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A VOTING PARADOX IN MODERN AMERICAN POLITICS"

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## Independent Leaners as Policy Partisans: An Examination of Party Identification and Policy Views

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# Independent Leaners as Policy Partisans: An Examination of Party Identification and Policy Views

David B. Magleby and Candice Nelson

## Abstract

Previous research has shown that Independents who lean towards the Democratic or Republican parties exhibit voting behavior similar to outright partisans. Less attention has been paid to the policy positions of Independent leaners. In this article we compare the policy positions of Independent leaners, Strong and not very strong Democrats and Republicans, and Pure Independents on five policy issues: the 2010 Affordable Care Act, the 2009 stimulus bill, the war in Iraq, abortion, and same sex marriage. On all five issues, Independent leaners are policy partisans; their positions are almost identical to the positions of outright partisans, and quite different from the views of Pure Independents. Analyses which consider Independents as one monolithic block are just as erroneous on policy issues as they are on political behavior.

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As the 2012 general election approaches, Independents are once again front and center in the debate over who will decide the outcome of the election. In previous work, we have argued that Independents are not a monolithic group (Keith, et. al., 1992; Magleby, Nelson, and Westlye, 2011). We have found clear distinctions between partisan Independents and pure Independents in their voting behavior and interest in elections. Partisan Independents are more interested in elections than pure Independents and as likely to vote for candidates of the party toward which they lean as outright party identifiers. Talk of 40 percent of the electorate being “up for grabs” is simply not true. Most of that 40 percent are partisan Independents—Independents who “lean” towards the Republican or Democratic parties—and the 10 percent or so of the electorate who are truly Independent are those people who are least likely to be engaged in the election and least likely to vote.

In this article, we examine Independents from a different perspective, looking not at their voting behavior but at their policy positions. Do partisan Independents share the views of outright partisans on issues, or are they more likely to have views on issues closer to pure Independents? Does what two scholars describe as the “greater ideological distinctiveness between the parties” (Flanigan and Zingale, 2010) extend to partisan Independents on the most important issues being debated today?

Our earlier research on the differences between Independent leaners and Pure Independents was driven in part by the widespread speculation at the time that a set of “new issues” was an explanation for dealignment and might portend a partisan realignment. The “new issues” of the early to mid-1970s included Vietnam, busing, urban unrest, women’s equality, drug use, and the conservation of natural resources. Some political scientists viewed the convergence of new sets of issues, declining partisanship, and growing independence as evidence that the issue concerns of the new generation of voters were incompatible with party choices based on a different set of issue concerns (Fiorina, 1977; Burnham, 1969, Converse, 1976; Jennings and Marcus, 1984; Verba, Nie and Petrocik, 1979). Data from the American National Election Study did not support this view; instead we found that “in 1968, 1970, and 1972, those people who thought that Vietnam was the most important issue facing the country were no more likely than the rest of the sample to be Pure Independents or leaners in either direction” (Keith et al, p. 143).

Our research on the partisan Independents of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s found that Independent Democrats were quite comfortable with the issue positions of Democrats. This was true of “life-style issues” as well as issues like busing and urban unrest. We observed that these findings were problematic for the view that “people become Independent Democrats because they were too liberal to fit in the Democratic Party’s mainstream” (Keith et al, p 163). At the time we observed that

the same issue compatibility was found between Independent Republicans and other Republicans. In the intervening decades the issue agenda has changed, and there is a widely held view that the American electorate has become increasingly polarized along partisan lines (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders 2006; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002). In this article, we revisit the issue of the extent to which Independent leaners are policy partisans.

### **Healthcare Reform**

One issue on which there are clear partisan differences at the elite level is healthcare reform and, more specifically, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA). Healthcare reform and the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 became a major issue in the 2010 election and was a major focus of the 2012 presidential campaigns. A poll conducted by Pew Research Center found that 71% of respondents were influenced by a candidate's position on health care in the 2010 congressional election, and in 2012, Republican presidential candidates and President Obama all made ACA a central part of their message (Pew 2010, Manos 2012). Observers called the 2012 election the "most important in the history of our health care system" (Blumenthal 2012).

Proposals to provide a form of national health insurance date back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which Theodore Roosevelt unsuccessfully supported government-sponsored healthcare (Palmer 1999). Early in the administration of President Bill Clinton, a task force was created to oversee the development of national healthcare legislation only to dead-end in the 1994 session of Congress (Bok 1998). More limited forms of government-provided or -funded medical care have long existed through such agencies or programs as the Veterans Administration, created by President Hoover in 1930 to provide healthcare to veterans; Medicaid, the government-funded program begun in 1965 providing health care to low-income families; Medicare, a part of the 1965 Social Security Act that provides healthcare to senior citizens or those with permanent disabilities; and the Children's Health Insurance Program, created in 1997 to help families that struggle insuring children but do not qualify for Medicaid (DVA 2011; CMS 2012; Vladeck, Van de Water, and Eichner 2006; Medicaid.gov 2011).

During the 2008 presidential election, the issue of healthcare reform was debated in the nomination contests in both parties. Among Democratic contenders, most favored a single insurance provider—the state—over multiple private insurance companies (Chozick 2008), while others advocated a system with a federal mandate that individuals are required to purchase insurance from

private companies, with federal subsidies for low-income individuals and families. This idea was first proposed as legislation as the Healthy Americans Act in 2007 and was endorsed by Hillary Clinton during her run for the Democratic nomination (LoC 2009). During the protracted contest between Obama and Clinton, Obama criticized Clinton's mandate-based plan, saying that it is like "eliminating homelessness by requiring everyone to buy a house" (Krugman 2008).

