendencies provide a beginning, but the heart of this article lies in understanding the partisan allegiances of military veterans. Sporadic historical evidence demonstrates veterans serving as an important voting bloc in elections. For example, Joseph McCarthy’s 1946 narrow Senate victory over Bob LaFollette Jr. relied on ex-Marine McCarthy’s support from veterans. The prominent veteran organization after the Civil War, the Grand Army of the Republic, allied itself closely with Republican candidates and mobilized its members to vote accordingly in the Gilded Age. Researchers also demonstrated aggregate-level estimates of the interplay between the number of veterans in the electorate and elections, noting their occasional impact on federal outlays for veteran pensions and compensation. The shortcomings of this literature for our present purposes are its broad level of analysis and its focus on veterans as a social movement or entitlement-seeking group, not as individuals. The best way to analyze vote-choice patterns as they relate to military service is to examine individual-level survey data during an election.

### Variables and Data

The partisan identification, candidate affect, and vote preferences of the American electorate, the three dependent variables of interest, can be parsed using survey analysis. Partisan identification (PID) or partisanship refers to the long-term psychological association that citizens feel with a party. In 2004, approximately 30 percent of the electorate identified with the Republican Party and 30 percent with the Democratic Party, while another 30 percent claimed to be independent but leaning toward one of the two major parties. Party identification can be measured in different ways, but this analysis relies mostly on a seven-point scale. Respondents identified as “strong Democrat” (SD), “weak Democrat” (WD), “Independent leaning toward Democrat” (LD), “Independent” (I), or with the corresponding Republican values (SR, WR, and LR). Candidate affect describes the affection or warmth felt toward political elites, groups of people, or institutions irrespective of party or vote considerations. It is a simple measure of how much a respondent likes someone (e.g., Hillary Clinton), a group (e.g., environmentalists), or something (e.g., labor unions). To measure a respondent’s affect for political figures, this analysis uses a “feeling thermometer,” a simple 0 to 100 scale on which respondents quantify how much warmth they feel toward a given person, in which 50 is neutral. Vote preference is an uncomplicated concept to measure immediately after the election, achieved by asking respondents for their ballot choice. If asked before Election Day, the question changes to a hypothetical one, asking respondents for their preference if they were to cast a ballot that day.
This analysis relies on six polls administered throughout 2004. The first five went into the field in March, April, May, July, and September and used telephone surveys to acquire subjects. These five were a joint effort by ABC News and The Washington Post. They included questions to measure respondents’ partisanship, ideology, age, gender, race, and ethnicity. Also, the polls included a trial ballot, or hypothetical vote-choice question based on what each respondent’s preference would be if the election were held that day. The sixth data source is the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES). The ANES instrument measures demographics and political characteristics of vote-eligible Americans every two years, using a reliable multistage sampling method and face-to-face interviewing. In addition to questions pertaining to party identification, ideology, age, gender, race, and ethnicity, the ANES also performs a follow-up interview immediately after the election to inquire about the respondents’ ultimate voting behavior. All six surveys asked respondents about their previous military experience, coding them as either being a veteran or not. Reflecting estimates from aggregate data well, the ANES sample included approximately 13 percent men and women with military experience. The ABC/Washington Post polls included similarly accurate representations of the veteran population, ranging from 14 to 17 percent within the samples. For control variables, all the surveys predictably measured age, gender, race, and ethnicity. This analysis recoded the data so respondents were either male or not, and white or not, while age remained scaled in years. Respondents’ self-reported ideology was measured as either “liberal,” “moderate,” or “conservative.” Education level on the ABC/Washington Post polls employed a six-point scale, ranging from 1 (8th grade or less) to 6 (postgraduate). The following analysis maintains the three-point ideology scale and the six-point education scale.

Findings: Partisanship, Candidate Affect, and Vote Choice

These data allow specific and straightforward quantitative evaluation of potential veteran distinctiveness in relation to the three germane election year questions: (1) partisanship: are veterans more Republican than nonveterans? (2) candidate affect: do veterans like candidates with military service? (3) ballot preference, which is the most important political phenomena to evaluate: do veterans vote for Republican candidates?

