



Measuring party support: Leaners are not independents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 May 2009

Accepted 26 May 2009

ABSTRACT

Many Americans, especially middle class and better educated ones, call themselves independent and citizens who choose the better candidate regardless of party affiliation. Their numbers seem to have increased in recent decades to nearly 40% of the electorate. The description and estimate are misleading. Very few Americans lack a party preference. Our largely unchanged high levels of party voting and the willingness of most “independents” to acknowledge a party preference after a bit of probing indicates that independence is more a matter of self-presentation than an accurate statement about our approach to elections, candidates, the parties, and politics in general. Most of the independents in national surveys and most of the increase in their numbers are contributed by “leaners” (those who initially describe themselves as independents but then acknowledge a preference for either the Democrats or Republicans). Leaners are partisans. Characterizing them as independents underestimates the partisanship of Americans and leads to inaccurate estimates of party effects and the responsiveness of the electorate to short-term electoral forces. The frequent treatment of leaners as independents in *The American Voter Revisited* contributes to this all-too-common misconception.

The data used in this analysis were provided by the Interuniversity Consortium for Social and Political Research. Neither the Consortium nor the principle investigators of the various national election studies used here are responsible for the analysis or interpretation.

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The American Voter Revisited (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008) is an elegant and persuasive testimonial to the fundamental soundness of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960). Almost all of the topics and themes of the original remain useful analytic perspectives on the political attitudes and behavior of Americans half a century later, which explains why almost all of the topics and chapters are repeated in *The American Voter Revisited* (AVR, hereafter). What is as impressive as the vitality of the variables is the virtually unchanged relationships among them? The measures and descriptive and causal statements in *The American Voter* reappear in *The American Voter Revisited* with few changes.

Probably the only portions of *The American Voter* that could not be summarized thusly are found in the chapters

that describe the political demographics of the American electorate. Many changes from then to now reflect a half century of new issues and conflicts that reoriented the political allegiances of many segments of the electorate.

Race has become a much more consequential social difference. A plurality of whites are Republican today (by 47–43%) but a majority were Democrats in the 1950s (by 53–37%); the preference of blacks for the Democrats has doubled (from 57–19% to 84–7%).¹

The south is no longer a foundation for a Democratic majority. The popular vote of the region has tilted to the GOP for the last 40 years and the loyalties of southern whites today are unquestionably with the Republicans. The

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¹ These percentages are based on the interpretation of the categories of the party identification measure that are the subject of this paper. See column 3 of Table 1.

politics of the region have shifted so completely that southern whites did not even support one of their own for the presidency when he ran as a Democrat. Jimmy Carter won southern states because the high turnout and overwhelming support of African Americans created marginal majorities for him in a few of these states; but whites in the region voted for Ford. Similarly, Clinton's victories in 1992 and 1996 did not come from southern white votes and, of course, Gore's defeat in 2000 was assured by his inability to carry any southern state – even Tennessee, which he had represented in the Senate.

Religious differences are also not what they were in 1950s. The Catholic-Protestant divide has diminished, although it is still substantial, to be replaced with a pronounced cleavage between those who are religiously oriented and observant and those who are not. Fifty years ago Catholics who regularly attended religious services were more loyally Democratic than those who did not, but that influence is reversed today. Among all white Christians, the most religiously observant are among the most loyal supporters of the GOP.²

The relationship of political behavior to social status indicators has also changed. Education has a curvilinear relationship to party preference and the vote (although the college-educated, as a group, are still more Republican-inclined). Income, once a marginal influence on the vote, has become a relatively strong predictor of a person's politics.³

Gender differences in political attitudes and behavior were rarely noted 50 years ago, and the detectable differences found women more inclined to support Republicans. That has reversed, placing a majority of women – at least those who are not married – in the Democratic column.

The age effects patterns in *The American Voter* apply today. The key to understanding the age effects then and now is – to paraphrase an insight of a later book from the same tradition (Butler and Stokes, 1969) – that it does not matter how old a person is but when they were young. Understood thusly, age is mostly a marker of generations and cohorts and the conclusions offered in *The American Voter* about the influence of age on political preferences and voting behavior are largely how we think about the matter today (although, between eras the relationship of party preference and the vote to age may shift – reflecting cohort effects).

1. The matter of party identification

The portion of the AVR that should not have followed *The American Voter* so closely is its treatment of leaners as independents (“leaners” is the conventional term for respondents who admit a party preference after initially answering they are independent).⁴ In both books, those

who responded to the first of the three party identification questions by selecting the independent option are frequently treated as though they are meaningfully different from anyone who acknowledged a preference for the Democrats or Republicans. But as an empirical matter, Americans who admit to feeling closer to one of the parties in the follow-up probe – the leaners – are virtually identical to those who are classified as “weak” partisans (who are almost universally viewed as party identifiers) across a wide variety of perceptions, preferences, and behaviors.⁵

The American Voter and the AVR (and many scholars overall) often take as empirically meaningful the stratification into seven categories that results from the probing sequence of the standard questions. Anyone who acknowledges a party preference is regarded as more of a partisan than someone who must be questioned more closely about their asserted independence. Those who do not admit an affinity for one of the parties in response to the first question, but required probing, are regarded as less partisan than everyone in the first group. The empirical facts demonstrate otherwise. The three party identification questions should not, I submit, be regarded as a finely tuned psychometric expression of a concept. It is more useful to view the questions as a finely tuned “interrogation” protocol that identifies who among us, with what intensity, and in what proportions, constitute the supporters of the Democrats and Republicans. As the following data will document, those who admit a “strong” attachment to one of the parties are more partisan than “weak” identifiers, but the leaners are every bit as partisan as those we typically categorize as weak Democrats or Republicans.