In the GOP contest, much of the focus on health care was criticism aimed at former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney's healthcare reforms enacted in 2006. The Massachusetts law included an individual mandate to obtain government regulated insurance along with a subsidy for those who could not afford insurance (Health Connector 2012). Ironically, the idea for health insurance exchanges had come from The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, and, as noted, was part of a Republican governor's state-level experiment in reform (Cooper 2012). These provisions became central to the Affordable Care Act of 2010 and have generated some of the most intense rhetoric from the Tea Party and Republicans in general (Gonyea 2012).

The Obama administration took a very different approach to health care reform than had the administration of Bill Clinton. Obama did not offer an administration proposal, as Clinton had. Rather, he encouraged Congress to "work together" to "fulfill the promise of health care in our time" (Obama 2009). Obama had run for president promising to make "health care affordable to every single American by bringing Democrats and Republicans together" (FactCheck.org 2008). Deferring to Congress clearly did not expedite the process, while it removed the President from a direct role in working out the inevitable compromises that are part of the legislative process (Werner 2010). Despite his deference to Congress, the Affordable Care Act was labeled by its opponents as "Obamacare." Final passage of the ACA was largely along partisan lines in both houses. In the House of Representatives the vote was 219 to 212, and in the Senate the vote was 60-39 (Pear and Herzenhorn 2010; Pear 2009).

The strong partisanship in the congressional vote and the accompanying partisan rhetoric, especially by the opponents of the act, continues today. This partisanship suggests that implementation of the act or revisions to it will continue to be controversial, in marked contrast to David Mayhew's prescription for successful policy changes. Mayhew has observed that "Bipartisanship is a good thing in major welfare-state enterprises if they are to stick" (Nagourney 2009).

Even though ACA drew from state experimentation, had roots in GOP think tanks, and contained concepts, a mandate and insurance exchanges, that had been supported by some Republicans, Republican office holders by 2010 and all presidential aspirants for the 2012 nomination strongly opposed Obamacare. Even Mitt Romney found a way to distinguish what his opponents called Romneycare

from Obamacare. He said "...our plan was a state plan. I believe in federalism. I believe that the tenth amendment gives states the right to create their own health insurance program rather than have the federal government intrude on the rights of states." (Kaczynski 2012)

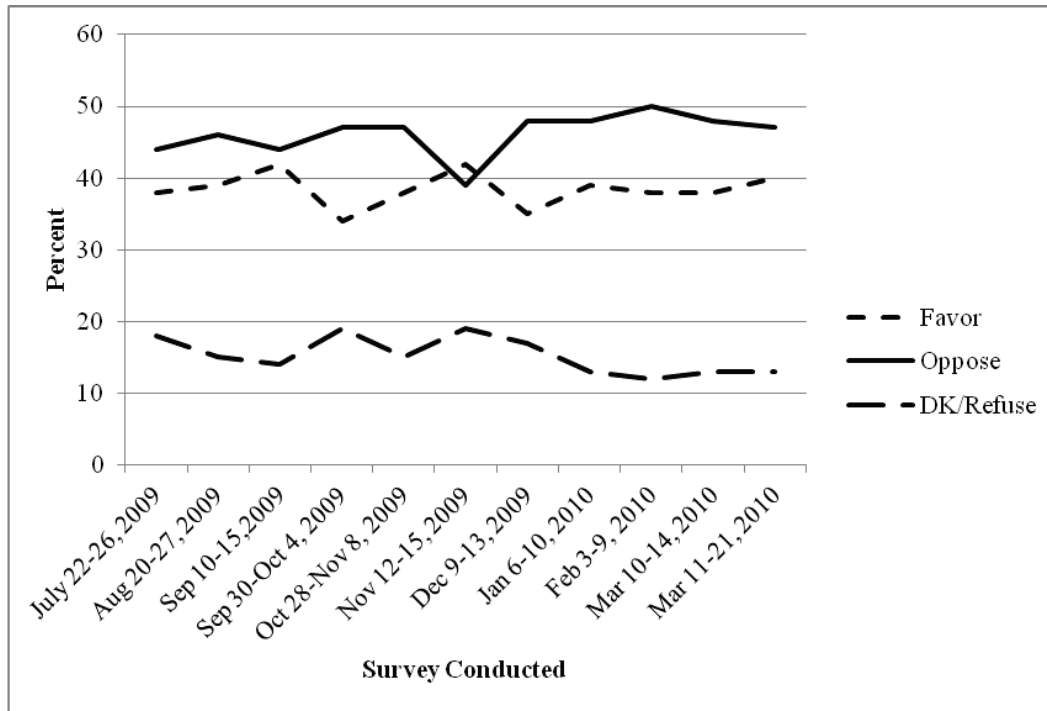
It is clear that at the elite level, healthcare reform and specifically the ACA came to be seen as a partisan issue. In this article we explore the question of whether the strong partisan divide seen in Congress also existed in the general public. To explore this question, we rely on multiple polls gathered over nearly a decade by the Kaiser Family Foundation and by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Both of these organizations have longstanding track records in doing high-quality survey research. To put the ACA in context, we also look at whether party identification, including identification as an independent or an independent with partisan leanings, influences views on important economic, foreign policy, and social issues that faced the country between 2008 and 2012.

