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## *Partisanship and Independence*

Few contemporary domestic political themes have attracted more attention than the growing number of Americans who choose to call themselves Independents rather than Democrats or Republicans. As one textbook observed, "None of the other trends . . . can match the decline in partisanship and party vitality with respect to the sheer number of words written."<sup>1</sup> The decline of partisanship has been a rare point of consensus among commentators in all parts of the political arena. Scholars and journalists, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans—all agree on this point. The conservative publicist Kevin Phillips wrote in 1982 that "the most enduring phenomenon of the years since the war in Vietnam and Watergate has been the rise in the ranks of independents."<sup>2</sup> The authors of *The Changing American Voter*, judged the most distinguished contribution to political science in 1976, concluded that the "most dramatic political change in the American public over the past two decades has been the

1. David B. Hill and Norman R. Luttbeg, *Trends in American Electoral Behavior*, 2d ed. (Itasca, Ill.: F. E. Peacock, 1983), 32.

2. Kevin P. Phillips, *Post-Conservative America* (New York: Random House, 1982), 227.

decline of partisanship.”<sup>3</sup> This view was shared a dozen years later by the *New York Times* reporter Hedrick Smith, who wrote that “the most important phenomenon of American politics in the past quarter century has been the rise of independent voters who have at times outnumbered Republicans.”<sup>4</sup>

As we will see, not everyone shares this view. However, it remains the preferred interpretation of at least some specialists in voting behavior and a great many students of political parties. The decline of the parties is a favorite theme in American government textbooks, the repository of our discipline’s conventional wisdom and the main source of undergraduates’ understanding of the political system. Most writers outside political science—historians, authors of big-picture interpretations of the United States, journalists—seem to take for granted the proposition that many fewer American voters are now affected by party ties.

The implications attributed to this putative growth in independence are numerous and momentous. Independents are unconstrained by partisanship from responding to election-year appeals. If more and more voters are becoming Independents, there could be wider and wider swings between the parties. Presumably this is what leads some observers to write that the increase in the number of Independents portends greater political instability. Other anticipated consequences include weaker presidential mandates, richer opportunities for third parties, partisan realignment, a more fragmented Congress, and the end of the current party system. We will examine these predictions in more detail shortly.

The implications for social science are scarcely less important. Party identification is the “foundation” of the “edifice” of conceptualizing and measuring voting associated with the National Election Studies (NES) conducted since 1952 by the

3. Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 47.

4. Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game: How Washington Works* (New York: Random House, 1988), 671.

University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies.<sup>5</sup> For a generation, political scientists had believed that party identification powerfully affected voting decisions and perceptions of political events; it was "the central thread connecting the citizen and the political process."<sup>6</sup> Assumed to be a point of stability in individual behavior, party identification was the baseline against which researchers measured the impact of short-term forces like issues, candidates, and assessments of governmental performance.<sup>7</sup>

In its modern meaning, "party identification" is a product of survey research. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents are identified by asking respondents to put themselves in one of these three categories. The portentous trend from partisanship to independence reflects an increase in the proportion of respondents who tell interviewers that they consider themselves not Republicans or Democrats but Independents. In the Michigan NES, the share of Independents went from 19 to 23 percent in the 1952–1964 period to a high of 37

5. Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, "Public Opinion and Political Action," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, 3d ed., ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (New York: Random House, 1985), 684.

The Michigan election research has had various labels since 1952. In the early years it was identified with the university's Survey Research Center and then took the name of the Center for Political Studies (CPS) when that unit was formed in the 1960s. Although still conducted by the CPS, the research has been called the National Election Studies (NES) since the creation in 1977 of a national board of overseers consequent to the first long-term multimillion-dollar grant to the CPS from the National Science Foundation.

The Michigan Survey Research Center conducted a national sample survey of sorts in 1948. For a variety of reasons, this study has had little visibility or influence, so our chronology of "the Michigan school" begins with the 1952 study.

6. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter*, 73.

