

PARTY IDENTIFICATION: THE DISPARITY BETWEEN GALLUP'S IN-PERSON AND TELEPHONE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

By Larry Hugick

For more than a decade, Gallup researchers have noted that the organization's standard party identification question produces different results in telephone surveys than in personal interview surveys. In order to maintain comparability between current and past results—the historical trendline, which dates back to the late 1930s, is based on in-person interviews—we have refrained from reporting telephone party ID figures.

Over the past two decades, however, telephone interviewing has largely supplanted personal interviewing in media polling on politics and public affairs. CBS News/New York Times, ABC News/Washington Post, and NBC News/Wall Street Journal polls, among others, survey by telephone only. Even the Gallup Poll, which in the early 1980s still collected virtually all of its data through in-person interviews, and continues to conduct some of its surveys in person, has made the transition to a telephone methodology. With many other organizations now reporting party ID figures from telephone surveys, which generally take less time to complete than personal surveys, Gallup's in-person results often reach the public after our competitors' telephone results.

Gallup's In-Person and Telephone Surveys Differ Consistently

In light of the debate about the state of the parties after the Gulf War, it is important that political scientists, reporters, and others following this issue be aware of the disparity between personal and phone party ID figures. Political writers often rely on Gallup's historical data to make comparisons with public opinion today; in the case of party ID this can result in an overstatement of GOP gains over the past decade. The latest results on party ID based on Gallup's personal interviews, conducted during the first half of this year, show the Democrats with a significant advantage, 39% to 30%. In contrast, the corresponding telephone results show the parties about even, 33% Democratic vs. 34% Republican.

These two very different views of party strength have been evident in Gallup polls since the mid-1980s. Yearly averages for party ID based on personal interviews from 1985 to the present show a Democratic advantage ranging from five to 12 percentage points. Telephone interviews, on the other hand, show the two parties within two points of each other for all but two of the last six years. Nearly all of the difference between personal and telephone party ID results is in the Democratic and Independent columns. Excepting the preliminary figures for 1991, the two interviewing modes have not varied by more

than one percentage point in their incidence of self-identified Republicans. In contrast, surveys conducted by telephone consistently show fewer Democrats than do personal surveys. On average, the Democratic figure in a telephone survey is six percentage points lower than the personal survey estimate.

The four-point difference in the percent Republican seen for the first half of 1991 may be a result of the timing of the interviews. No personal interviews were completed during the months of March and April, a period when the national satisfaction over the Gulf War victory helped boost Republican identification. Telephone results for these months showed GOP identification increasing from 33% to 37% between February and March. The April figure was 35%, still above the norm.

While it is easy to demonstrate that party ID figures vary by mode of interviewing, it is harder to explain why. One important factor would appear to be the differences in the socioeconomic profiles of the two samples. Since non-telephone households are represented in personal interviewing samples, the latter have marginally higher proportions of the less well-educated, lower income households and minorities—all groups which tend to be more Democratic. But other factors may contribute to the difference, including an "interview mode" effect. Experience has shown that responses to some questions may differ when they are asked face to face rather than over the phone.

The key question for many analysts is: Which set of results provides the more nearly correct assessment of current party strength? Have the Republicans really caught up with the Democrats in party identification, as the telephone interviews indicate? Or are the Democrats still well ahead, as Gallup's (and Roper's) in-person interviewing suggests. We don't know. It is possible, of course, that the in-person interview samples are a better representation of the entire US population, while telephone interview samples better reflect the views of those more politically active.

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**IS THERE STILL A DEMOCRATIC EDGE IN PARTY IDENTIFICATION,
OR HAVE THE REPUBLICANS FULLY CAUGHT UP?**

Differences in Party Identification, by Type of Interview

Question: In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat or an independent?

	Gallup In-Person Interviews			Gallup Telephone Interviews		
	Rep	Dem	Ind	Rep	Dem	Ind
1991 (Jan-June)	30%	39%	31%	34%	33%	33%
1990	32	40	28	33	33	34
1989	33	40	27	34	32	34
1988	30	42	28	31	33	36
1987	30	41	29	31	35	34
1986	32	39	29	31	36	33
1985	33	38	29	32	34	34

(Well, it depends whether you are looking at telephone or in-person interview data.)

	Self-Identified Republicans			Self-Identified Democrats		
	Personal	Tel.	Diff.	Personal	Tel.	Diff.
1991 (Jan-June)	30%	34%	+4 points	39%	33%	-6 points
1990	32	33	+1	40	33	-7
1989	33	34	+1	40	32	-8
1988	30	31	+1	42	33	-9
1987	30	31	+1	41	35	-6
1986	32	31	-1	39	36	-3
1985	33	32	-1	38	34	-4

Note: Gallup weights responses to its in-person interviews so as to make the achieved distributions in sex, race, education, age, and region identical to updated Census-based distributions on these variables. However, Gallup weights its telephone interviews to achieve distributions on sex, race, education, age, and region comparable to those for telephone households only. Hence, the weighted telephone samples are slightly more upscale and have a slightly higher proportion of whites than do the weighted in-person samples.

Source: Each yearly average is based on a minimum of 6,000 interviews. The 1991 figures are from the Gallup Poll; the 1985-90 figures are from Gallup/Newsweek Poll. These tables exclude persons who say they belong to other parties or have no party identification.