### **Policy Partisanship on Healthcare Reform**

Questions in the American National Election Studies (ANES) on healthcare reform in the 1960s and specifically on support for government helping people get "doctors and hospital care at low cost" found that, overall, 52 percent favored government action, while others said either the government should "stay out of this" or that they did not know. Strong Democrats were the most supportive of a government role (73 percent), but not very strong Democrats and Independent Democrats were much less supportive (58 and 52 percent). Strong, not very strong, and Independent Republicans were more inclined to say the government should stay out of this (40-45 percent), with Independent Republicans more of this view than the partisans. In subsequent elections, the wording of ANES questions on health care varied but this same pattern of support and opposition held. By 1992, Independent Democrats had come to rival Strong Democrats in support of a government insurance plan, while Independent Republicans continued to be among the least supportive of this approach.

The Pew poll asked cross-sectional samples at regular intervals in 2009 and 2010: "As of right now, do you generally favor or generally oppose the health care bills being discussed in Congress?" Figure 1 provides the data points for support and opposition to health care reform for this period.

Figure 1. Approval of ACA



Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press

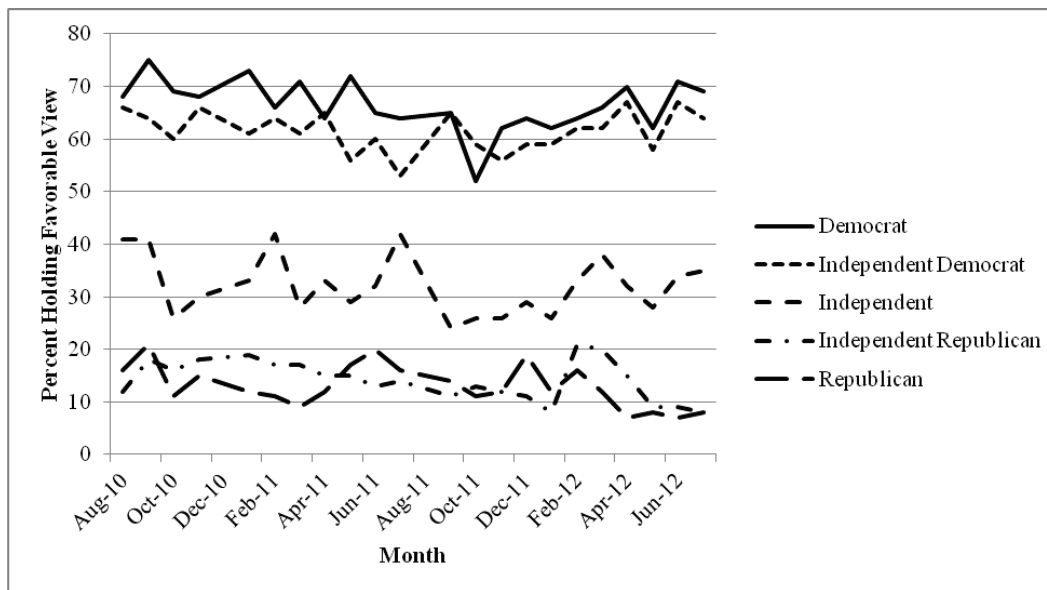
Question wording: As of right now, do you generally favor or generally oppose the health care bills being discussed in Congress?

During the 2009-2010 period, prior to passage of ACA, opposition to the bills being considered was generally higher than support: the average difference was about 6 percent, and about 15 percent reported they did not know or declined to answer the question. Pew asks its party identification question as follows: “In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?” Those who respond with Independent are then asked: “As of today, do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?”

Both the Pew Center for the Press and Politics and the Kaiser Family Foundation conducted regular polls in the period after ACA passed. Their findings of the proportions supporting and opposing ACA are quite consistent. Pew’s data show between 38 and 47 percent approving of the law and between 44 and 49 percent disapproving. Kaiser asks its question somewhat differently: “As you may know, a health reform bill was signed into law in 2010. Given what you know about the health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally

unfavorable opinion of it? Is that a very favorable/unfavorable or somewhat favorable/unfavorable opinion?<sup>1</sup> The Kaiser polls find that views on ACA have ranged from as high as 50 percent supporting the law to as high as 51 percent opposing it, with between 8 and 19 percent saying they did not know or refusing to answer over the period between April 2010 and July 2012.

Figure 2. Favorable View of ACA



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

Note: We have removed from this figure Kaiser Family Foundation polls in April through July 2010, December 2010 and August 2011 which did not ask the independent learner follow-up question.

To what extent are the views of individuals on ACA influenced by partisanship? Do independents see the issue differently from Democrats and Republicans? To explore this question, we first need to acknowledge that in most

<sup>1</sup> This is the wording used by the Kaiser Family Foundation poll in every monthly poll after ACA passed in [March, 2010]. Previous to the passage of the legislation, the question was worded as follows: "As of right now, do you generally (support) or generally (oppose) the health care proposals being discussed in Congress? Is that strongly support/oppose or somewhat support/oppose? Respondents had these response options: strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose, and depends on which proposal (House/Senate, Dems/Reps) (volunteered.), and don't know/Refused (volunteered).



standard questions on partisan identification, respondents who indicate they are Independent are asked if they lean towards the Republican or Democratic party. This is the case in the Kaiser, Pew, and other sources of data we are using in this article. Figure 2 presents the proportions of Democrats, Independent Democrats, Pure Independents (those without leanings), Independent Republicans, and Republicans who said they had a favorable view of the health care law.