7. One well-known example is the central place of party identification in calculating the "normal vote," a method used to identify groups that respond in different ways in a given election. See Philip E. Converse, "The Concept of a Normal Vote," in Angus Campbell et al., *Elections and the Political Order* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), 9–39.

percent in 1978. In 1990, 36 percent of the NES sample called themselves Independents.

Any NES respondent who claimed to be an Independent has always been asked if he or she was closer to one or the other party. Until we began our research, analysts of the NES data—the major source of information about individual political behavior—seldom paid attention to this follow-up question. Independents were all those people who claimed this status when answering the initial question about party identification. This book results from our discovery more than fifteen years ago that the second question is essential to an understanding of Independents because it enables analysts to distinguish genuine Independents from those who initially claim this status but then concede that they lean toward the Democrats or Republicans. Thus we can dispel the assumption, once almost universal and still widespread, that all Independents—“the second largest group in the electorate”—share some characteristics that differentiate them in important ways from Republicans and Democrats.<sup>8</sup> *This assumption is wrong. Independents, defined inclusively, have little in common. They are more diverse than either Republicans or Democrats. Most of them are not uncommitted, and they are not a bloc. They are largely closet Democrats and Republicans.*

Therefore, none of the large generalizations about Independents is correct because as Independents are usually defined, the category includes not one but three kinds of people. Most of the increase in Independents has occurred among the hidden partisans; the high-level speculations apply only to genuine Independents, whose increase has been rather modest.

The gist of our findings about Independents began to circulate among some political scientists as early as the summer of 1975 and was reported at the end of that year in a textbook

8. Gerald M. Pomper et al., *The Election of 1976* (New York: David McKay, 1977), 73. This estimate is more modest than that of Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, who call Independents “the largest group in the society” (*The Changing American Voter*, 346).

coauthored by one of us.<sup>9</sup> Our first full statement was in a paper delivered in the summer of 1977.<sup>10</sup> Many of our early findings could have been found one place or another in the literature. Some were mentioned as an aside, an unremarked table, or a paragraph ignored in subsequent chapters. Despite some published clues and an unimaginable number of similar findings in computer printouts, our case against the monolithic conception of Independents was very much a minority view in 1977. Since then, our view has been accepted by some, considered and rejected by others, and (apparently) ignored by others. These developments are discussed at length in chapter 5.

Although we disagree with the revisionist scholars who think that party identification lost much of its importance in the 1970s, our findings are also incompatible with the earlier conventional wisdom associated with researchers at the University of Michigan. The latter difference is less conspicuous because Independents did not occupy such a prominent place in their work. It should be emphasized, however, that none of our findings describes a recent development. With one exception, everything that we say about different types of Independents was as true in the 1950s as it is today. The only difference is the lower level of interest and participation by the genuine Independents, those who deny that they are closer to one party or the other.

## Parties in Disrepute

A jaundiced view of political parties is part of our most distinguished intellectual heritage. Parties were, after all, among the most unattractive of those “factions” that the Founding

9. Raymond E. Wolfinger, Martin Shapiro, and Fred I. Greenstein, *Dynamics of American Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 133, 151.

10. Keith et al., “The Myth of the Independent Voter,” paper delivered at the 1977 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

Fathers so roundly deplored.<sup>11</sup> Long after parties had become an essential component of the American political system, they were still regarded with suspicion by acute and influential observers. For example, Lord Bryce's model citizen

will give close and constant attention to public affairs, recognizing that this is his interest as well as his duty. He will try to comprehend the main issues of policy, bringing to them an independent and impartial mind, which thinks first not of his own, but of the general interest. . . . If, owing to inevitable differences of opinion as to what are the measures needed for the general welfare, parties become inevitable, he will join one, and attend its meetings, but will repress the impulses of party spirit. Never failing to come to the polls, he will vote for his party candidate only if satisfied by his capacity and honesty.<sup>12</sup>

Bryce was not alone in urging Americans to keep their distance from parties if they had the astuteness and strength of character to do so. This was the outlook in an 1891 high school civics text:

As on the playground, some do not care always to go with the crowd, or even prefer to be by themselves. Such as these, who think for themselves, and dare to stand alone, make the Independents in politics.