A reluctance to confess a party preference in response to the initial question (ergo the “interrogation”) is nothing more than a reflection of the inclination of Americans to prefer to think of themselves as independent-minded and inclined to judge candidates on their individual merit (Petrocik, 1974). The United States has an anti-party political culture. According to the 2000 ANES, only 23% supported having one party control the Congress and Presidency while a 51% majority voiced a preference for divided government. Only 38% express a preference for continuing the current Democratic and Republican party domination; almost as many (34%) prefer to see new parties challenge the Democrats and Republicans.⁶ Americans are also unlikely to report basing their voting decisions on party allegiance. Very few – between 6% and 10% in recent surveys – report that their candidate choices are dictated by a party attachment. As many as 60%, but usually around 50%, insist that local or national issues determine their choices; another 20–30% report selecting the better candidate, regardless of party.⁷

² These demographic distinctions are conditioned by race and ethnicity, and apply mostly to differences among white voters.

³ McCarty et al., 2006 have compelling data on income and partisanship, albeit with a different focus.

⁴ Without providing an exhaustive inventory, examples include Figures 6.1 and 6.2, tables 6.4, 6.6, 6.7, 7.2, and 7.3. It probably includes tables and figures unclearly labeled regarding where independents are coded such as Figures 6.1 and 6.2. Tables 6.2 and 6.3 represent the distinctions that should be made.

⁵ Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a REPUBLICAN, a DEMOCRAT, an INDEPENDENT, or what? (If Republican or Democrat is selected): would you call yourself a STRONG [Democrat/Republican] or a NOT VERY STRONG [Democrat/Republican]? (If Independent, no preference, or other is selected): do you think of yourself as CLOSER to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?

⁶ These data and other data references in this paper are drawn from ANES surveys of the indicated years, unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ Pew Research Center polls from October 2000 and November 2006.

Academic research and the media that inform us all have furthered the notion that parties are weak influences on voters, candidates, office-holders, and government in general (examples include King, 1997; Fiorina, 1977a,b; Wattenberg, 1990; Herrnsen, 2000; Burden and Kimball, 2002 – and it is not limited to assessments of the American electorate, see Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Self-starting candidacies, primary rather than party-selected nominees, lopsided campaign spending, individual fund-raising, restrictions on party spending, and the importance of interest group endorsements and support are common topics. Elections are often presented as candidate-centered, with office-holders expected to run away from their party affiliation when it is advantageous to their pre-occupation with reelection (Mayhew, 1974). Candidates tout their individuality and service to their constituents as a high value.⁸ Challengers commonly criticize incumbents for voting the party line to the detriment of their constituents.

We cannot be too surprised, therefore, that independence (and Independents) are a focus of academic and public interest – and also candidates and their strategists who see independents and swing voters, often the same thing in their view, as the key to electoral success. However, partisanship is the overwhelmingly dominant influence on the candidate decisions made by voters; nonpartisanship is rare. Party preference accounts for 75–80% or so of the election choices of voters over the past 50 years. Only a bit more than 10% of the total vote is contributed by independents and another 10% – but sometimes more – comes from those who defected from an announced party preference. Leaners contribute almost one-third of the total amount of party voting that we observe.

This paper presents data to make the case for the preceding assertions. The next section clarifies the understanding of party identification that underpins these data. The following section makes the case for the interpretation of leaners as partisans. The final part illustrates some of the uses that follow from this understanding.

2. The meaning of partisanship and party identification

Much ink has been spent to promote contrasting definitions and conceptualizations of partisanship and party identification. The most common dispute turns on whether party identification should be conceived as a psychological attachment and a social identity (Green et al., 2002) or a summary statement of issue preferences (Fiorina, 1977b; Erikson et al., 2002). The debate is long standing, and unlikely to be resolved because evidence can be marshaled for both conceptions.⁹ More nuanced debates about what

⁸ Studies of legislative elections (congressional elections in particular) have so consistently trumpeted the importance of incumbency and constituent service that we almost ignore party preference as an influence in these contests (a good example is Fiorina and Rivers, 1989).

⁹ There has also been an ongoing debate about how generalizable any conceptualization might be outside of the context provided by the structure of a nation's elections. It is common to argue that it is equivalent to the vote for many, especially in other nations. Budge et al. (1976) have an early and comprehensive overview of these issues.

a respondent must avow for us to be confident that it is an “identity” other than an affirmation of support are also unlikely to be resolved or provide analytic purchase on the perceptions and behavior of Americans as they consider the policies and candidates they are asked to support.

The key fact about this preference is that, at any given time, it represents an expression of support that influences behavior and other party-related attitudes and assessments. People who think of themselves as Democrats are inclined to vote for Democratic candidates and contribute time and money to Democratic campaigns (although not many Democrats, Republicans, or Independents give money or time); they are inclined to view the public statements of Democrats as more credible; they are also likely to have views on public issues that are more like the views of others who call themselves Democrats (compared to those who call themselves Republicans). The intensity of this preference is meaningful. Those who strongly embrace it are less likely to behave in an inconsistent way: a person with a strong preference for the Democrats is less likely than someone with a weak preference to vote for a Republican and less likely to hold other political views that are inconsistent with what Democrats normally believe about public policy issues. The associations are not perfect, but they are stronger than any other political preference that we study as an influence on political beliefs and behavior. The important question for this analysis is where there are significant breaks in partisan effects across the seven categories of party identification. These breakpoints allow us to establish who is a Democrat, Independent, and Republican; it also permits conclusions about how different the categories are relative to the behavior and assessments they shape.