Counter to what media expectations, campaign assumptions, and the gap literature may suggest about vivid partisan differences between those in this country who have served and those who have not, the American National Election Study data exhibit scant partisan differences dividing veterans and nonveterans in 2004. Party identification among the 160-odd veterans statistically parallels the party identification of the population.
Figure 1 depicts the proportions of veterans and nonveterans in each category of the seven-point scale of partisan identification. A slight Republican tilt is evident among the veterans compared to the whole sample. For both strong and weak identifiers, veterans proportionally outnumber nonveterans on the Republican side and nonveterans proportionally outnumber veterans on the Democratic side. However, the difference is not substantively or statistically meaningful. A simple bivariate test of association cannot falsify the no-relationship null hypothesis between party identification and past military service. Dividing the sample into different age groups of veterans yields no different results. Those who served in the military after the advent of the all-volunteer force (AVF) statistically reflect their same-aged peers vis-à-vis party identity, as do those who served before the AVF. In short, while veterans are slightly more Republican than are nonveterans in 2004, the difference is not statistically significant and certainly not the size of the gap between the current active duty
officer corps and the civilian population reported elsewhere. Partisanship may be too immovable to detect lingering effects of military service. Partisan loyalty is an enduring trait at the individual and aggregate level, requiring substantial stimuli for change. The environment of a political campaign is replete with political messages that tap into potential voters’ partisan identity, and that identification becomes intensely activated—more so than other criteria such as a candidate’s past military service.

We also want to see whether veterans simply like political elites who have served in the military. A logical inference one can make from John Kerry sailing with his former comrades-in-arms at the convention and Wesley Clark’s “Veterans for Clark” banners is that campaigners believe veterans in the electorate hold appeal for veteran candidates. The ANES and its “feeling thermometer” rating asks its respondents about their warmth toward political elites irrespective of party or ideology. We can compare the average thermometer rating for Ralph Nader, John Kerry, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, John McCain, and Colin Powell among veterans versus nonveterans, bearing in mind that Kerry, Bush, McCain, and Powell each served in the military.

Table 1 lists evidence about respondents’ affect for various candidates in which individuals at the top of the table received the least warmth from veterans and individuals at the bottom received the most. Using mean feeling-thermometer ratings in the 2004 ANES data, it is clear that among veterans, Bush enjoyed a higher level of affect than did Kerry—a difference of six points. Yet, when comparing the feeling-thermometer ratings pertaining to the same man between veterans and nonveterans, the two major parties’ nominees are statistically and substantively equivalent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Whole Sample</th>
<th>Veterans</th>
<th>Nonveterans</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Nader</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>37.8*</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John F. Kerry</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>1,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>1,202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. W. Bush</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>1,207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John McCain</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>68.4*</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin Powell</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>75.9*</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>1,146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Military”</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>83.5*</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>1,054</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data are from the 2004 American National Election Studies.
Note: “Feeling thermometer” questions pose the following question to respondents, asking them to rate individuals, groups, and institutions from 0 to 100: “I’ll read the name of a person and I’d like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person.” Individuals unable to identify the subject considered missing values.
*denotes difference of means test between veterans and nonveterans (assuming unequal variance) \( p \leq .01 \).
Veterans and nonveterans rate Bush almost equally, and the corresponding veteran-nonveteran comparison is also true for Kerry. The findings are different for other political elites though. John McCain, Vietnam veteran and senator, and Colin Powell, former general and secretary of state, both retain higher levels of support among men and women who served, levels that are statistically distinct from non-veterans.

Because other relevant factors confound these simple comparisons of mean values, multivariate methods reveal a more complete answer. Regression analysis, used to evaluate the causal influence of factors on thermometer ratings, indicates that veterans hold McCain and Powell in higher regard than do nonveterans. A standard ordinary least square (OLS) model regressing the thermometer rating on veteran status, age, party identification, ideology, education, race, geography, and marital status demonstrates that veterans, with other things being equal, feel about 4 percent warmer about both men. Table 2 lists the precise results. Despite this affect for veterans McCain and Powell, the veteran admiration does not extend to Bush or Kerry. Neither nominee attracted any favorability distinctions between veterans and non-veterans in the bivariate or multivariate comparison. This fact is likely because of the importance of other voting heuristics during an election, particularly partisanship. Election-time evaluation of these candidates, with all the power of party loyalty, supersedes the veteran affect that ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen may feel for political elites with a shared military experience.61