They are likely to prefer the good of their country to the success of their party. They will not act with their party, or will leave it, if it is wrong. If the other party changes, as parties sometimes change, and advocates measures that they believe in; if they change their own minds as sensible men sometimes must; or if the other party puts forward better candidates; or if a new party

11. See Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction: Party Reform in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 22–57.

12. James Bryce, *Modern Democracies*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 47–48.

arises, the independent voters are willing to act wherever they believe they can best secure the public welfare.<sup>13</sup>

In short, partisanship had its place, but it was no substitute for the voter's independence of thought and action.

Other students of politics thought that it was up to Independents to rescue the parties:

If the politicians must look after the parties, there should be somebody to look after the politicians, somebody to ask disagreeable questions and to utter uncomfortable truths; somebody to make sure, if possible, before election, not only what but whom the candidate, if elected, is going to represent. . . . The old parties are not to be reformed from within. It is from without that the attempt must be made, and it is the Independents who must make it. If the attempt should fail, the failure of the experiment of democracy would inevitably follow.<sup>14</sup>

More recently, serious students of politics came to prize parties as an essential part of the polity:

The political parties created democracy and . . . modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties. . . . The parties are not therefore merely appendages of modern government; they are in the center of it and play a determinative and creative role in it.<sup>15</sup>

Few contemporary political scientists would challenge this view, but most Americans share the Founding Fathers' distaste. In the fall of 1974, in the immediate aftermath of Watergate—a scandal to which neither party contributed—72 percent of the American public said that the parties were

13. Charles F. Dole, *The New American Citizen* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1891), 127.

14. James Russell Lowell, "The Place of Independents in Politics," in J. R. Lowell, *Political Essays* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1888), 318.

15. E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1942), 1.

the part of the government they “least often trust to do what’s right.” A mere 13 percent mentioned the president in this connection.<sup>16</sup>

The fundamental explanation for the parties’ unpopularity seems to be a belief that they stir up conflict. Jack Dennis, the leading student of the parties’ public image, reported that nearly two-thirds of those interviewed agreed that “the political parties more often than not create conflicts where none really exists.” Fifty-three percent thought that “our system of government would work a lot more efficiently if we could get rid of conflicts between the parties altogether.”<sup>17</sup> In 1980, 56 percent of all NES respondents agreed that “the parties do more to confuse the issues than to provide a clear choice on issues,” and just 24 percent dissented from this verdict. Half the sample went so far as to agree that “it would be better if, in all elections, we put no party labels on the ballot.”<sup>18</sup>

In view of such sentiments, it is not surprising that the vast majority of Americans deny that a candidate’s party is important and insist that they vote for the best candidate, irrespective of party. A month before the 1986 elections, less than 10 percent of registered voters said that the biggest factor in their vote decision would be the candidate’s political party.<sup>19</sup>

If party affiliation really influenced the votes of so few people, it would not be the keystone of most efforts in the past thirty-five years to understand voting behavior. We will see that despite their expressions of distaste for the parties, most

16. Unattributed statements about voting and public opinion are based on our analysis of National Election Studies (NES) data. The multi-year tables throughout this book are based when possible on the NES 1952–1988 Cumulative Data File.

17. Jack Dennis, “Support for the Party System by the Mass Public,” *American Political Science Review* 60 (September 1966): 605. See also Dennis, “Public Support for the Party System, 1964–1984,” paper delivered at the 1986 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

18. This item has not been asked of NES respondents since 1980.

19. CBS News–*New York Times* poll release dated October 6, 1986. Nearly three-quarters of the votes cast in the 1986 House elections were along party lines.



Americans are powerfully affected by their affiliations with the Democratic or Republican party.