3. Levels of party support and its stability

The interpretation of the several answers to the party identification questions presented in Table 1 captures differences in voting and political behavior more accurately than the variable categorizations used in the AVR and *The American Voter* before it. The left-most column presents the standard seven category measure, distinguishing all the possible substantive answers, and ordering them from the responses that mark an individual as the most partisan Democrat through the most partisan Republican. The second column categorizes the answers to reflect differences in electoral behavior that exist among those identified as strong, weak, and leaning identifiers. This categorization groups

Table 1
Three categorizations of partisanship.

| The index of party identification | A partisanship categorization that reflects behavior and beliefs | A categorization that measures the party balance |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Strong Democrats | Strong Democrats | Democrats |
| Weak Democrats | Weak Democrats | |
| Leaning Democrats | Independents | Independents |
| Independents | | |
| Leaning Republicans | Weak Republicans | Republicans |
| Weak Republicans | | |
| Strong Republicans | Strong Republicans | |

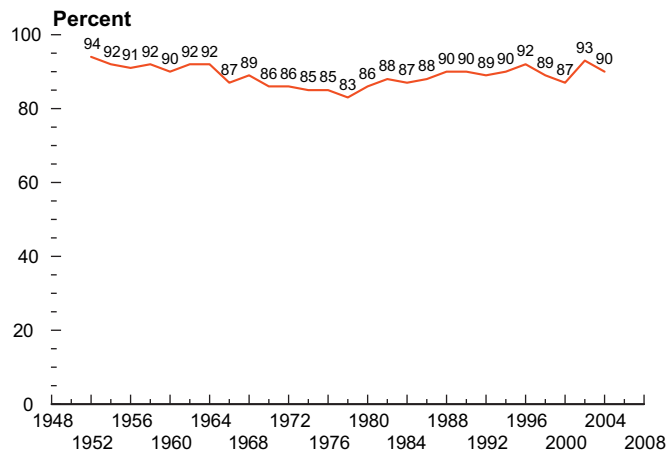


Fig. 1. Party supporters, 1952–2004.

weak and leaning identifiers because of their virtually identical responses to the candidates and the parties by several criterion variables. The right-most column in the table groups respondents in a way that maximizes the substantive accuracy of any measurement of the portions of the electorate that identify as Democrat, Republican, or with neither party. Put differently if one wants to know how many Democrats and Republicans there are, or what proportion is independent, column three is the categorization to use because it yields the most homogeneity within the categories and the greatest difference among them for virtually all electoral choices and assessment.

All of these distinctions can be appreciated by examining the empirical consequences of treating leaners as independents, and so the similarity of learners and weak partisans is the topic of this paper.

3.1. A portrait of American partisanship

The measurement of partisanship and our ordinary language interpretation of what Americans agree to call themselves is a critical determinant of how much partisanship we observe. Fig. 1 estimate the percentage of the population that thought of themselves as Democrats or Republicans between 1952 and 2004 when leaners are treated as partisans. When they are excluded party loyalty has declined and is not high today. The proportion who answered “Democrat” or “Republican” to the first part of the standard party identification questions declined approximately 15 percentage points after 1964. In the 1950s about 24% refused to “think” of themselves as a Democrat or Republican; but almost 40% refused this association by 2000 and 2004 (Nie et al., 1979; Wattenberg, 1990 chronicled these changes).

The decline virtually disappears when leaners are treated as partisans. Party support did diminish after 1964 to a low of 83% by the late 1970s, when it began a largely uninterrupted resurgence. The fraction of the citizenry declaring themselves to be supporters of the Democrats or Republicans produced a 90% level of party support by 2000–2004 that was indistinguishable from the 92% level

observed in the 1950s. Only 10–15% insist they are independent and feel no attachment for either party.

The overall level of party support has not maintained a constant fraction of Democrats and Republicans (Fig. 2 defines partisans according to the categories in column three of Table 1). In the 1950s, Democrats (including the leaners) outnumbered Republican supporters by about 20 percentage points (also including leaners), a fraction that did not change until the early 1980s. The advantage of the Democrats in the party preference of Americans is about half that number today. This current party balance has been unstable, possibly more than the Democratic lead in party identification prior to that time – but not dramatically so. The oscillation since the middle of the 1980s reflects the impact of short-term forces on the standing of the incumbent president’s party and the vote intention, much as it seems to have influenced variation in party preference in the 1950s (the Eisenhower elections) and 1960s (especially 1964 when Johnson trounced Goldwater). Overall, however, there isn’t much question about the closer division of party identification since the middle 1980s.

Also, if leaners are viewed as partisans, the aggregate level of party voting is high and has varied hardly at all from 1952 through 2004. Fig. 3 graphs the total share of the vote that is contributed by Democratic identifiers who vote for the Democratic Presidential or House candidate and Republican identifiers who voted for the Republican candidate.¹⁰ Party voting declined after 1964, reaching its nadir in 1980, after which it increased. It has remained slightly below the watermark set in the 1950s for congressional candidates, but party voting for the presidency is, on balance, as high as ever (Bartels, 2000; Hetherington, 2001). In general, party loyalties are as consequential today as they were half a century ago. Any

¹⁰ The difference between this percentage and 100% is the share of the electorate who are independents (varying from 10% to 15%) – not party voters by definition – and the fraction who defect to a candidate of the opposing party (a Democratic identifier who voted for the Republican candidate, for example). The figure does not report the percentage for each election because it would render the figure unreadable. The 2000–2004 percentages are reported for their topical interest.

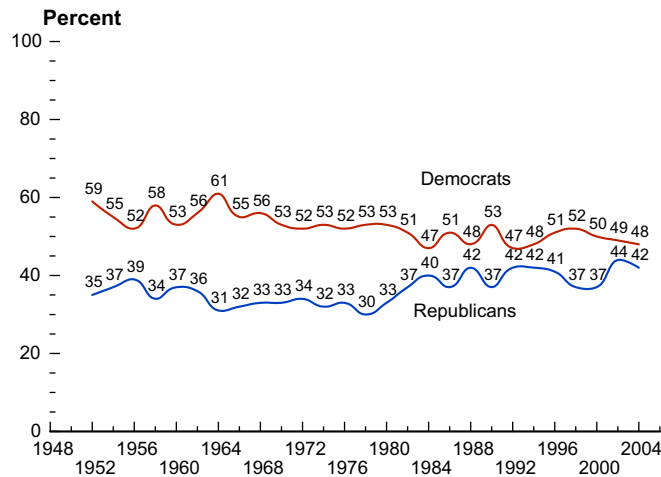


Fig. 2. Party supporters from 1952 through 2004.

erosion in party voting has been minimal and there is no evidence of a decline in the future.