Veterans held affection for the military as an institution during the 2004 election, a finding in line with previous research,62 which is not surprising for a wartime election in which the military itself became a campaign theme. It is interesting to note that veterans held the institution in higher regard than the political elites from either party.63 Bill Clinton, whose poor rapport with the military establishment began with campaign allegations of draft dodging during the Vietnam War and his 1992-1993 row with then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell over gays’ service in the military, might be expected to be less popular among veterans than nonveterans. In 2004, four years after he left office and twelve since he was first elected, Clinton was slightly less popular among veterans but not significantly so. Some prudence is warranted in interpreting these feeling-thermometer results. The difference between McCain and Powell’s appeal to veterans versus the null findings for Bush and Kerry do not necessarily imply that veterans prefer veteran candidates. Veterans may not have been impressed with Bush or Kerry’s military record compared to the service records of McCain and Powell. In addition, it is possible that the candidates, in the context of a hard-fought partisan campaign, impel people to rely on partisanship when making affective evaluations, shrouding any political consequences of previous military service. In any case, these figures portray only subtle opinion differences between veterans and nonveterans in the electorate.

The third and most important evaluation of veteran distinctiveness tests for differences in voting or voting intentions. If partisanship and candidate affect are
Table 2  
Factors Driving Feeling-Thermometer Ratings, 2004 (OLS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Powell</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>Kerry</th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Nader</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OLS Coefficients</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OLS Coefficients</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OLS Coefficients</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.907*</td>
<td>4.173</td>
<td>2.049*</td>
<td>0.499</td>
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<td>0.147</td>
<td>0.047**</td>
<td>0.202</td>
<td>0.051**</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>3.123</td>
<td>0.388**</td>
<td>0.852</td>
<td>0.370*</td>
<td>-7.595</td>
</tr>
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<td>Ideology</td>
<td>1.556</td>
<td>0.913</td>
<td>0.508</td>
<td>0.796</td>
<td>-1.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.517</td>
<td>0.352</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.315**</td>
<td>-0.245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-0.610</td>
<td>1.815</td>
<td>1.579</td>
<td>1.699</td>
<td>-3.623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>2.751</td>
<td>1.510</td>
<td>-0.891</td>
<td>1.585</td>
<td>-1.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2.029</td>
<td>1.504</td>
<td>0.263</td>
<td>1.396</td>
<td>-4.373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.831</td>
<td>1.475</td>
<td>2.810</td>
<td>1.461</td>
<td>-1.605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>39.806</td>
<td>5.646**</td>
<td>30.307</td>
<td>5.050**</td>
<td>84.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>1,126</td>
<td>1,139</td>
<td>1,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data are from the 2004 American National Election Studies.
Note: OLS = ordinary least squares; SE = standard errors. All quantitative analyses herein performed with Stata (v9.2).
*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01.
important tests of veterans’ distinctiveness, candidate preference is the most salient electoral manifestation of these psychological attributes in a campaign setting and certainly the most relevant political behavior in terms of impact. For those concerned about a potentially homogenous veteran voting bloc, it is this basic political expression—candidate choice—that deserves the closest scrutiny. Given secret ballots, the best way to measure vote choice in the electorate is to ask respondents for their vote intentions before the election or self-reported vote choice afterward. Looking at veterans and vote choice only, bivariate comparisons indicate that veterans generally prefer Bush more than nonveterans do. The veterans expressing an intention to vote for Bush outpaced those veterans intending to vote for Kerry by between three and twelve percentage points throughout 2004. The difference in the ANES data is approximately 11 percent. It is this distinction that pollsters and journalists seized on as evidence for the above-mentioned reporting of Bush’s advantage among veterans in the electorate. The evidence fit in well with the martial frame with which the media characterized the campaign.

Simply comparing the percentages of veteran preferences masks an important fact about veterans. Those in the United States with military service are substantially older, more likely to be white, and overwhelmingly male when compared to the whole population, so multivariate analysis controlling for related correlates is required to understand the impact of previous military service alone. The ANES and media surveys deployed different measures of party identification and education when polling the electorate. This discrepancy is remedied by standardizing the values to prevent the instrument differences from having an effect on the substantive results. In addition, the veteran population is distinctive in terms of its age, gender, race, and ethnicity, making controls for each necessary in the vote choice model.