The distribution of opinion on ACA is strongly partisan with most Democrats having a consistently favorable view of the law and with few Republicans sharing that perspective. Across all of these cross-sectional samples, Democrats had on average a 67 percent favorable view of ACA compared to just 13 percent of Republicans. Democrats never fell below a majority having a favorable view, and the median percentage seeing the law favorably was 66 percent, while Republicans never rose above 21 percent seeing the law favorably, and their median percentage favorable was 12 percent.

Figure 2 also provides the percent of Independent Democrats, Independents, and Independent Republicans who said they had a favorable view of the health care law. In twenty-two cross-sectional surveys conducted between August 2010 and July 2012, Independent Republicans, like Republicans, generally did not have a favorable view of the healthcare law. The proportions giving this response among Independent Republicans are strikingly similar to the proportion among Republicans. In about one-third of the surveys, Independent Republicans have a smaller percentage giving ACA a favorable assessment, and overall they average only just over 1 percent giving a more favorable assessment than is the case among Republicans. Clearly, Independent Republicans are indistinguishable from Republicans on this issue. The mean for Independent Republicans is 14 percent and the median is 15 percent having a favorable view of ACA.

Likewise, Independent Democrats are also very much like Democrats in their assessment of ACA. In the twenty-one cross sectional surveys, the proportion of Independent Democrats giving ACA a favorable assessment never falls below 53 percent. In two instances, Independent Democrats are more positive about the health care law than Democrats, while overall they average about 4 percent fewer respondents with a positive assessment. The mean for Independent Democrats is 62 percent, and the median is 61 percent.

The wide difference of views between Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans is critical to the ongoing debate about how independent Independent leaners are; Table 2 demonstrates these different views regarding ACA. Both views of ACA are consistently partisan. Moreover, Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans have quite consistent views of ACA over time. They do not appear to be responsive to the intense media coverage and advertising about ACA, much of it in opposition to the act. Opponents of the

legislation spent \$235 million dollars in advertising, while supporters of ACA spent \$69 million in favor of the law. Much of the spending against the law was targeted on specific states; ads supporting ACA were typically oriented to a nationwide audience (Goodnough 2012). This suggests that on ACA, most Independents are no more unsure of their positions than are partisans for the party towards which they lean.

When analysts combine all three types of Independents into one group of Independents, the Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans cancel each other out, masking this substantial difference between the two groups. Pure Independents were consistently in the middle between Independent Republicans and Independent Democrats on ACA. The average for Pure Independents was 32 percent supporting the legislation, with the median the same. The difference between the means for Independent Democrats and Pure Independents is 29 percent. The difference between Independent Republicans and Pure Independents is 18 percent, showing that on average Pure Independents were closer to the Republicans on the health care issue. In both cases, the difference between the means is statistically significant (at the  $p < .001$  level) using a two-sample t-test (with unequal variances).<sup>2</sup>

A validation of the Kaiser Family Foundation data can be found in data collected by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a large sample-size Internet survey with more than 30,000 respondents. About half of the questions are asked of the full sample, while the other half consists of random sub-samples who are asked questions posed by teams of academics (CCES 2012). In 2010, the CCES common content portion of the survey included the following question: Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...” Democrat, Republican, or Independent with partisans asked as a follow-up, “would you call yourself a strong Democrat/Republican or a not very strong Democrat/Republican?”, and with those answering Independents asked as a follow-up: “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or the Republican Party?”

The CCES asks the partisan identification question in the standard manner with seven categories, allowing a comparison of strong and not very strong partisans. It is also possible to look at the 2010 CCES with five categories of party identification like those used in the Kaiser survey. We compare the CCES five category response on ACA with the merged 2009 and 2010 data from the Kaiser survey in Table 1.

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<sup>2</sup> Democrats, Independent Democrats, and Pure Independents were somewhat more likely to say they did not know their view on healthcare reform legislation or refuse to answer the question (15 percent) than Republicans and Independent Republicans (10 percent).

Table 1. Comparison of CCES and Kaiser Family Foundation Poll, Percent Supporting ACA, 2010

	CCES Support ACA	Kaiser Support ACA <sup>a</sup>
Democrat	86	83
Independent Democrat	86	76
Independent	49	43
Independent Republican	13	18
Republican	16	17
Not Sure <sup>b</sup>	65	25

Source: CCES 2010 (Common content, N= 55,058) and September, October, and November 2010 Kaiser Health Tracking Poll (N=3,386)

<sup>a</sup> This column reports those who stated they felt either very or somewhat favorable to the ACA