3.2. The issue: different categorizations, different results

The interpretation that is built into the data presented in Figs. 1–3 requires that leaners and weak partisans are similar in their voting, candidate and party assessments, political activity other than voting, and issue preferences. Are they?

4. Partisanship and voting

The pattern in Fig. 4 illustrates how strongly party identification has influenced the vote choice during the last half century. The voting choices of leaners and weak identifiers are also clear evidence that leaners are partisans of the same intensity as weak identifiers. The top figure reports the highest, lowest, and the average Democratic vote for each class of identifiers. For example, among Strong Democratic identifiers, the highest level of support for a Democratic candidate was 97% (in 2000 and 2004) and the lowest Democratic presidential vote they reported was 72% in 1964. For Strong Republicans, the lowest level of support for a GOP candidate was 90% (in 1964) and the highest was 99% in 1988 and 2004.¹¹ The impact of short-term forces produces substantial swings in the vote, but there is great consistency in the relative behavior of strong, weak, and leaning identifiers – all of whom vote for the party for which they express a preference. The consistency is especially clear in the “average” line in Fig. 4.

But the key feature of Fig. 4 for assessing the partisanship of the leaners is the similarity of weak and leaning identifiers among both Republicans and Democrats. Consider the “average” line in the top half of the figure. Sixty-nine percent

of weak Democrats voted for Democratic candidates, actually slightly less than the 74% loyalty of leaners – but really not different at any substantive level. Republican leaners averaged an 88% Republican vote while weakly identified Republicans averaged an 86% GOP vote. Nothing has changed in the most recent elections, which, if anything, document more rather than less party voting by leaners, and no difference between them and the weak partisans (see the bottom half of Fig. 4). The relationship between the vote and expressed party preference was actually higher in 2000 and 2004 than it was in previous elections, as a comparison of the top and bottom parts of the figure makes clear.¹²

The responsiveness of leaners and weak identifiers to insurgent candidacies is also substantially indistinguishable (the bottom portion of Fig. 4). Neither Perot in 1992 nor Wallace in 1968 found much support among strong Democrats or Republicans. They drew their largest vote share from complete independents (38% in the case of Perot and 21% for Wallace). Leaning and weak identifiers were in the middle, and not different from each other in their responses to Wallace and Perot. Wallace was equally attractive to leaning and weak Democrats, but leaning Republicans were slightly more inclined to vote for Wallace than weak Republicans. In 1992, on other hand, leaning and weak Republicans defected to Perot at equivalent rates (25% and 24%), but leaning Democrats found Perot more attractive (26% voted for him) than weak Democrats (19% of whom reported a Perot vote). Overall, however, the differences were small and the variability of the defection rates across the parties between the two elections signals a mostly equivalent electoral response of leaners and weak identifiers to insurgent candidacies. In brief, the almost indistinguishable voting choices of leaners and weak identifiers of the same party is datum number one for the proposition that leaners are partisans, even if their first

¹¹ The other way to state this, making the sentence correspond to the values in the figure, is that highest level of support for a Democrat among strongly identified Republicans was 10% in 1964 and the lowest level was 1% in 1988 and 2004.

¹² The regression slope for the elections summarized in the top panel averaged about 14.5; it was 16.9 for the elections in the bottom panel (and approaching 18 for the 2004 election).

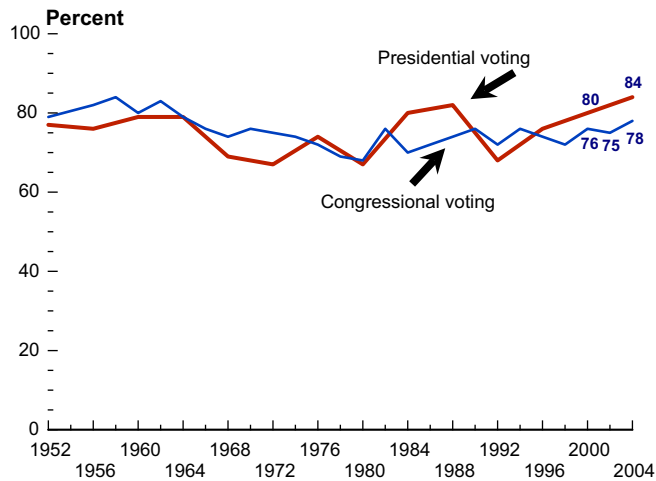


Fig. 3. Party voting in national elections.

inclination is to respond to the party identification question by calling themselves independent.¹³

4.1. Making up their minds

Leaners and weak identifiers are equally similar in the time it takes them to commit to their candidate. Fig. 5 plots a cumulative trend line for the points during the election year when voters decided whom they would support. Consider the top line in the top figure. In the 1952–1960 presidential elections, 52% of all strong identifiers (Democrats and Republicans) report making a candidate choice before the conventions. Another 9% of strong identifiers held off making a commitment until the conventions, at which point 61% had made a choice. It took the campaign to bring another 34% around, so that only 5% of strong identifiers had not decided their vote before the last two weeks.