### **The Michigan View of Party Identification**

Affiliation with a party can be defined in various ways: legal voter registration, formal "card-carrying" membership, or personal identification. The first of these alternatives is a function of state laws, which vary enormously. In some states there is no registration by party; in others, membership is achieved simply by claiming to be a Democrat or Republican when voting in that party's primary. This diversity makes it impossible to use legal registration as the basis of a nationally uniform definition of party membership. The drawback of the second definition, formal membership in an organization, is its rarity; less than 4 percent of all Americans belong to a party in this sense. The third and most useful manifestation of partisanship is party identification, a subjective identification as a Republican or Democrat.

Reporting their analysis of nationwide surveys in 1952 and 1956, four social scientists at the University of Michigan described party identification as the most stable and important determinant of individual voting decisions and the point of departure for analysis of many aspects of public opinion:

Few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place. And they are an important factor in assuring the stability of the party system itself. . . . Most Americans have this sense of attachment with one party or the other. And for the individual who does, the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior.<sup>20</sup>

20. Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 121.

The Michigan researchers were not the first to assert that many Americans have durable commitments to a political party. This idea had long been a staple of political commentary and was an important element in the work of such influential scholars as V. O. Key, Jr.<sup>21</sup> But they were the first visible academic survey researchers to identify Republicans and Democrats in other than election-specific terms. Earlier researchers had assigned respondents to a party on the basis of their voting intentions in the impending presidential election.<sup>22</sup> The Michigan contribution in this respect was an operational measure of partisan commitment that was consistent with the previous understanding of this concept, as represented in the work of scholars like Key.

If party identification were identical to vote choice, it would be an unnecessary term; if it were unrelated to vote choice, it would be without explanatory value. The crux of the concept is that it is antecedent to, distinct from, and influential of individual voting decisions. By conceiving of party identification as an affective attachment, the Michigan scholars made it possible to understand electoral decisions as the interplay of historical forces and such contemporary factors as candidate appeal, disputes about policies, and evaluations of governmental performance.

Few analysts dispute the brilliant simplification involved in the initial Michigan approach, that voting is affected both by long-term predispositions and by short-term cues. Predispositions continue to be much the same from election to election and can be invoked to account for the

21. An especially interesting example is V. O. Key, Jr., and Frank Munger, "Social Determinism and Electoral Decision," in *American Voting Behavior*, ed. Eugene Burdick and Arthur J. Brodbeck (New York: Free Press, 1959).

22. Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 25–26. The Gallup Poll began asking about party identification as early as 1937. See Everett Carl Ladd, "Party Identification: The Idea and Its Measure," *The Public Perspective* 2 (May/June 1991): 17.

substantial numbers of electors who always vote for the same party.<sup>23</sup>

An "affective orientation to an important group-object,"<sup>24</sup> party identification was an enduring aspect of the individual's political outlook. It imparted stability, a certain degree of predictability, to elections. Committed partisans—most of the public—were less receptive to candidates appealing to election-year passions. This was nicely illustrated by the pattern of support in 1968 for the third-party presidential candidacy of George C. Wallace, which was based largely on Wallace's hostility to civil-rights laws. These measures were most popular among the young, but so was Wallace, who "captured less than 3 percent of the vote among people over seventy outside the South, but 13 percent of those under thirty, with a regular gradient connecting these two extremes."<sup>25</sup> The explanation for this apparent inconsistency was the strong relationship between age and strength of party attachment. Younger voters, less anchored by party identification, were more vulnerable to Wallace's appeal.

One can easily understand why party identification was not only "the key concept of U.S. electoral research"<sup>26</sup> but also of great interest to a broader scholarly constituency:

In the course of a mere two decades, party identification has become as pervasive a concept as power, authority, legitimacy, stability, or any other element in the professional political scientist's vocabulary. . . . It offers a

23. Ian Budge, Ivor Crewe, and Dennis Farlie, "Introduction: Party Identification and Beyond," in *Party Identification and Beyond*, ed. Budge, Crewe, and Farlie (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), 18.

24. Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 121.

25. Philip E. Converse et al., "Continuity and Change in American Politics: Parties and Issues in the 1968 Election," *American Political Science Review* 63 (December 1969): 1103.

26. Michael B. MacKuen, Robert S. Erikson, and James A. Stimson, "Macropartisanship," *American Political Science Review* 83 (December 1989): 1125.

new explanation of democratic stability and legitimacy, which in turn confer authority and power. The more electors are attached by enduring psychological links to political parties, the argument runs, the more the polity is insured against . . . sudden demagogic incursions.<sup>27</sup>

## Measuring Party Identification

For more than a generation, social scientists have been identifying Democrats, Republicans, and Independents by asking respondents to apply one of these labels to themselves. The NES uses this question:<sup>28</sup>

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

If the respondent answers "Republican" or "Democrat," the interviewer follows up with

Would you call yourself a strong Republican [Democrat] or a not very strong Republican [Democrat]?

If the respondent answers "Independent," the interviewer probes:

27. Budge, Crewe, and Farlie, "Introduction," in *Party Identification*, 3.

28. The NES questions are often used in other academic surveys and by media and political pollsters. The wording ("Generally speaking, do you usually . . .") was designed to encourage respondents to look beyond the immediate present. This contrasts with the Gallup organization's question, which emphasizes the here and now: "In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" Compared to the Gallup measure, responses to the NES question vary much less over time and are considerably less responsive to economic conditions and assessments of presidential performance. See Paul R. Abramson and Charles W. Ostrom, Jr., "Macropartisanship: An Empirical Reassessment," *American Political Science Review* 85 (March 1991): 138–47.

Gallup seldom uses a probe that permits identification of partisan Independents. For a thoroughgoing review of responses to Gallup questions on party affiliation, see Everett Carl Ladd, Jr., "Declarations of Independents," *Public Opinion*, April–May 1984, 21–32.

Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican party or to the Democratic party?

Nearly two-thirds of those who initially label themselves Independents concede that they are closer to one or the other party. These are the “leaners,” “partisan Independents,” or “Independent Republicans” and “Independent Democrats.” “Pure Independents” are those who continue to deny any partisan inclinations when asked about closeness to a party. Together with the Strong and Weak (“not so strong”) Republicans and Democrats, the NES questions provide seven categories of party identification:<sup>29</sup>

Strong Democrat  
Weak Democrat  
Independent Democrat  
Pure Independent  
Independent Republican  
Weak Republican  
Strong Republican

The full time series from 1952 through 1990, with all seven party identification categories, is in table 1.1.

One obvious decision in any data analysis using the Michigan party identification questions is how to treat respondents who call themselves Independents. Should their initial label be honored? This would create an inclusive category comparable in size to either party’s adherents. Or should attention be paid to their response to the probe about closeness to a party? This would produce a small Pure Independent category, less than one respondent in six.

This problem was not mentioned in *The American Voter*’s discussion of measuring party identification, except perhaps for the observation that “by treating Independents as a single

29. Once in a while someone identifies with a minor party and a handful of people manifest no interest in parties or politics. These apolitical respondents are discussed in chapters 2 and 9 and will be excluded from data analyses after chapter 2.

Table 1.1 *Party Identification, 1952–1990*

	Strong Democrats	Weak Democrats	Indep. Democrats	Pure Indeps.	Indep. Republicans	Weak Republicans	Strong Republicans	Apolitical
	22%	25%	10%	6%	7%	14%	14%	3%
1952	22	25	10	6	7	14	14	3
1956	21	23	6	9	8	14	15	4
1958	27	22	7	7	5	17	11	4
1960	20	25	6	10	7	14	16	3
1962	23	23	7	8	6	16	12	4
1964	27	25	9	8	6	14	11	1
1966	18	28	9	12	7	15	10	1
1968	20	25	10	11	9	15	10	1
1970	20	24	10	13	8	15	9	1
1972	15	26	11	13	11	13	10	1
1974	18	21	13	15	9	14	8	3
1976	15	25	12	15	10	14	9	1
1978	15	24	14	14	10	13	8	3
1980	18	23	11	13	10	14	9	2
1982	20	24	11	11	8	14	10	2
1984	17	20	11	11	12	15	12	2
1986	18	22	10	12	11	15	11	2
1988	18	18	12	11	13	14	14	2
1990	17	19	12	11	13	17	11	2

