

THE PARTISAN IDENTIFICATION QUESTION:  
AN INVALID MEASURE OF PARTISANSHIP

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In chapter five of The American Voter, entitled "The Impact of Party Identification," Campbell, et. al. developed and tested a model of voter behavior which emphasized the role of partisanship in the structuring of political attitudes and behavior. Essentially, they argued that the stronger an individual's psychological attachment to his party, as measured by a seven point self-classification scale, the more significant the party will be as a supplier of political cues. Conversely, Independents, lacking the structuring element of the party, were considered to be politically rudderless. This model of partisanship posited that the party identification question tapped the individual's attachment to the party such that Strong Party Identifiers are more partisan than Weak Party Identifiers, who are more partisan than Partisan Independents, who are more partisan than Pure Independents. For the purposes of analysis most researchers, following Campbell, et. al., have combined the Independent categories. Thus, most tests of partisanship are based upon a three point ordinal scale; e.g. strong party identifiers, weak party identifiers and Independents.

Testing the model with this ordinal definition of partisanship, Campbell and his associates found considerable supportive evidence. Without exception, they found that there was a strong positive relationship between the strength of party identification

and a variety of indices of political involvement. This research completely destroyed the "myth" that Independents were active in and informed about politics but were non-partisan. Actually, the Independents were found to be only tenuously and erratically involved in politics.

Although the ordinal definition of partisanship conforms well with the data presented in The American Voter, it has posed problems for subsequent analyses. Beginning in the 1960's and throughout the 1970's a number of studies have noted anomalies in the political orientations of the Independents. In several areas, such as efficacy, the Independents have not always conformed to expectations generated by this model of partisanship. Researchers have not, however, challenged the basic model of partisanship articulated in The American Voter. Instead, they have concurred with Burnham's assessment that a "new Independent" emerged in the mid 1960's; one qualitatively different from the largely apathetic Independent of the 1950's. This new independent is not, to paraphrase Pomper, indifferent to politics; rather, he is simply unconstrained by partisanship.

Simultaneously, however, these researchers have moved away from the earlier ordinal interpretation of partisanship. Increasingly, more recent publications have tended to view partisanship as a nominal rather than an ordinal concept. Thus, Burnham, Asher, Pomper, Flanigan and Zingale, and others have consistently compared Partisans to Independents in their analyses. One searches their works in vain for such expression as "the stronger an individual's sense of partisanship...." (The American Voter is, of course replete with such phrases.) The reason for

this shift from ordinal statements to nominal statements is obvious. The exploration of the fascinating characteristics of the Independents has led to the discovery by John Petrocik and others that the partisan identification scale is apparently intransitive. If the measure is indeed intransitive, then ordinal interpretations of the partisanship data would be misleading.

Any conference devoted to the analysis of "the issues surrounding the concept of partisan identification" will assuredly discuss the emergence of the "new Independent" and the simultaneous difficulty of maintaining the posited ordinal characteristics of the partisan identification scale. These two problems beg several questions. Do the partisanship characteristics that were discovered and so well articulated by Campbell and his associates no longer accurately describe the partisan of the 1970's? Should political scientists shift their attention away from the Partisans and toward the growing number of Independents? Would a better understanding of the Independents increase political analysts apprehension of the changing party system at the macro-level and the individual voting decision at the micro-level? Are we facing, in Thomas Kuhn's words, a paradigm crisis?

Questions such as these are ripe for discussion. We advocate, however, the exploration of a new and different approach for analyzing the closely associated problems of the "new Independent" and the apparent intransitivity of the partisan identification scale.

Many of the difficulties in conceptualizing partisan identification, understanding the "new Independent," visualizing the role of independence, observing the effects of apathy, and resolving the apparent intransitivity of the partisan identification index (most of these problems are described in the Anderson-Eulau memorandum) dissipate when one recognizes that the partisan identification index is an invalid measure of partisanship. A measure is valid if and only if any given value of the concept is represented by one and only one value of the measure. Yet, the partisan identification question is not unidimensional since it measures two concepts--partisanship (the psychological attachment to either the Republican or the Democratic party) and independence (the psychological attachment to the values associated with the "myth" of independence). Consequently, a person who weakly identifies with one of the major parties will be classified as a Leaning Independent if he has a strong sense of independence (the strong sense of independence leads to an initial response that he is an Independent) but will be classified as a Weak Partisan if he has no psychological attachment to the values associated with independence (that is, he will initially classify himself as a Partisan). Since these are two different measures for the same value of partisanship, the partisan identification scale is an invalid measure.

This does not mean, however, that past research using the party identification question has been futile nor that future analyses of data involving the partisan identification question is impossible. Indeed, the recognition of the bidimensionality of the question increases the utility of the measure as a research tool.

A clearer picture of the effects of partisanship can be constructed by controlling for independence. Conversely, a concise description of the effects of independence can be generated by controlling for partisanship.

