

The Association Between Political Organization Membership and Optimism About the Future

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Introduction

- Research suggests that there is an important relationship between a person's outlook on the future and their participation in politics.
- People with strongly optimistic outlooks on the future tend to more readily support third parties and politicians with little or no experience (Niven, 2000).
- Active membership in both civic and political organizations increases the amount of political activism with which a person engages (Minkoff, 2016).
- However, most research focuses either on how outlook affects political views or how membership in civil and political organizations affects political participation. Little research has actually focused on how that membership is related to people's outlook on the future.
- A recent study found that for the participants of a youth climate activism organization "Fridays For Future," membership in the group increased optimism in the youths' outlook on the future (Cattell, 2021).
- Much research is still left to be done into how different forms of political participation might relate to people's optimism about the future.

Research Question

- Is there an association between membership in a political organization or movement (other than political party) and optimism about the future?

Methods

Sample

- Respondents (n=2,294) were drawn from the 2012 Outlook on Life (OoL) Survey, a nationally representative sample of English-speaking, non-institutionalized adults in the U.S.

Measures

- Membership in political organizations was coded dichotomously, as membership in at least one organization or membership in none. The organizations tested were the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
- Optimism about the future was assessed using the sum of three optimism scores— personal, national, and economic outlook—and ranged from -8 (least optimistic) to 8 (most optimistic).
- Political party was measured by respondents selecting either Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Other.

Results

Univariate

- 12.77% of respondents were members of at least one political organization.
- The mean optimism score was 1.45 and the median was 1 (both indicating mild optimism).
- 75% of respondents scored above 0 (which is neutral) meaning 75% were at least slightly optimistic about the future.

Bivariate

- An ANOVA test showed that **membership in a political organization** was significantly and positively associated with **optimism about the future**.
- Respondents who belonged to at least one political organization reported significantly higher optimism scores (Mean=2.11, s.d. ±3.14) compared to those who did not belong to any organizations (Mean=1.35, s.d. ±3.25), $p=.0002$.