While the ANES data measures actual self-reported candidate choice immediately after the election, the five media polls conducted well before Election Day ask the counterfactual trial ballot question, “If the election were held today, for whom would you vote?” The results indicate that for the March, April, May, July, and November samples, veterans’ hypothetical and real vote choice was statistically indistinguishable from nonveterans’ preferences after controlling for the other factors.

September was exceptional. For the September data, veterans did express a strong preference for Bush over Kerry, while other factors are held constant. Figure 2 provides a closer examination of veterans’ candidate preferences and partisan identity in the September sample, demonstrating the proportion of veterans and nonveterans who would choose Bush among each discrete, unstandardized value of party identification. In each partisan category, veterans are more likely to vote for Bush than are nonveterans, but the magnitude of that difference is especially vivid with Independents and Democrats. For example, consider the veterans who are Independents leaning toward Democrats (“Lean Dem” in Figure 2): the proportion of veterans who would vote for Bush in September almost doubles the proportion of nonveteran Bush voters. Among Democrat identifiers (“Dem” in Figure 2), the
difference is even more than double. These statistically and substantively significant findings contrast with the other 2004 samples. As a comparison, within the other surveys detailed in Table 3 before and after September, the greatest difference between veterans and nonveterans across all party identification values is only 0.04, making the September differences remarkable.

**Discussion: The 2004 Election and the Veteran Vote**

Rather than inhabiting sharply partisan territory, veterans in the 2004 presidential election shared three important political characteristics with their nonveteran peers: partisan identification, candidate affect, and largely, vote choice. Using evidence
### Table 3
**Two-Candidate Bush Vote Choice, 2004 (Logistic Regression)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>September</th>
<th>Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logit Coefficients</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Logit Coefficients</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Logit Coefficients</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.48</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>-1.96</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
<td>-0.78</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>1,061</td>
<td>1,017</td>
<td>858</td>
<td></td>
<td>887</td>
<td>827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-417.55</td>
<td>-407.78</td>
<td>-348.45</td>
<td></td>
<td>-287.73</td>
<td>-270.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Trial ballots, March to September and postelection self-reported vote choice in November. Unpooled analyses. March to September data are from separate ABC/Washington Post polls, while “election” respondents are from the American National Election Study pre- and postelection data (and include only voters). Party ID and Education are standardized measures to accommodate scale differences between polls.

*Significant at 5%. **Significant at 1%.
from an election year with salient military themes, this analysis has cast doubt over the view that the veteran community of today is a deeply Republican one. Examination of polling data spanning the election year demonstrates that the veterans of 2004 were not a particularly Republican population, especially when controlling for other related factors. There are likely many reasons for the veterans of 2004 to correspond politically to nonveterans. The countervailing forces affecting individuals in the military may cancel each other out, leaving veterans to find other sources for developing partisan and ideological identities. Both the individuals that compose the military and the institution itself value conservative traits; the military is perhaps the institution most invulnerable to change. Yet, some have written about the armed services placing a strong emphasis on communitarian values, likening the military to a “Great Society in camouflage,”66 embodying group-minded and inclusive values that do not necessarily comport with core Republican ideals. Alternatively, it is easy to recognize that today’s veteran population is a mélange of individuals from different cohorts, regions, and backgrounds despite their shared experience in the institution.

Recent scholarship has focused on and debated the growth of a gap between the political disposition of the military, especially the officer corps and military elites, versus the public at large—depicting a Republican and conservative institution that clashes with Democratic presidents and inculcates conservative values.67 However, the officer corps composes less than 20 percent of the armed forces. The enlisted ranks, men and women who likely joined without degrees beyond high school, do not exhibit the same distinctions from mainstream America as their commissioned leaders do.68 While most survey instruments preclude measuring the officer-enlisted differences directly because they do not ask about respondents’ former rank, we know that the preponderance of veterans were not officers; therefore, the gap literature’s ability to help us explain distinct partisanship for the veteran population is only partial.