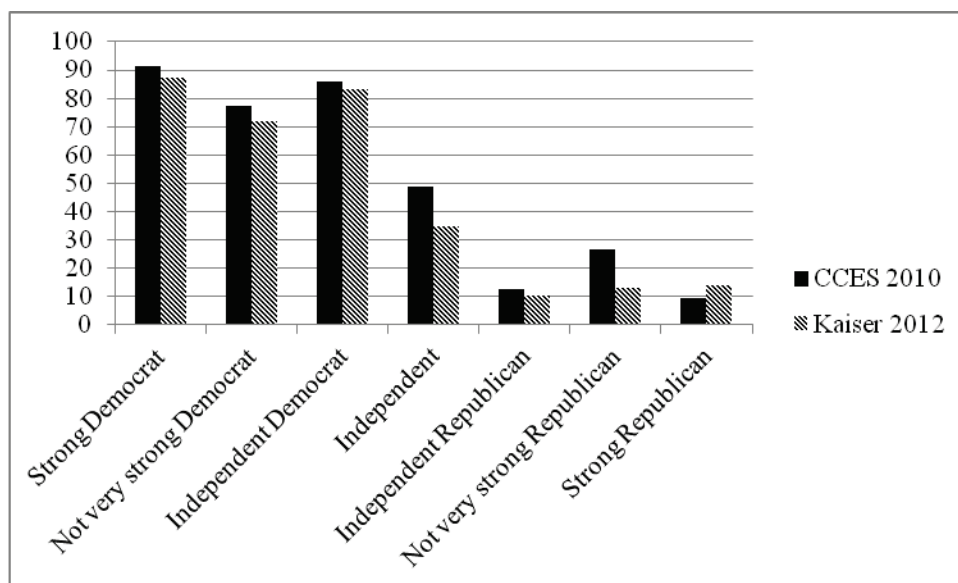
<sup>b</sup> In the Kaiser data, this row indicates those who did not choose any of the five identifications, not those who stated they were “Not sure”. This answer choice was not an option in the Kaiser data. The CCES did not provide a “don’t know” response option to this question.

The data for the two polling organizations on levels of support for ACA among partisans, independent leaners, and pure Independents is remarkable for its consistency. Democrats in both polls overwhelmingly support ACA and Republicans overwhelmingly oppose it. Independent leaning Democrats support ACA, with 76 and 86 percent holding this view. Independent leaning Republicans in both polls are not very likely to support ACA—13 and 18 percent. The CCES data also allows us to look at data with all seven categories of the party identification question. Figure 3 presents the 2010 CCES data on support for ACA, with not very strong Democrats and not very strong Republicans included.

The pattern clearly visible in Figure 3, where we look at data from the Kaiser Family Foundation survey of July 2012, shows the strongest level of support for ACA among Strong Democrats (87 percent), followed by Independent Democrats (86 percent), and then by not very strong Democrats (72 percent). The lowest level of support for ACA was among Independent Republicans (11 percent), followed by not very strong Republicans (13 percent), and then by Strong Republicans (14 percent). The absence of a difference between the three types of Republicans on this issue is striking, with Independent Republicans indistinguishable from not very strong Republicans in lack of support for ACA. On this issue, among the Democrats, the leaners are more like strong Democrats

than the not very strong Democrats. The Pure Independents are in the middle, with 49 percent supporting ACA and 51 opposing it.

Figure 3. Support/Favorability for ACA Among All Seven Categories of Party Identification



Source: CCES 2010 (Common content, N= 55,058) July 2012 Kaiser Health Tracking Poll (N=1,048)

Note: CCES asks about support and Kaiser asks about favorability

The data from both the Kaiser Family Foundation and the CCES surveys are consistent. On ACA, Independent leaners are clearly policy partisans. Independent Democrats support Obamacare; Independent Republicans do not. Consequently, while views on healthcare, and specifically ACA, may have been important to the outcome of the election, campaign rhetoric targeted at Independent leaners likely did not sway their views.

The substantial differences we have documented between Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans in their support for ACA also extend to their view of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on the constitutionality of the law (*National Federation of Independent Business et al. v. Sebelius* 2012). The Kaiser Family Foundation asked in its poll of June 2012 about the decision with the following question: “The Supreme Court recently decided to uphold the health care law. Do you approve or disapprove of the Court’s decision in this case? Table 2 presents the proportion indicating they approved, disapproved, or did not know about the decision in this case.

Table 2. Partisanship and Views of the Supreme Court Decision Regarding the Affordable Care Act

	Approve	Disapprove	DK/Refused
Democrats	79	16	5
Independent Democrats	74	15	12
Independents	39	39	22
Independent Republicans	16	76	8
Republicans	12	83	6
TOTAL	47	43	10

As with their views on ACA more generally, the partisans are most divided on this issue. Democrats approved of the decision (79 percent) only slightly less than Republicans disapproved (83 percent). However, the difference between the partisans and Independent leaners (Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans) is not statistically significant. Independent Democrats approved of the decision with nearly as great a margin (74 percent) as Independent Republicans disapproved (76 percent). Independents, true to their standard ambivalence, were evenly divided with 39 percent approving and 39 percent disapproving.

Kaiser also asked respondents in June 2012 the following question, “Now that the Supreme Court has ruled to uphold the health care law, opponents should “stop their efforts to block the law and move on to other national problems,” or should they “continue trying to block the law from being implemented” (Kaiser Health Tracking Poll, June 2012). Again the partisan responses by Independent leaners are consistent, with Independent Democrats indistinguishable from Democrats. Eighty two percent of Independent Democrats and 78 percent of Democrats said opponents should move on. Independent Republicans were indistinguishable from Republicans, where 69 percent of both said opponents should continue trying to block the law from being implemented. Not surprisingly given our earlier findings, Independent leaners and the partisans of the party towards which they lean are not significantly different in their responses. Pure Independents were more inclined to urge opponents to move on (51 percent) than continue trying to block the law (35 percent), with the remainder undecided or not taking a position.

