

QUESTIONING PARTY IDENTIFICATION

By Andrew Kohut

A flurry of polls after the end of the Gulf War showing conflicting indications of changes in party identification has once again called into question the meaning and reliability of the indicator. As the nation celebrated victory in the Gulf, most surveys showed the GOP making gains on the Democrats; polling organizations differed, however, as to the size of that gain. Some national polls showed significant Republican pluralities in this most fundamental of partisan indicators, while others showed the party still trailing and having only slightly advanced. These disparities raised issues both about how the public really feels about the parties and about the utility of party identification as a political measure.

A Key If Sometimes Misused Measure

Party identification is one of the oldest and most frequently used measures in survey research. No public opinion poll is complete without a party question, yet it is a measure that is often misunderstood. Some regard "party ID" as a hard and fast indicator, like sex, age, education or some other demographic measure—almost as if it were stamped on the soul of every voter in America, rather than the results of a simple attitude question. One of the most common mistakes of neophyte pollsters is to weight or statistically adjust their sample distributions to the "proper party" breakdown. To regard the results of a party question as a basis for judging the representativeness of a sample is tantamount to confusing the subject of an investigation with the means by which the investigation is conducted.

At the other extreme, some analysts have all but given up on the utility of the measure. Geoffrey Garin, in a recent interview in *Public Perspective*, described party ID as "more akin analytically to asking how do you feel about the way things are going in this country today." In that same interview he echoed the findings of other pollsters who have noted that the results of party affiliation sometimes vary based on the subject matter of the questionnaire, and can fluctuate widely around major news events. Garin's comments and other similar assessments overstate, however, the variability of party ID measures. The month-to-month results of major published polls are in fact relatively stable. This is not to say party identification questions are not subject to contextual effects, or to the impact of major national events or any of the other things that can influence the results of most attitude questions. That party ID is an attitude question and not a hard and fast indicator does not render it meaningless.

Sources of Divergent Findings

The basic party ID question continues with some variation in the format George Gallup pioneered over 50 years ago,

because this question style has a history that pollsters find useful. It's likely that if George Gallup were starting out today he would do it differently—a scale question or even two independent questions. Nonetheless, Gallup's pioneering approach is a serviceable measure with a great historical perspective. Today, party affiliation questions are worded slightly differently by the various survey organizations and polling units that conduct nationwide surveys. Small wording differences in the question typically do not produce large variations in survey results.

The largest disparities in party affiliation distributions have been associated with the mode of interviewing. Gallup has, for instance, found a consistent difference in the results of its phone and personal interview surveys using identically worded questions. It's not clear whether these phone vs. personal interview differences are accounted for by disparities in the compositions of the samples, or reflect variations in the way people respond to the questions in the two interviewing environments. [Larry Hugick's accompanying piece explores these issues—editor's note.] Recently, however, in the wake of Gulf war victory, we have seen that small differences in question wording can produce substantially different survey results when public opinion is in a dynamic state.

Telephone surveys conducted separately by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press and by the Gallup Organization soon after the Gulf war found significant pluralities of the public identifying with the GOP, while surveys conducted by CBS and the New York Times and by ABC News and the Washington Post continued to show Democratic pluralities. Three successive Gallup nationwide surveys from February 28 through April 5 found Republicans outnumbering Democrats—37% to 30%, 36% to 32%, and 35% to 32%. A Times Mirror study of March 14-19 found a similar 36% to 29% GOP advantage; a late January Times Mirror poll had also found a 34% to 31% GOP lead. In contrast, during the post Gulf war period, CBS/Times in two surveys showed a three to five point edge for the Democrats, while three ABC/Post polls showed on average a three-point Democratic advantage. As recently as the fourth-quarter of 1990, all four national telephone surveys, which are conducted similarly, had comparable party affiliation findings, showing a larger Democratic plurality. (See *Public Perspective* May/June, pp. 20-21.)

"Today" ...or "Generally Speaking"?