The vertical distance separating strong, weak, and leaning identifiers at each point in the campaign cycle can be regarded as another demonstration of (1) the intense partisanship of strong identifiers, (2) the similarity of weak and leaning identifiers, and (3) the partisanship of the leaners. The pattern is what we should expect. The more strongly partisan individuals find it easier to decide their vote; so at any given point, a voter is more likely to have made a choice in direct proportion to the intensity of their party attachment. Fewer weak and leaning identifiers made an early choice; more of them held out to election day. In both *The American Voter* years and in *The American Voter Revisited* years, strong identifiers made their choice early. Independents were the least likely to make an early choice, and there were more of them who waited until the last two weeks to decide their vote. Independents were especially slow deciders in 2000 and 2004.

But the virtually identical behavior of weak and leaning identifiers is the important feature of Fig. 5 because it

demonstrates the underlying partisanship of the leaners. In *The American Voter* years, slightly more than a third of both leaners and weak identifiers had a candidate before the convention; another 30% of both groups made a choice during the convention; a final 25% or so made their choice during the campaign. About 15% of leaners and weak identifiers made their choice during the last two weeks. The numbers are similar for *The American Voter Revisited* years – 2000 and 2004. What the data show for both periods is that weak and leaning identifiers were indistinguishable in the time it took them to rally behind the candidate of their party, implying, I submit, an equivalent level of party attachment for the two groups.

Split-ticket voting also documents levels of party voting among leaners that is equivalent to that of the weak identifiers, in the baseline 1950s and in recent elections. Consider Table 2, which reports, for the 1950s and the current period, patterns of split-ticket voting and overall defection rates for weak and leaning identifiers. Of the sixteen comparisons that can be made between leaners and weak identifiers, there are a grand total of three instances in which leaners split their President–House, President–Senate, or defected for both offices at a higher rate than weak partisans. There are two instances in which the weak identifiers split their ballot or defect more than leaners. Overall, there is no substantial difference between leaners and weak identifiers.¹⁴

5. Short-term election forces and leaning and weak identifiers

Rates of party voting are high but differ among elections because a party predisposition can be reinforced or eroded by circumstances of the moment, as the high–low range in Fig. 4 illustrates. The ability to examine this variation not only confirms the importance of partisanship but it also allows us

¹³ This “closet” partisanship is actually well-known if not always acknowledged. Petrocik (1974) was the first to identify it, but the term was coined by Keith et al. (1992) who produced an early systematic analysis of what they described as the “myth” of the independent voter.

¹⁴ A higher rate is defined as a difference greater than 3%. This is a generous standard and a very conservative test of a difference that is well below the value that is required for statistical significance.

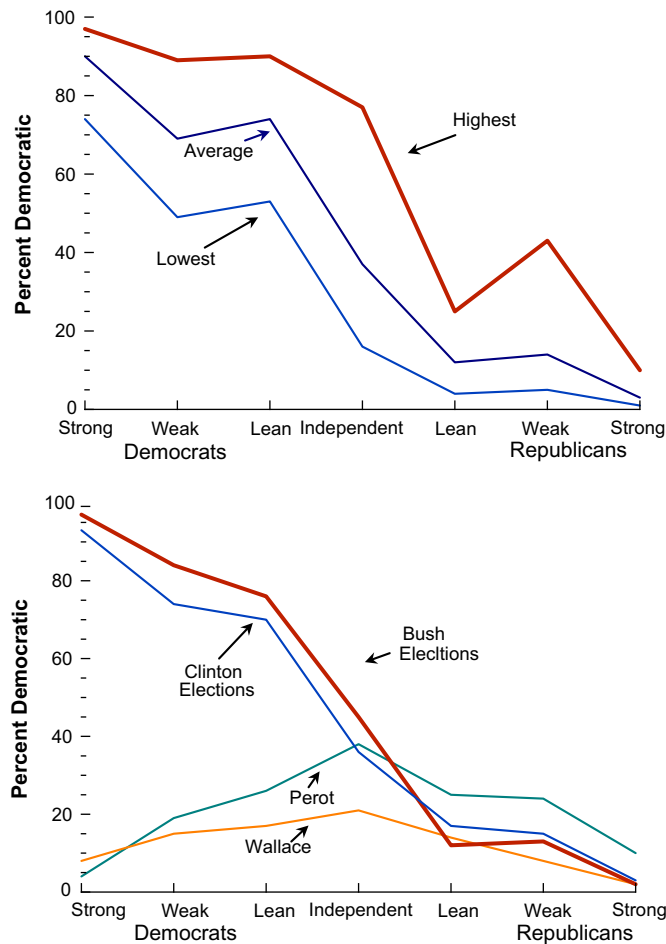


Fig. 4. Party identification and presidential voting.

to demonstrate further the similarity of the voting choices of weak and leaning identifiers. Party voting is at its highest level when the candidates are typical representatives of their party and no exceptional issue or event is on the public's agenda. It is lower – sometimes much lower – when one or both candidates are atypical of their party or the issues and events of the moment are cutting across party lines to the detriment of one of the parties. Elections contested in an environment of domestic and foreign policy failures, or malfeasance by the incumbents almost always cause partisans of the incumbent party to vote for the other side while it reinforces partisans of the out-party. An election held during “good-times” should be expected to have just the opposite effect: partisans of the in party will be encouraged to vote their party affiliation, uncommitted voters can be expected to support the “ins,” and defections from partisans of the out-party will increase the incumbent's majority.

These outcomes are not easily predicted, to the occasional embarrassment of the savants who try to do it.¹⁵ But prediction failures notwithstanding, the direction of the

swing between adjacent elections corresponds to changes in the issue environment and the differential appeal of the candidates. The swing is sufficiently regular and orderly – and centered on the partisanship of the voters – to permit generalized predictions about changes and the outcome of elections across election environments. It also highlights the behavioral similarity between weak and leaning identifiers.

Consider Fig. 6, which provides a graphic representation of this process.¹⁶ The unit of analysis is the election. The dependent variable is the Republican candidate's share of

¹⁵ See the symposium in the March 2001 issue of PS, which offers various accounts for the failure of almost all standard models to predict Bush's victory.