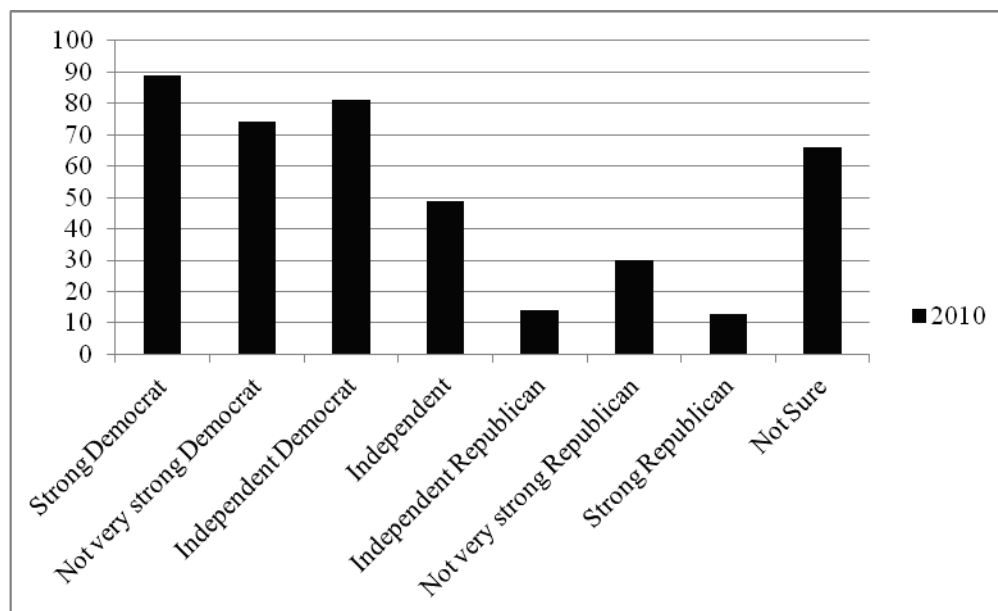
### Policy Partisans: Looking at Issues Beyond Healthcare Reform

Are the partisan policy positions of Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans also evident in other major issues recently debated in American politics? To examine this, we gathered data on policy positions for the categories of partisanship and independence examined previously. We selected an economic issue, the stimulus bill passed early in 2009; a foreign policy issue, the war in Iraq; and two prominent social issues, abortion and same-sex marriage.

#### The Stimulus Bill

Following the decline in the U.S. economy in the fall of 2008 the Congress passed and President Obama signed into law a stimulus package to try to stabilize the economy. The 2010 CCES asked questions about the stimulus bill (The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009). Figure 4 presents partisan views on this legislation. Once again, the views of Independent leaners are very similar to the views of outright partisans.

Figure 4. Support for the 2009 Stimulus Legislation



Source: CCES 2010 Common Content

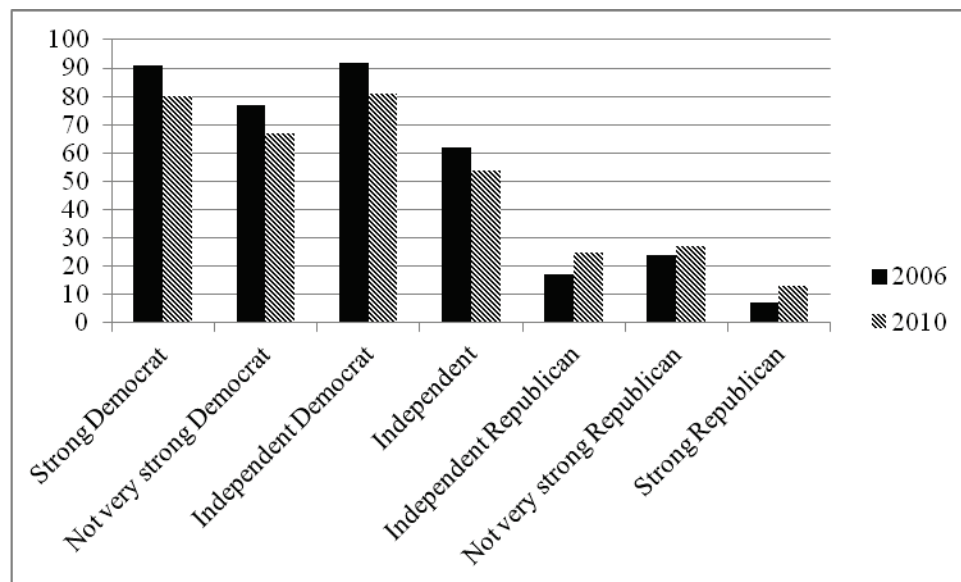
On the stimulus bill, the partisan divide is clear. Again we find strong partisans and leaners with similar views. Almost 89 percent of Strong Democrats

and 81 percent of Independent Democrats supported the stimulus package. Independent Republicans and Strong Republicans were indistinguishable in their views: 86 percent of Independent Republicans and 87 percent of Strong Republicans opposed the bill. Pure Independents were once again in the middle – 49 percent supported the stimulus, and 50 percent opposed it.