A report of our initial research exploring the implications of recognizing the invalidity of the partisan identification measure will be presented at the 1978 Midwest Political Science Convention. Briefly, we have discovered that controlling for either partisanship or independence leads to the following conclusions:

1. Although the partisan identification index exhibits intransitive properties, transitive measures of partisanship can be constructed. Specifically, we know that Strong Partisans are more partisan than Weak Partisans and that Leaning Independents are more partisan than are Pure Independents.

2. The two transitive measures of partisanship demonstrate that the conclusions stated in The American Voter concerning the role of partisanship are correct. Our longitudinal analysis of the SRC/CPS Presidential election studies clearly shows that the greater an individual's sense of partisanship is, the greater the probability is that the person will be politically active. This is true for both psychological and behavioral measures of political activity.

3. By controlling for partisanship one can construct a transitive measure of independence from the partisan identification question. Our longitudinal analysis using this measure reveals that Burnham's "new Independent" is not new. People who positively identify with the values associated with the myth of independence

have been present in each of the SRC/CPS Presidential election surveys. The difference between the early surveys in the 1950's and the later ones is not the effects of independence but simply the number of persons who identify with these values.

4. Our analysis indicates that the values associated with a strong sense of independence are very similar to the values espoused by civic groups such as the League of Women Voters. The stronger an individual's sense of independence is, the greater the probability is that the person will reject overt forms of partisan behavior (for example, straight ticket voting), that the person will be factually informed about politics, and that the person will be interested in politics and will possess a high sense of political efficacy. Surprisingly, a sense of independence neither increases nor decreases an individual's concern over the election outcome or the probability that the person will vote in the Presidential election.

5. The conclusions of The American Voter concerning the Independent apply to the truly apathetic citizen (that is, the person who rejects identifying with either major political party and who feels no psychological attachment to the values associated with independence). This type of individual, who is present in all the SRC/CPS Presidential surveys, is the typical type of Independent in the 1950's but not in the 1960's and 1970's.

Given the intriguing results of our initial research we urge the board to include within the conference's agenda the following questions:

1. Are we justified in asserting that the partisan identification index is not a unidimensional measure of partisanship but is instead a bidimensional measure of partisanship and independence? An examination of the nature of the two part party identification question and a review of the increased explanatory power that derives from the acceptance of the assertion provide both logical and empirical justifications for accepting the validity of the assertion.

2. How does the recognition that the partisan identification index is not a unidimensional measure of partisanship help clarify the roles that the psychological concepts of partisanship, independence, and apathy play in the individual's voting decision? This entails a further exploration of our initial research results that are outlined above.

3. Given the bidimensionality of the partisan identification question is it desirable to attempt to construct unidimensional measures of partisanship and of independence? Or given the fact that "the measure of party identification is so simple and has 'worked' so well in many instances" and given that unidimensional measures of partisanship and of independence can be abstracted from the party identification question, would it instead be better to continue using the question and not worry about constructing valid measuring instruments of the two psychological concepts?

4. Is it possible to construct a better theory of the voting decision from the insights derived above as to the role of partisanship, independence, and apathy? We believe that one of the first steps toward the construction of such a theory is a closer

examination of the relation between scores on the partisan identification question and the likes and dislikes the individual has for voting for a particular candidate. Most academics have conceptually bifurcated the voting decision into the decision as to whether or not to vote and the decision of for whom to vote. This bifurcation has created several conceptual and methodological problems in understanding the voting decision. If instead of inquiring as to the person's likes and dislikes of a particular party or candidate, researchers would instead ask respondents about their likes and dislikes for voting for a particular candidate, an even more powerful predictor of the voting decision would be possible. (Kelly and Mirer's "The Simple Act of Voting," 1974 APSR provides an initial indication of the importance of likes and dislikes in predicting a person's vote. They found that the best predictor of a person's vote is his likes and dislikes of the party and the candidate. This was a better predictor than even partisanship.) Psychological concepts such as partisanship, independence, efficacy, alienation, and apathy are important because they effect the magnitudes of the individual's likes and dislikes for voting for various candidates. Those likes and dislikes in turn determine the voting decision. This brief outline of the relation between psychological concepts, likes and dislikes for actions, and the political action that the individual takes provides the basis for the development of a theory of political decisions. Since much of this derives from the insights gleaned from recognizing the invalidity of the partisan identification question as a measure of partisanship, the implications of our initial research deserve careful attention.

These four questions fit most logically into the first session suggested by the Anderson-Eulau memorandum. That session is to be devoted to the question as to what the party identification question has measured. As our memorandum suggests, the recognition that the party identification question is a bidimensional measure of partisanship and of independence, provides the basis for the construction of a better theory of voting. The examination of the bidimensionality of the question will help lead to a decision making theory that achieves that illusive goal of serving as the nexus between our ideas of how man makes political decisions and the actual political decisions that man makes.