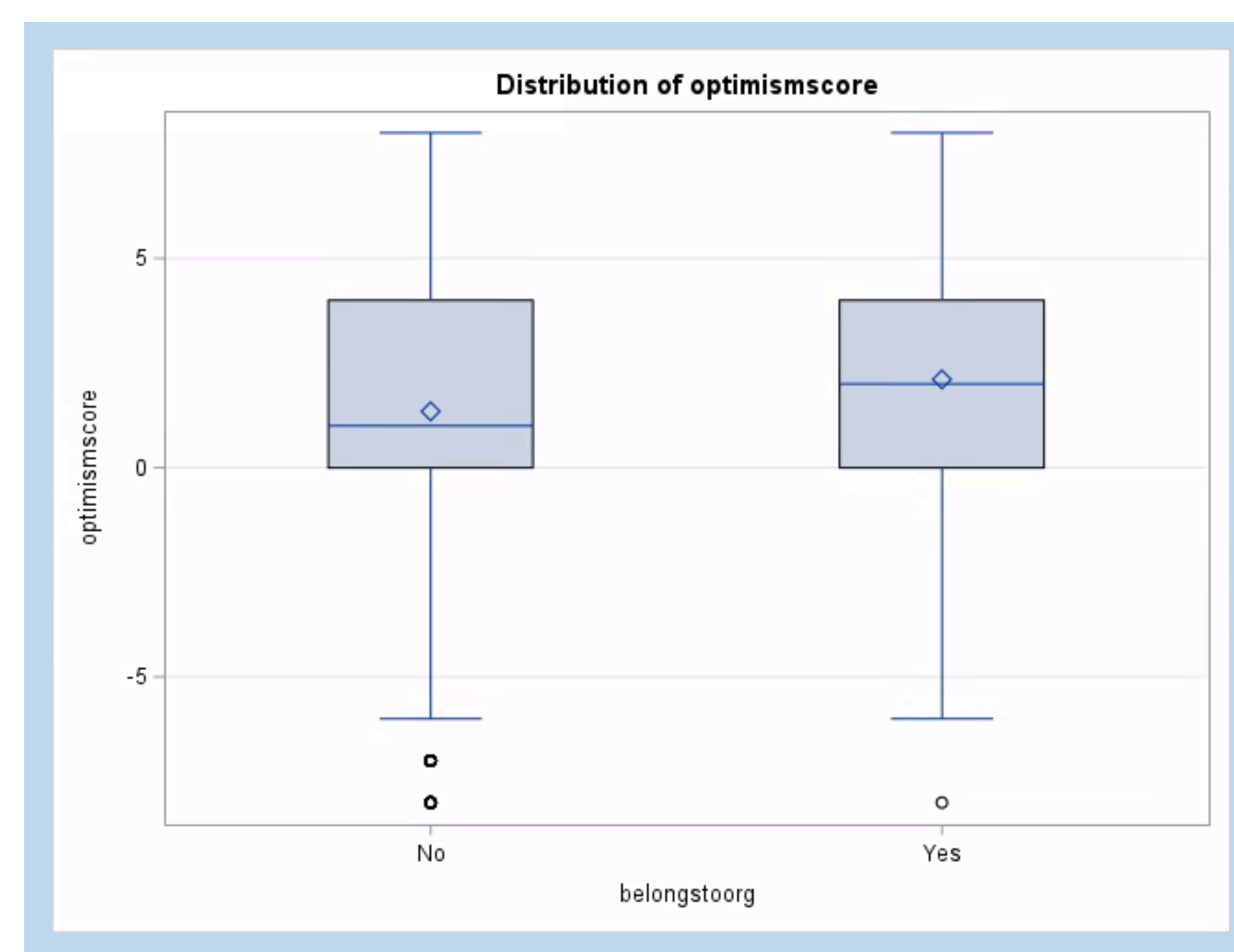
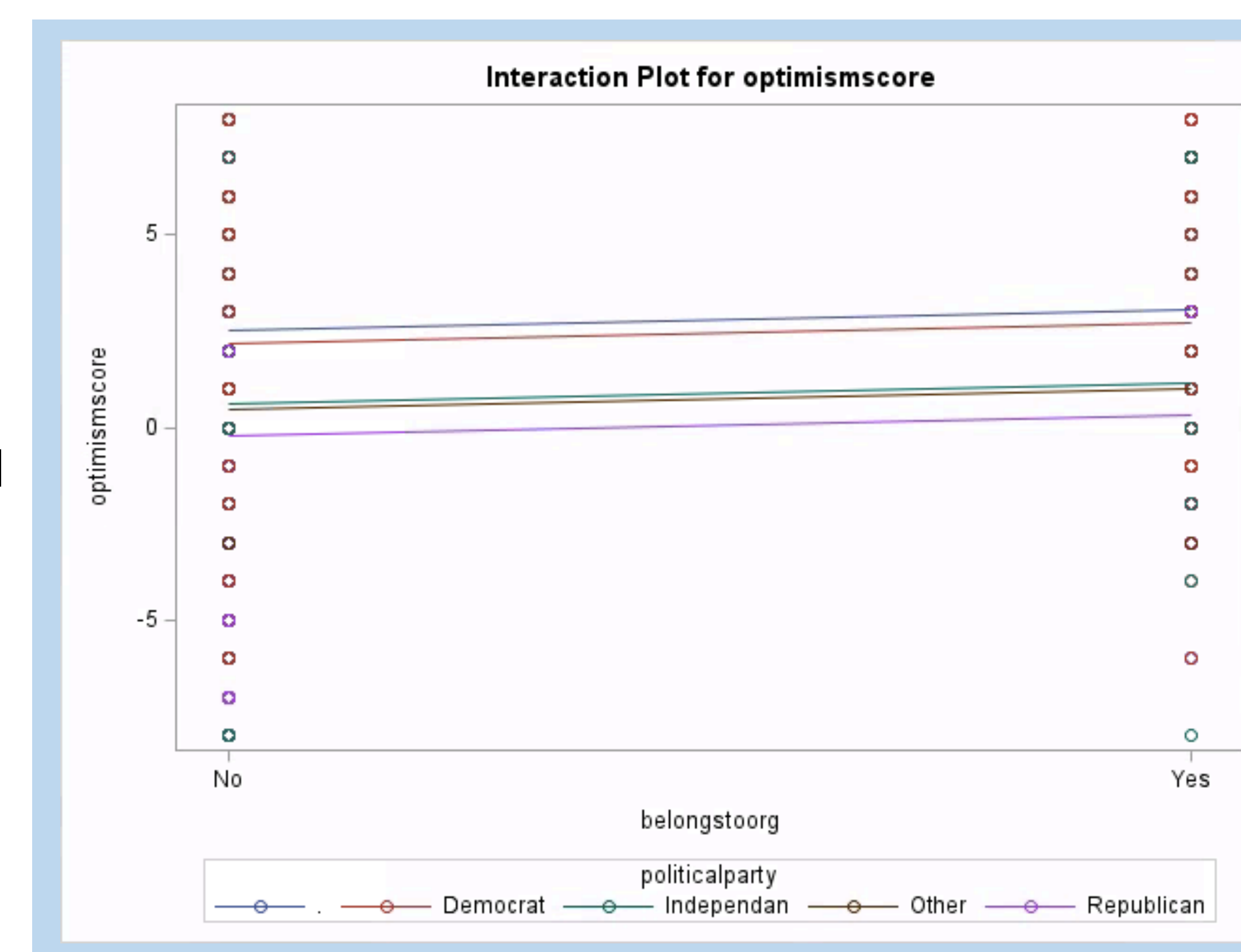


Figure 1. Optimism about the future by membership in at least one political organization or not

Figure 2. Multiple regression with political party and organization membership determining optimism

Multivariate

- **Political Party** appears to be a moderating variable in the association between membership in a political organization and optimism about the future.
- After controlling for political party, membership in a political organization is still significantly and positively associated with optimism about the future, but at a lower level of significance ($p=0.0071$) than before.



Discussion

- Membership in a political organization, both nonparty movements/groups and political parties, may have an affect on how an individual thinks and feels about the future.
- Belonging to at least one non-party organization of the five that were included in the OoL Survey was associated with a more optimistic outlook on the future than no membership. Beyond this, different political party affiliations were also significantly related to how optimistic a responded was.
- Leaders of political organizations and politicians might use this information to better understand their audiences, and to investigate how they can inspire greater optimism about the future in American adults in general.
- Further research into the association of membership in political organizations and life outlook could help us better understand what drives our images of the future.