### The War in Iraq

Just as economic recovery was a major issue in 2009, and healthcare was a major issue in 2010 and 2012, the war in Iraq was a major issue in 2006, 2008, and 2010. How do Independent leaners compare to pure Independents and partisans in their attitudes on this issue? Flanigan and Zingale describe Independents on Iraq as “somewhere in between [the partisans] but became increasingly negative as time went on” (p. 157). Again we turn to the CCES for data on 2006 and 2010. Figure 4 provides the proportion saying Iraq was a mistake.

Figure 5. Percent Saying the Iraq War Was a Mistake



Source: CCES for 2006, and 2010

Note: Question wording in 2006 was as follows: “Do you think it was a mistake to invade Iraq?” The answer choices were Yes, no, not sure.” The wording in 2010 was: “All things considered do you think it was a mistake to invade Iraq?” The choices were yes, no, not sure.” The wording in 2008 was substantially different and so we do not include those data here.

Independent Democrats were statistically indistinguishable from Strong Democrats on the war in Iraq in 2006 and 2010. In both years, Independent Democrats were one percent more likely to say the war in Iraq was a mistake. Independent Republicans were more supportive of the war in Iraq than not very strong Republicans in 2006 and 2010 but not as supportive of the war as strong Republicans. It is important to note the wide gap between Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans in both years—75 percentage points in 2006 (92 versus 17) and 56 points in 2010 (81 percent versus 25 percent).

With differences this wide between Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans, it is readily apparent that treating all Independents as the same makes no more sense than to assume Strong Democrats are the same as Strong Republicans. On this issue, just as on healthcare and the stimulus, Independent leaners are policy partisans.

### **Abortion**

Another issue on which the two parties have come to have identifiable stands is abortion. The 2006, 2008, and 2010 CCES included the questions on abortion, with some variation in question wording. The question in 2010 asked, “Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view on abortion?” The choices were: “by law, abortion should never be permitted,” “The law should permit abortion only in the case of rape, incest or when the woman’s life is in danger,” “The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established,” and “By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.” Figure 6 provides the proportion saying that by law abortion should always be allowed. This is the most pro-abortion response in the range of alternatives given to respondents.

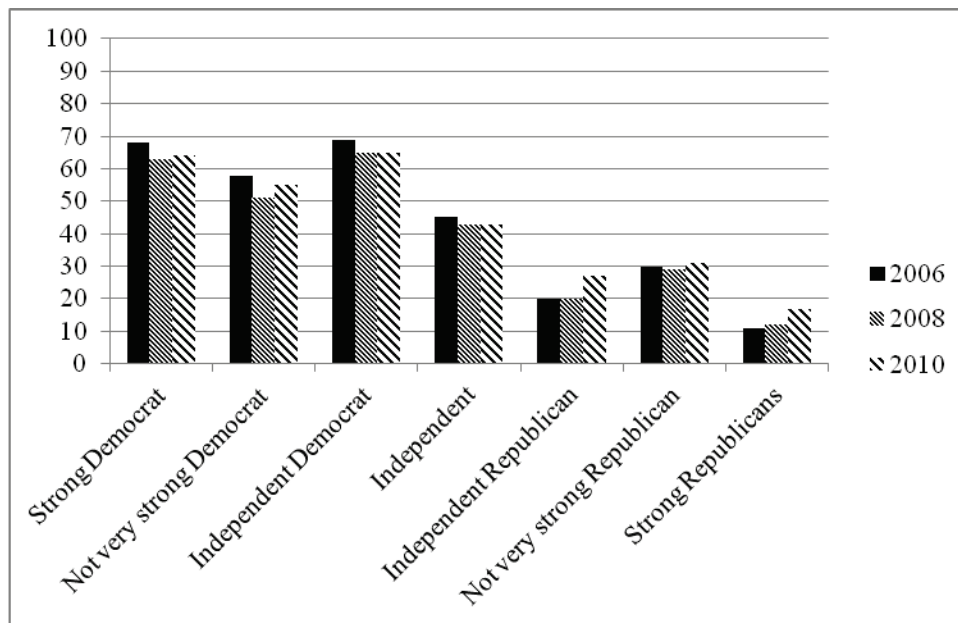
The stability of opinion on abortion by categories of party identification is striking. Between the three samples in 2006, 2008, and 2010, the widest variance in proportion holding the view that abortion should be legal in all cases was seven percentage points. Among not very strong Democrats, support for this view declined from 58 percent in 2006 to 51 percent in 2008, and among Independent Republicans, it rose from 20 percent in 2006 to 27 percent in 2010. For all others categories, the difference ranged from 2 to 6 percent.

In terms of the views of partisans and independents on abortion, there is again little difference between the views of Strong Democrats and Independent Democrats. Approximately two-thirds of both groups favor abortion being legal in all circumstances in both 2006 and 2008. And while the Strong Republicans are the least supportive of abortion being legal in all cases, 8 percent fewer Independent Republicans (on average) are supportive of abortion being legal in all



cases than not very strong Republicans. Again, Pure Independents are in the middle. On this issue, where there are clearly partisan differences, Independent leaners clearly side with the outright partisans, and clearly differ from the Pure Independents.