All four polls showed an increase in Republican identification just after the war, but the Times Mirror and Gallup surveys picked up much more movement than either the CBS/Times or the ABC/Post polls. It would be easy to dismiss these differences as another indication of how soft, if not meaningless, party measures have become. However, a closer look at the wording differences in the four administrations provides some clues as to why these polls may have shown such differences and what meaning to draw from the disparities.

Measuring Things/Kohut continued

The Gallup and Times Mirror questions are identical and begin with a phrase that asks respondents to consider their "politics today." The CBS/Times and ABC/Post pollsters, however, begin their question by asking respondents to think generally about their partisanship: "Generally speaking, do you usually?..." There is some evidence that while the small differences in the prefaces are not material during politically stable periods, they take on greater meaning when people are rethinking their partisanship. The preface to the Gallup and Times Mirror question emphasizes *now*, while the preface to the other formulations is more likely to get people thinking about their traditional allegiances.

A comparison of the Gallup trend over the past decade, to the CBS/Times trend lends some support to this notion. The Gallup measure seems to change more in response to contemporary events than does the CBS/Times question. On average, Gallup's partisan spread shifted 3.2 percentage points over the 1980s, while the CBS/Times results shifted 2.2 points. Between 1983 and 1985, the Democratic plurality in the Gallup series shrank by 14 points—presumably in response to Reagan's big second term win. During the same period the CBS/Times showed the Democratic plurality declining by 6 points.¹ The same pattern was evident between 1986 and 1988, when there was Republican slippage in response to Iran/Contra. Gallup's Democratic plurality increased by 5 percentage points, whereas that of CBS/Times grew by just 1. The pattern repeated itself again this year. When Gallup and Times Mirror asked respondents about their "politics today" in the afterglow of the Gulf War, both obtained more partisan movement than either of the polls which questioned respondents about their politics "gen-

erally." Since the early spring, the Times Mirror measures have shown a rebounding in Democratic identification and a decline in Republican affiliation: A 2 point Democratic edge in May, a 6 point margin in July. In this more stable environment these findings are once again very close to results obtained using the "generally speaking" wording. The CBS/Times June and July surveys found 3 and 4% pluralities in Democratic affiliation, respectively.

What appears clear is that the Gallup and Times Mirror question form magnifies the public's partisan reconsiderations, while the other format tends to anchor respondents somewhat more during periods of change. The Gallup approach gives a fuller indication of how much public reconsideration has occurred, while the CBS/Times format provides a more robust measure which may have more analytical utility—when, for example, it is such structural features of party support as social group composition that are to be analyzed.

Endnotes

¹The comparisons between the two data sets are on the basis of the "spreads" since these are not directly comparable measures. Gallup excludes no answer and other party from its percentage base. A direct comparison is also confounded by phone to personal interview comparability problems noted above.

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CBS/Times and Gallup Party ID Comparisons

	CBS News/New York Times			Yrly Diff. Shift
	Rep.	Dem.	Diff.	
1981	26.0	35.8	-9.8	
1982	23.3	38.3	-15.0	5.3
1983	26.2	37.8	-11.6	3.4
1984	26.8	36.8	-10.0	1.6
1985	30.2	35.9	-5.7	4.3
1986	28.5	35.5	-7.0	1.3
1987	29.7	37.9	-8.2	1.2
1988	28.9	36.5	-7.6	0.5
1989	32.0	35.5	-3.5	4.1
1990	30.1	33.9	-3.8	0.3
			Gallup	
1981	28.0	42.0	-14.0	
1982	26.0	45.0	-19.0	5.0
1983	25.0	44.0	-19.0	0.0
1984	31.0	40.0	-9.0	10.0
1985	33.0	38.0	-5.0	4.0
1986	32.0	39.0	-7.0	2.0
1987	30.0	41.0	-11.0	4.0
1988	30.0	42.0	-12.0	1.0
1989	33.0	40.0	-7.0	5.0
1990	32.0	40.0	-8.0	1.0

Note: The Gallup data shown here are from their in-person, not their telephone surveys.