¹⁶ The data for the figure from nearly 200 surveys conducted for which vote choice by all seven categories of party identification were available. All regions of the country and types of districts, e.g., rural vs. urban, wealthy vs. poor, are represented. Also, the elections are quite diverse in terms of the strength of the candidates and the outcome of the election. Districts with “invulnerable” incumbents from either party are not generally included in the sample, although there are a few cases of incumbents posting strongly favorable personal evaluations over virtually unknown challengers and 70–20 “wins” in trial heat ballots. In general, the dataset sampled a wide range of election “outcomes”. It includes elections in which the Republican candidate won with more than 65% of the vote and those where the Democrat won with an equally large majority. In some of the surveys the respondents were very positive toward one candidate and hostile or indifferent to the other, while in still others they offered a more balanced evaluation of the contestants.

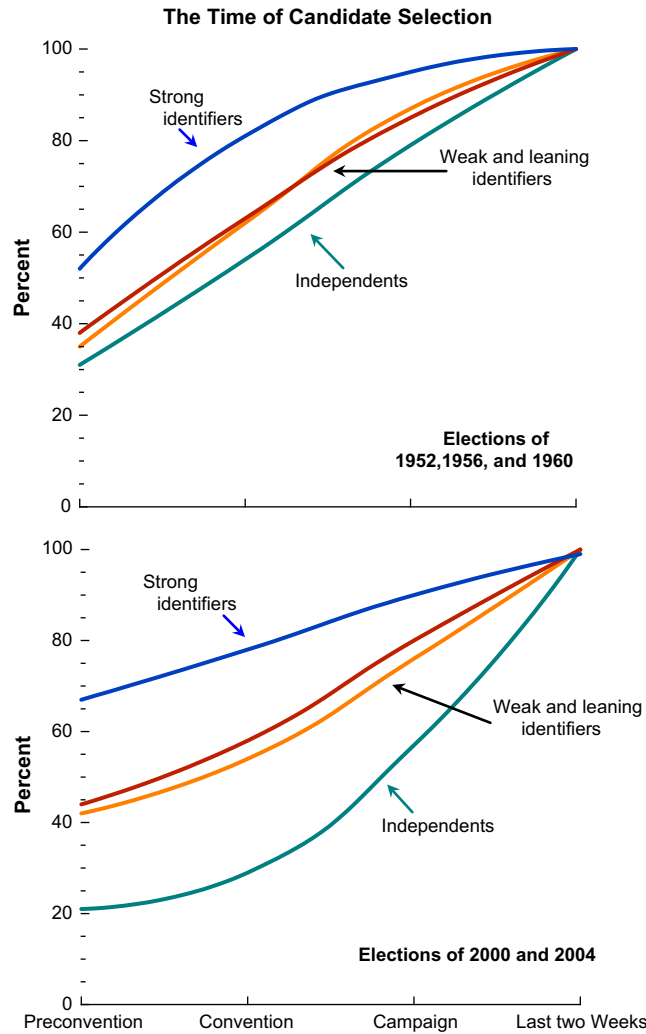


Fig. 5. The time of candidate selection.

the committed vote in the trial heat ballots that were asked in each survey. This percentage is calculated for each class of partisans (Strong Democrats through Strong Republicans). The short-term force of the election environment was assessed by the relative balance of favorable and unfavorable evaluations of the candidates in the election.¹⁷

¹⁷ Respondents were presented with the name of each candidate and asked if they were “aware or not aware” of him or her. Those who indicated familiarity were subsequently asked whether their impressions were favorable or unfavorable. Each respondent was characterized as favorable, unaware or otherwise lacking an opinion of the candidate, or unfavorable toward each candidate. In each survey, the balance of opinion toward each candidate was calculated as a percentage difference (a PDI) by subtracting the percentage of unfavorable evaluations from the percentage of favorable evaluations for each candidate. At this stage, a positive score indicates that more voters regard him or her favorably than unfavorably. The second-order difference was calculated by subtracting the Democrat’s PDI from the Republican’s PDI. The resulting scores are increasingly negative as the Democratic candidate was preferred by the electorate and increasingly positive as the Republican candidate was preferred. Petrocik (1989) has a full description.

A comprehensive measure of the short-term bias of the election would include more than candidate evaluations. A measure of the election’s short-term force that is limited to the candidates is, incomplete, but it is a reasonably comprehensive summary of candidate affect and issue concerns by virtue of the fact that a candidate evaluation is the point at which most of these other considerations are expressed. The specific issue agenda of the election, unique

Table 2
Voting patterns of weak and leaning identifiers.

| Period | Democrats | | | | Republicans | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-------------|------|-----------|------|
| | 1950s | | 2000–2004 | | 1950s | | 2000–2004 | |
| | Weak | Lean | Weak | Lean | Weak | Lean | Weak | Lean |
| Split-ticket on President–House | 24 | 18 | 20 | 21 | 9 | 16 | 21 | 26 |
| Defected on both | 13 | 16 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 8 |
| Split-ticket on President–House | 21 | 17 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 11 | 25 | 22 |
| Defected on both | 15 | 23 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 6 |

Note: Table entries are the percent who split their ticket or defect.

