

to use an alternative fuel: safety, availability, performance, ease of use in refueling, and the absence of costly modifications of their present cars. In addition, two-thirds mentioned the price must not exceed that of gasoline.

If consumers are going to purchase alternative fuels, they need to know about and want them. However, no alternative fuel is currently considered "most appealing" by as many as a fifth of new car buyers. Among the options, solar power (17%) and gas blends (i.e., gas mixed with alcohol and ethanol - 16%) are the leaders. No more than a tenth mentioned electricity (battery powered), methanol (a form of alcohol), or methane (natural gas). Two-fifths of respondents (42%) didn't select any specific alternative fuel as most appealing. Half of all respondents failed to name any alternative fuel they would *not* use. Methane (mentioned by 16%) and electricity (15%) are the two fuels that generate the greatest resistance.

As an aid to understanding the factors that drive car purchases, a battery of 40 statements concerning cars, petroleum and other auto issues was prepared. Fourteen of those statements have direct bearing on the issue of alternative fuels. Foremost among the concerns of many buyers are good gas mileage, energy conservation and air pollution.

They recognize air pollution as a significant problem in their area, and give at least nominal backing to the idea that the use of alternative fuels should be mandated in cities with high pollution levels. However, buyers see that there are trade-offs in the use of alternative fuel vehicles, including performance questions, safety issues and limits on distances such vehicles may be driven. While many buyers provide the socially approved response on willingness to spend more for pollution-reducing fuels, they waffle and backslide when asked to be specific on the amount.

What does this study teach us about alternative fuels, in sum? The American driver, operationalized by perhaps its most "successful" segment, the new car buyer, is not yet an advocate for alternative fuels. Knowledge of the alternatives in general, and of specific fuels, is remarkably low. The pollution problem gets high recognition, in contrast to the very low recognition of possible solutions. Support exists for some action, but government is expected to take the lead. The Middle East crisis may now be the catalyst for changing public opinion on these issues, and forcing the government to act.

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## INDEPENDENTS AND THE NEW AMERICAN POLITICS

By Patrick Reddy

America's two major parties have been in decline since the 1950s: The Democratic-Republican competition which began in the Civil War era with the GOP dominant and was reshaped during the Depression as Democrats achieved majority status, has eroded considerably. At the same time, the number of "independent" voters — those declining adherence to either major party — has grown steadily. While the Democrats have certainly declined (from 48% in 1960 to 34% in 1988, according to Gallup's final pre-election polls), the Republicans have not gained all that much. Independents have been the big winners.

After World War II, rising levels of education and real income caused partisan ties to weaken significantly. In 1937, fully 84% of all voters choose a major party (Democrats 50%, Republicans 34%) according to Gallup surveys, and 75% did in 1952. The number of independents hit an all-time high in 1975 and 1979 at 33%. While independents have leveled off at about a third of the electorate, and the Republicans under Ronald Reagan gained in the 1980s, it's unlikely that partisanship will recover its 1930s strength. Today's "more sophisticated" voters, especially those under 40, don't really identify with either the Donkey or the Elephant. They "vote for the person, not the party," as the saying goes.

### The Two Independents

A demographic profile of independents would reveal two kinds of voters. The dominant type are mostly under 40 years old, have some college education and are slightly above the average family income. They are overwhelmingly white (most blacks and non-Cuban Hispanics are Democrats), secular Protestants, and likely to vote. In short, they're Yuppies. The other group of independents are persons of lower socio-economic status, are generally apathetic about politics. Among the latter are moderate to conservative former Democrats in the South and Southwest, fed up with liberal domination of the national party but not quite ready yet to embrace the Republicans. Political scientists have long recognized that there are two independent types: the "I'm very engaged, but the parties can't command my loyalty" crowd, and the "I'm not interested, thank you" bloc. (The cynical and the apathetic, one might say). This is still true, but the former seems to be the one whose ranks are growing rapidly.

### **The Politics of Independent Voting**

The Democratic era lasted from 1932 to the 1960s (roughly from Franklin Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson). During this time, America went from being a blue-collar industrial society centered in big cities to a suburbanized, white collar, "post-industrial" society. The working class Democrats who came of age in the Roosevelt/Truman era have largely passed through the electorate and been replaced by the middle class children of post-World War II affluence.

The Democrats have also been victims of the cultural shocks which hit the body politic beginning in the late 1960s. The two groups which have defected the most from national Democrats over the last 25 years have been northern white ethnics and white southerners — social conservatives who were known as "Reagan Democrats" in the 1980s, were "Democrats for Nixon" in 1972, and voted for (or at least flirted with) George Wallace in 1968. These marginal Democrats defect regularly from Democratic presidential candidates, but they and independents are instrumental in maintaining Democratic control of Congress.

As the number of independents has grown, the strategies of both parties have also shifted. When self-identified Democrats were still close to a majority in 1960s, John Kennedy's task was merely to bring home those Democrats who had voted for Eisenhower and pick up a few independents. In contrast, Richard Nixon had to mobilize the Republican faithful and appeal to Democrats and independents. In 1988, with the two parties even in identification, George Bush only had to win a majority of swing voters (i.e., independents), something he was able to do handily by drawing sharp ideological differences with his opponent. Michael Dukakis in 1988 won about the same percentage of Democrats as Jack Kennedy did in 1960 (85%), but it wasn't enough, the Democratic base having shrunk well below 40%. The votes of independents now decide presidential elections. For the 1990s and beyond, national elections will turn on whether the GOP can hold its new base of registered Republicans plus independents in the suburbs. Democratic prospects depend on nominating candidates who can appeal well beyond their core voters.

### **Fiscal Conservatives, Social Libertarians**

Of the two parties, Democrats have had more trouble with independents: in every presidential election of the last 40 years, except the Johnson landslide of 1964, independents have voted Republican. The reason is economics: survey data show independents to be fiscal conservatives and pro-business. Since Republican national

candidates usually run on reducing taxes and spending, they have easily moved in on this group. But Republicans have problems with independents too: the latter have a strong libertarian bent on social issues like abortion, free speech and civil rights. The Christian Right-wing of the Republican party probably dissuades many independents from joining the GOP. (In addition, independent voters are more moderate than Republican identifiers on government redistribution issues — one might call them fiscal conservatives with a heart). As a result, independents usually vote Republican for president (and often governor) and Democratic in legislative races. They don't completely trust either party. They don't trust Democrats with their pocketbooks or Republicans with their private lives. Independents may see split-level voting and divided government as the best way to put a check on each party's worst tendencies.

The right combination of fiscal conservatism and social tolerance wins the votes of independents. It was this very formula that Dwight Eisenhower termed "modern Republicanism" in 1952. If the GOP is to extend its presidential strength down to the local level, Republicans will have to find more young, attractive candidates in the Eisenhower mold: i.e., who promise to maintain the fiscal status quo (which strongly favors the middle class), but support basic social services (especially education and Social Security), without a whiff of prejudice toward any group. As for the Democrats, to regain a competitive position in presidential contests, they must activate their own base of labor and minority voters (who in the past have been drawn to the polls by promises of social spending increases) and win over fiscally conservative independents plus a few moderate Republicans. Under normal circumstances, this is extremely difficult. They need either a charismatic national figure (their own Eisenhower) or a crisis brought on by Republican mistakes.

As the population has become more educated, white collar, and suburban over the past 30 years, the number of independent voters has doubled. They are now the swing group in presidential elections; if present trends continue, they may well be dominant in the not-too-distant future. More and more, political strategy will be directed to the interests of independents. As the national philosophy seems to be moving toward a blend of fiscal restraint and social tolerance, independent voters will lead the way.

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