*Note:* Cross-section samples only; preelection surveys in presidential election years.

group we may reduce seven categories to five.”<sup>30</sup> The emphasis was on party identification as “a continuum of partisanship extending from strongly Republican to strongly Democratic.”<sup>31</sup> In his article “The Concept of a Normal Vote,” Philip E. Converse said that the seven categories of party identification “are often collapsed, as in this article, to five or three classes, in response to needs for greater numbers per class, or under certain circumstances to assure monotonicity” (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup>

The authors of *The American Voter* opted to aggregate all Independents for purposes of analysis, setting a precedent that was almost universally observed for nearly twenty years.<sup>33</sup> Independents were the midpoint on a continuum running from Strong Democrats and Weak Democrats to Weak and

30. Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 123.

31. Ibid., 122–23.

32. Converse, “The Concept of a Normal Vote,” 20n.

33. The exceptions to this generalization in the three seminal books by the scholars who conducted the first Michigan studies are sparse enough to be enumerated in one note. The first book from Michigan contained several tables based on the seven-way classification but did not acknowledge in the text that Democratic leaners were more loyal to the Democratic presidential candidate than Weak Democrats or the same pattern on the Republican side. See Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren E. Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1954), 101, 108–9.

This evident lack of interest in differentiating leaners and Pure Independents continued in *The American Voter*, which presented a great many data analyses that combined all varieties of Independents and just seven tables where they were not combined (pp. 124, 125, 126, 134, 148, 201, 390). Only the tables on pp. 125, 126, and 148 bear on the controversy about how to classify leaners. All three tables show leaners less willing than weak partisans to report a personal history of party regularity. (We discuss this substantive topic and the validity of such retrospective data in chapter 5.)

The single seven-way table in *Elections and the Political Order* (p. 218) concerns one of the few variables that always has a monotonic relationship to strength of party identification: respondents’ reports about the partisan consistency of their past voting choices. The same finding appears on p. 125 of *The American Voter*. Another table in *Elections and the Political Order* (p. 197) included leaners with strong and weak partisans in a three-way distribution.

Strong Republicans. Once all three kinds of Independents were in one category, strength of partisanship was positively associated with turnout and other measures of civic virtue, including interest in the campaign and concern about its outcome. The relationship was U-shaped, with Independents at a low point between the partisans of each party. By the same token, the relationship of this five-point measure to vote choice was monotonic. Strong Democrats were most likely to vote for their party's candidate, Weak Democrats less so, then Independents, and so on to the Strong Republicans at the opposite end of the party identification scale.

In sharp contrast to the pre-survey-research view of Independents, *The American Voter* found them ignorant, apathetic, and inactive.<sup>34</sup> Other than impugning their civic virtue, *The American Voter* had little to say about Independents. They were the midpoint on a continuum; their beliefs and behavior were interesting chiefly as a basis of comparison with people of varying degrees of partisan affiliation.

This picture of partisans and Independents became the unchallenged conventional wisdom until the late 1960s when large increases in the number of Independents raised new questions. Although this development led some scholars to characterize Independents in new ways, for some years no one challenged the five-category and three-category scales of party identification that treated Independents as a single group.

### **The Rise of Independents and the "Decline of the Parties"**

In the next few pages we will examine some of the implications that observers of the American political scene have found in the growing number of Independents. Many of these fairly portentous conclusions are associated with explicit rejections of a view of individual political behavior that their authors attribute to *The American Voter*. But both these revi-

34. Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 143–44.