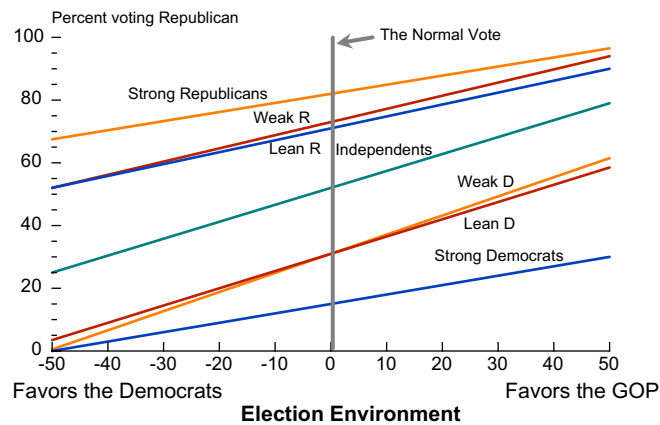


Fig. 6. The effect of short-term forces on different types of partisans.

features of the candidates with regard to certain issues, personal assessments such as perceived competence, and the performance of the incumbent party all figure into the assessment of the candidate.

The lines in Fig. 6 are the simple OLS slopes obtained from regressing the Republican share of the vote of each group of partisans on the measure of short-term forces in the election. The zero point of the short-term measure (the point at which the percentage of favorable and unfavorable evaluations of the candidates sum to zero) indicates an election in which the short-term forces are in balance. The slopes show the insulation partisan intensity provides against election-specific forces. Strong identifiers are the least responsive to electoral tides (the regression coefficient is about .3 for strong Democrats and Republicans). Weakly identified Democrats are about as responsive to short-term forces as leaning Democrats. Leaning and weak Republicans are also virtually identical in their response to the election environment. It is worth noting that any observable difference between weak and leaning identifiers actually finds that weak identifiers may be more responsive to short-term forces in the election. The slope for independents is about .54.

What this means for the vote is reported in Table 3. The values in the table are calculated from Fig. 6. The first three columns of numbers report the expected Democratic vote

when the short-term forces in the election significantly favor the Republican Party and its candidates (a value of 20 in Fig. 6, which might correspond to an election like 1972); neutral (a value of zero, perhaps corresponding to a year such as 1960 or 1976); and favor the Democrats (a value of -20, which might represent an election environment of the sort Goldwater and Johnson experienced in 1964). The “vote swing” column is the absolute value of the difference between the Democratic vote when the short-term force favors the Democratic party compared to when it favors the Republicans.

Strongly identified Democrats and Republicans respond the least to short-term forces. Independents and weak and leaning Democrats are the most responsive. But the key finding that further documents that leaners are identifiers is the similarity of their vote to the vote of weak partisans among Democrats and Republicans. The expected vote of leaning and weak Democrats is virtually identical in all three environments, corresponding to the patterns in Fig. 4; leaning and weak Republicans also vote similarly across all three environments.¹⁸

6. Candidate evaluations

Other criterion variables assess leaners the same way. Fig. 7 reports a summary measure of likes and dislikes toward the candidates and the parties.¹⁹ During the 1950s and in the most recent 2000 and 2004 NES surveys there is a consistent result: leaners and weak identifiers of a given party give the parties and candidates of the party to which

Table 3
Short-term forces and changes in the vote.

| Party identification | Percent expected to vote Democratic when the short-term force favors the | | | Vote swing |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|------------|
| | Republicans | Neither | Democrats | |
| Strong Democrats | 79 | 87 | 91 | 12 |
| Weak Democrats | 58 | 70 | 80 | 22 |
| Leaning to Democrats | 57 | 70 | 80 | 23 |
| Independents | 37 | 51 | 59 | 18 |
| Leaning to Republicans | 21 | 28 | 37 | 16 |
| Weak Republicans | 19 | 26 | 35 | 16 |
| Strong Republicans | 12 | 15 | 24 | 12 |

Note: “Vote swing” is the effect of the short-term force. See the text for a full explanation.

¹⁸ The projected vote of each class of partisans when the short-term forces are in balance (the index equals zero) is the share of the vote a Democrat can be expected to “typically” or “normally” receive from each class of partisans. A “normal election” in the first decade of the 21st century will produce a 53% Democratic win in the national electorate. In this “normal” election 51% of independents vote for the candidate of the party with which they identify (with Republicans displaying slightly more loyalty). About 87% of the strong Democrats vote Democratic and slightly fewer strong Republicans (85%) support the candidate of their party. Converse (1966) is the originator of this concept. The data here, with some updates, was fully reported in Petrocik (1989).

¹⁹ These are pre-constructed measures in the ANES cumulative file. They are variables VCF0322 and VCF0409.

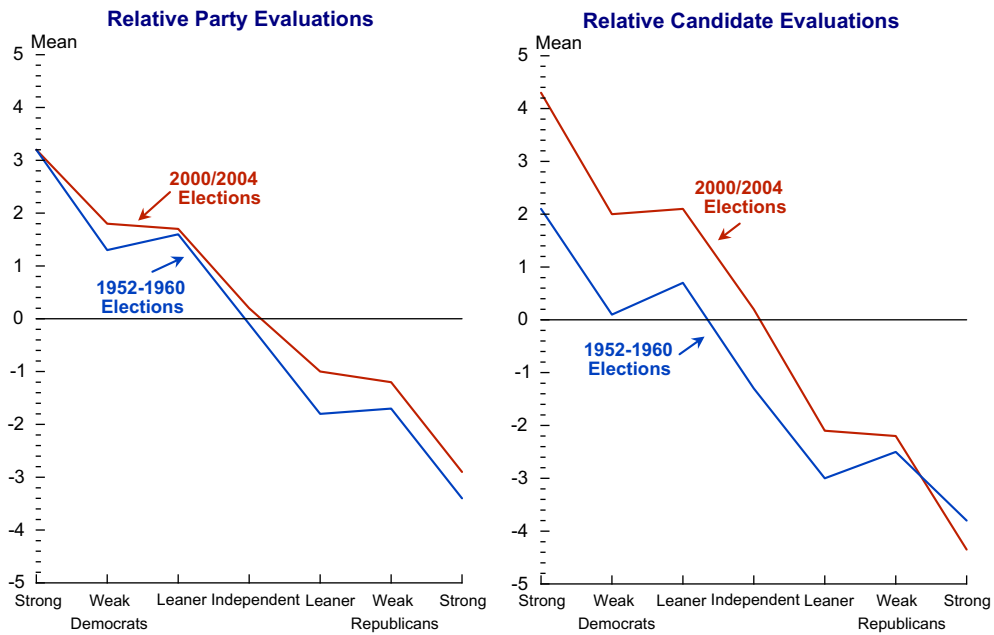


Fig. 7. Candidate and party evaluations.