Yet, one critical caveat to this political similarity between veterans and nonveterans remains. What caused the September results to vary from the rest of the time points? Why would Democratic-identifying veterans cross over to Bush in September but return to Kerry in real election booths in November? The survey was conducted between September 23 and 26 after the conventions, after the airing of the first Swift Boat Veterans for Truth advertisement, and after the resulting media splash it created. The 527 group produced and aired subsequent ads in battleground states, spending more than $22 million during August, September, and October. The effect of the ad extended far beyond the targeted states, enjoying wide free media coverage because it attempted to repudiate Kerry’s reliance on his military service, used expressly to bolster his commander-in-chief credentials. The resonance of the attack continued to damage Kerry’s support after the initial impact because an effective response to the negative advertisements was slow in coming.69
The point of the organization and its ads was to hinder the Kerry campaign’s efforts to win the election, and many believe the strategy was effective. By attacking the nature of Kerry’s war service, the 527 group attempted to disparage what some saw as Kerry’s core electoral advantage. The nature of the ads’ appeal with its theme and imagery held potential for an especially potent impact on voters who themselves had served in the military. Claims that Kerry exaggerated his war wounds and broke faith with American prisoners of war by testifying in Congress may have been the key contributing factor toward Democratic veterans temporarily abandoning their party’s candidate in September. Others have empirically demonstrated palpable effects from electioneering efforts, finding that campaign advertising can move aggregate vote preference at the margins. The Swift Boat ad, and the rapid discussion thereof in the echo chamber of election year media, created temporary veteran distinctiveness in terms of the all-important question of candidate preference. Veterans possess the potential for mobilization, although the evidence in 2004 demonstrates that immoderate means are required to activate this possible veteran distinctiveness.

It is not difficult to recognize the importance of the Swift Boat ad, both for understanding its role in the larger picture of Kerry’s failed White House bid as well as the specific matter of veterans’ brief response to the ad. Looking toward the future, the implications of these findings have two sides. One aspect reveals limits to the possibility of veteran persuasion using negative portrayals of candidates’ service. The media has highlighted several Democrats, veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, running for office in the 2006 congressional elections. Their willingness to run suggests that Democratic candidates with military service are not deterred by future manifestations of the 2004 Swift Boat strategy. In fact, the Swift Boat organization’s name has transformed into a verb in Washington, whereby “swift boating” a candidate means to disparage a candidate’s military service unfairly.

Yet, the other and more obvious side of these findings suggests that veterans’ political preferences can be swayed through campaign persuasion, albeit temporarily. If this activation is repeated in a similar fashion, through the means employed by the Swift Boat organization or otherwise, then veterans may possess latent but shared political dispositions that vote-seeking elites may tap to garner support for allies—or diminish support for opponents. Furthermore, because the civil-military gap discussed by Holsti, Feaver, Kohn, and others is a relatively recent phenomenon, then the distinctiveness of today’s military may be reflected in tomorrow’s cohorts of veterans beyond the modest differences seen in 2004.

Notes


19. The 527 groups are eponymously named for the federal tax code befitting their tax-exempt status.


58. Using a regression model (ordered probit) to identify factors driving party identification as a multivariate follow-up test, the usual suspects of ideology, gender, etc. live up to their expectations while the veteran variable held no effect. In addition to the lack of a relationship between partisanship and military service in 2004, ideology does not associate with military service meaningfully either. Similar findings appear when considering the ABC/Washington Post data, though their measurement of partisanship differs from ANES, making comparison difficult.

59. This slight tilt also manifests in two of the ABC/Washington Post samples.

60. The $\chi^2$ statistic is 0.7824. To consider the same question a different way, a $t$ test comparing the veteran sample’s party identity mean (3.99 on the seven-point scale in which 1 = “strong Democrat” and 7 = “strong Republican”) to the nonveteran mean (3.85) assuming unequal variance does not demonstrate statistical or substantive differences ($p = .452$).

61. More evidence of this finding can be seen in comparing the goodness-of-fit estimates ($R^2$). The ability of the factors listed to explain the variance in candidate affect is robust for the Kerry and Bush models but is significantly diminished in the Powell, McCain, and Nader models.


63. This finding does not suggest that civilian nonveterans hold the military in disregard—the military is among the most trusted institutions in the eyes of the American public. See David C. King and Zachary Karabell, The Generation of Trust: Public Confidence in the U.S. Military since Vietnam (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2003).


71. The Swift Boat ad can be viewed online at http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/.


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