Figure 6. Those Favoring Always Allowing Legal Abortion



Source: CCES for 2006, 2008, and 2010

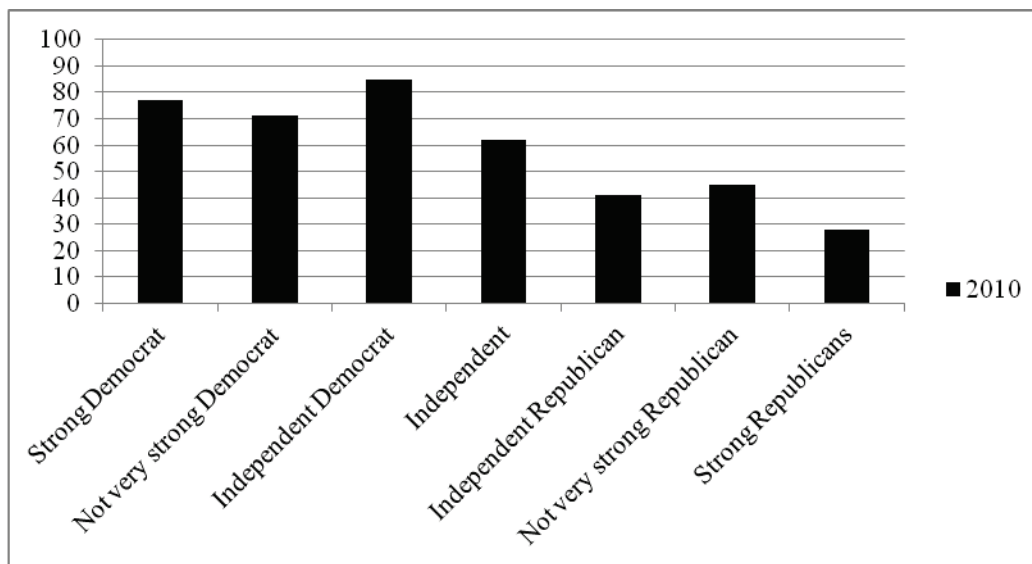
### Same-Sex Marriage

As the 2012 election campaign unfolded, the presidential candidates in the two major parties took quite distinct partisan stands on same-sex marriage. All of the GOP presidential candidates except Ron Paul opposed legalizing gay marriage, a position also taken in the GOP 2012 platform (Keller 2011). Paul was personally opposed to same-sex marriage, but he did not think the government should be involved in deciding who can get married (Keller, 2012). Barack Obama in May of 2012 stated that his personal position on this issue had “evolved” and that he now supported legalizing same-sex marriage, a position also taken in the 2012 Democratic Party platform, something the party did not do in 2008.

As Figure 7 shows, Democratic independent leaners and partisans were ahead of elites on the Democratic side in their views on this issue. This example runs counter to results found by Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, Marc

Hetherington, and Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey. These political scientists argue that party leaders provide cues for citizens on issues (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002). To examine the views of partisans, pure Independents, and partisan Independents, we again turn to the CCES, which asked respondents in 2010 the following question: “Do you support a Constitutional Amendment banning Gay Marriage?” Figure 7 provides the percentages for those who did not support an amendment to ban gay marriage.

Figure 7. Those Opposed to an Amendment Banning Gay Marriage



Source: CCES for 2010

On same-sex marriage, Independent Democrats are even more opposed to an amendment restricting gay marriage than are Strong Democrats and not very strong Democrats. Independent Republicans have a very different view of same sex marriage than do Independent Democrats. In 2010, Independent Republicans are closer to Strong Republicans in their position on this issue than not very strong Republicans. While not as likely to support an amendment to ban gay marriage as Independent Democrats are to oppose such an amendment, both groups are predictably partisan in their issue orientation.

## Conclusion

Our previous research has shown that Independent leaners and pure Independents differ sharply in their voting behavior, interest in elections, and turnout. In this article, we have expanded the research question to examine differences between Independent leaners and pure Independents on policy issues central to American politics between 2008 and 2012: healthcare, the economic stimulus, the war in Iraq, abortion, and same sex marriage. On all the issues we examine, Independent leaners are policy partisans. Independent Democrats consistently share the views of Strong Democrats, and Independent Republicans consistently share the views of Strong Republicans. Discussions and analyses that talk about Independents as one block – be it voting behavior or policy issues – are simply missing the mark.

These findings also support evidence of individuals having aligned themselves into distinct partisan groups on current issues. According to Levendusky, this partisan sorting happens first at the elite level (Levendusky, 2009). Not only are outright partisans sorting themselves as Democrats and Republicans, Independent leaners are also sorting themselves as Democrats and Republicans on key policy issues. Pure Independents, in contrast, have no clear policy affinities.

It has been a longstanding view that party identification influences an individual's attitudes and voting behavior. What has not been as widely accepted is whether this is true of partisan Independents. On the issues we have examined both during the 1970s to 1990s and more recently, we find strong evidence that there is little difference in issue positions on many major issues between Independent Democrats and Democrats and between Independent Republicans and Republicans. It is also important to entertain the possibility that issue preferences may be important in determining partisanship (Aldrich, Abramson, and Rhode, 2012, 220). While this research has not addressed that question, it appears clear that there is an alignment between issue positions and partisan positions which is consistent and strong in such current issues as healthcare reform, abortion, same-sex marriage, the Iraq war, and the 2009 stimulus package.

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