

**PARTY IDENTIFICATION:
THE IDEA AND ITS MEASURE**

by **Everett Carll Ladd**

No other measure of voters' partisan preferences and the parties' strength has been deemed nearly so telling a political statistic, or used as widely as party identification. American parties really have never had members; rather, they have had vast armies bound to them by psychological bonds—of memory, "tribal" membership, and interests. We ask, then, Which team is yours? Do you *think of yourself* as a Republican or a Democrat?

So far as I have been able to discover, the first survey operationalization of the idea was by Gallup, in a study of March 3-8, 1937. Midway through it, in between questions on whether sit-down strikes should be made illegal, and had the respondent gone to the movies in the past month—both answered affirmatively by roughly two to one—Gallup asked: "Do you regard yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or a Socialist?" The November 1939 poll was the first to use the now familiar, "In politics, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat...or an Independent?" By 1946 Gallup was including the party "ID" question regularly, and by 1947 it was part of a standard battery of demographics at the end of the questionnaire—where it is found today in most polls.

It was long political science gospel that party ID for most people is a bedrock identity, rarely and reluctantly changed, which serves as a uniquely powerful determiner of electoral behavior. Some analysts now believe that this assessment, though perhaps valid in the past, no longer holds—in an era when political parties have become objects of diminished attachment. Geoffrey Garin argues in this issue (p. 9) that asking about party ID is "much more akin analytically to asking, How do you feel about the way things are going in the country today? It's very fluid."

As part of our comprehensive examination of the parties' standing and changes therein, we present in the pages which follow every poll finding on party identification by six leading organizations for 1980, 1982, 1985, 1988, and 1990-91—covering the sweep of the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Some developments in party preference are shown clearly and consistently across these data. Most notably, the consensus of the six polling groups finds the Republicans much stronger in the latter years of the period than they were at the beginning. Though space constraints prevented us from printing all of them, we have compiled the complete ID findings for every year since 1980. The total array (available from the Center upon request) shows Republican gains even more clearly.

The reader will note that the survey organizations sometimes differ markedly as to the parties' relative strength. In February 1985, for example, Roper showed the Democrats up by 14 percentage points, whereas Gallup had them ahead only by 4, and NBC found them actually trailing by 2. In 1980, the Gallup and Roper pictures were identical: Gallup put the Democrats in the lead by an average margin of 22 points, Roper by 24. In 1990 and thusfar in 1991, however, Gallup has shown the Republicans moving up and taking the lead, while Roper has continued to find a decisive (if reduced from the early Eighties) Democratic margin of 10 points or so.

The polls differ on other aspects of the party ID story. For example, was there any short-term change in the parties' standing over the course of the Gulf conflict? The Yankelovich Clancy Shulman polls for Time say there really wasn't. In fact, they show the Democrats' lead essentially constant over the last two years. In contrast, the ABC/Post polls show the GOP closing the gap in ID during the war months but then (in a Post-only survey) falling back a bit again in April. Gallup agrees with ABC/Post on the Republicans' moving up during the war—but differs in that it finds no Republican fall-off in April.

While the polls differ on the parties' relative strength overall, they are consistent in finding the Republicans doing better among the young than among any other age group. The persistence of patterns in party identification based on generational experience, and the marked Republican success among those who have come of age politically since the late 1970s, is shown by data in the Public Opinion Report (pp. 94-95).

When those independents who say they "lean" to one party or the other are added into the respective bodies of partisans, the Republicans' relative position almost always is shown improving slightly, in recent polls. As the beneficiaries of the realignment, they have more soft support than do the Democrats. The GOP margins of 10 to 12 points in Gallup polls of late March and April—with leaners included—represent the first instance in the history of polling when a respected survey organization has found a clear (if temporary) Republican ascendancy.

The Roper Center is engaged in a long-term study of partisan identification, involving both substantive matters of party strength—among them, issues of realignment and dealignment; and methodological issues of how inter-organization differences of sample composition, question wording, question placement, etc., may contribute to the contrasting findings.

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