they lean or weakly identify essentially the same evaluation. Identical results are observed from the frequently used thermometer ratings (data not shown). The thermometer difference between weak and leaning Democrats averages slightly less than 4°, with weak identifiers almost always “warmer” toward the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates and “colder” to the GOP and Republican candidates. The Republican leaners provide similar evaluations: weakly identified Republicans are warmer toward the GOP and its candidates than the leaning Republicans by slightly less than 4°. By contrast, leaning Republicans and Democrats are an average of 21° apart in their thermometer ratings of the parties and candidates.

Both types of data tell the same story: it would be reasonable to combine weak and leaning Democrats into one group and weak and leaning Republicans into a different group. Combining leaning Republicans, leaning Democrats, and independents who express no preference for either party collects individuals with opposite reactions to the parties and candidates.

7. Political activity

Table 4 demonstrates the similarity of weak and leaning identifiers in their non-voting political activity. The “talking

Table 4
Other activity of weak and leaning identifiers.

| Type of activity | Democrats | | Republicans | | | | | |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------|-----------|----|----|
| | 1950s | 2000–2004 | 1950s | 2000–2004 | 1950s | 2000–2004 | | |
| Talking politics | 22 | 28 | 35 | 42 | 28 | 33 | 60 | 40 |
| Campaign work | 4 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 5 | 8 |
| Giving money | 5 | 7 | 7 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 10 |

Note: Table entries are percents.

politics” measure is a binary variable that indicates whether the individual wore a political button or displayed a political sign, tried to influence someone’s vote, or had a political discussion at least once. “Campaign work” reports whether they went to a political meeting or did any work on behalf of a party or candidate. The “contribution” measure is simply whether they report a political contribution during the election.

There is nothing particularly partisan about any of these activities but if a person believed that leaners were independents one might expect the leaners to be less politically engaged and partisan than the weak identifiers, and that one manifestation of it is a lower rate of activity (of the kind in Table 4) than the weak partisans. However plausible such an expected difference, it is not observed. Strong partisans report doing all of these things at a higher rate than weak and leaning partisans, but there is no systematic difference between the latter two groups. Leaners are, on average, throughout Table 4, as or more likely than weak identifiers to report talking about political matters, doing campaign work, and contributing money.

8. A brief look at attitudes and policy preferences

Lastly, Table 5 provides a brief snapshot of eight policy attitudes and preferences in 2000 and 2004 by the different categories of partisans.²⁰ These are multi-item measures (with the exception of the abortion variable) scored and rescaled to vary from zero to one, with .5 representing the arithmetic center of the range. Zero represents the most

²⁰ These differences do not extend to a variety of traditional measures of political efficacy, which showed almost no difference across partisan categories.

Table 5
The policy preferences of partisans.

| Issue index | Democrats | | | Republicans | | | |
|--------------------|-----------|------|------|-------------|------|------|--------|
| | Strong | Weak | Lean | Ind | Lean | Weak | Strong |
| Race | .46 | .54 | .56 | .62 | .67 | .70 | .73 |
| Abortion | .41 | .51 | .45 | .55 | .59 | .62 | .72 |
| Gays | .31 | .37 | .26 | .41 | .43 | .48 | .58 |
| Social welfare | .27 | .33 | .30 | .35 | .43 | .44 | .52 |
| Force | .54 | .56 | .54 | .62 | .68 | .67 | .78 |
| Religion | .62 | .59 | .49 | .60 | .57 | .59 | .69 |
| Size of government | .21 | .27 | .37 | .39 | .51 | .46 | .60 |
| Ideology | .35 | .46 | .40 | .53 | .62 | .64 | .76 |

Note: Table entries are means on a 0 through 1 measure of liberalism, where higher scores indicate a more conservative preference. See the text.

liberal position possible, one is the most conservative. The interparty differences (or lack of them in a few cases) may be noteworthy but the focus here is on the lack of differences between leaners and weak identifiers of the same party and the mischaracterization that would occur if leaners from both sides were merged together to produce an estimate of the preferences of independents.

As was the case with the vote and other measures, the collapsing of all leaners together with independents would merge significantly different segments of the electorate. Leaning Democrats have different opinions and policy preferences than leaning Republicans, but each is in close agreement with their weak partisan brethren.

9. Conclusion

So how should we understand the leaners? We have known for a long time that Americans, especially the middle class and the better educated, are inclined to call themselves independent and assert an unbiased judgment of the candidates. Applied to measuring partisanship, we should understand the independent leaners – the leaners – as partisans who are engaging in a self-presentation and not making an accurate statement about how they approach elections and make judgments about candidates, the parties, and politics in general. Leaners are partisans and Figs. 1–3 tell the appropriate story about Americans.

Multiple contradictory considerations about the parties and candidates may leave voters more willing to recognize the shortcomings of their preferred party these days. The news environment is invariably critical of public figures, and that has an impact. The early 21st century may not be the golden age of parties that historians report to have existed at the end of the 19th century, but the best evidence we have is that some 85–90% of Americans feel close to or identify with the Democrats or the Republicans. Regarding

leaners as independents mis-characterizes the partisanship of Americans, underestimates the rate of party voting, and may mislead both scholars, public commentators, and the public about what to expect at elections and how one should formulate analyses of issues and political behavior.

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