

Partisan Leaners are NOT Independents

By Andrew E. Smith, Alfred J. Tuchfarber, Eric W. Rademacher, Stephen E. Bennett

"In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" This question seems to be a straightforward way of estimating the partisanship of the American electorate. And over the past half-century the Gallup Organization has regularly reported the partisanship of the American people using a three-point scale derived from this question: Republicans, Independents, and Democrats.¹ This method of reporting partisanship is simple, easy to understand, and *seriously misleading*.

Gallup, like many survey organizations, routinely uses an "intensity" probe to "unfold" the responses to the standard party identification question.² Respondents who indicate that they are Democrats (or Republicans) are asked if they would call themselves a "strong" Democrat (or Republican) or a "not very strong" Democrat (or Republican), while Independents are asked if they think of themselves as closer to the Republican or to the Democratic party. Unfolding the party identification question results in a seven-point partisanship scale: "strong Democrat," "weak Democrat," "Democrat leaner," "pure Independent," "Republican leaner," "weak Republican," and "strong Republican." The unfolded question provides researchers with a detailed profile of American partisanship, but researchers often do not make full use of this additional information when reporting their results.

Many survey firms continue to report partisanship as though an intensity probe had not been used. This method is misleading and seriously underestimates partisanship. Not reporting the intensity of partisanship also encourages scholars, journalists and other political pun-

dit to inaccurately believe that the American two-party system is in jeopardy.

Researchers who report partisanship should classify strong, weak, and leaning partisan identifiers as partisans and report only Independents who do not lean towards one of the two major parties as Independents. Independent

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"leaners" are attitudinally and behaviorally very similar to weak partisan identifiers, and are very different from "pure" Independents. While this is not an original finding, it needs to be restated because previous research has not been sufficiently absorbed by members of the media, and even many public opinion researchers.³

The basic flaw in the more traditional way of reporting partisanship is that there is an assumption that "Independents" are a homogenous group in the electorate. Using the intensity probe described above, it is easy to find three distinct groups of Independents: Democratic leaners, "pure" Independents, and Republican leaners. It is also demonstrable, as we show below, that the "independent leaners" are every bit as partisan as the "weak" party identifiers.⁴

Voting Behavior of Independents

The first, and perhaps most important area which demonstrates the difference between "leaners" and "pure" Independents is voting behavior. Figure 1 shows that when voting for President, partisan "leaners" vote like partisans. An average of 71% of Democratic leaners reported they voted for Democratic candidates in the four most recent Presidential elections compared to an average of 67% of weak Democrats.⁵ Similarly, an average of 79% of Republican leaners said they voted Republican in these same elections compared with 81% of weak Republicans. On the other hand, pure Independents were much more likely to split their votes between Republicans and Democrats than were leaners—an average of 31% cast votes for Democratic candidates and 55% cast ballots for the Republicans.⁶

This same pattern of behavior exists in elections for US House of Representatives. Since 1980, on average, 78% of Democratic leaners report voting for Democratic candidates in House elections compared with 76% of weak Democrats. For the same span, 65% of Republican leaners reported voting Republican compared with 70% of weak Republicans. As with presidential voting behavior, pure Independents were much less partisan than leaners in their votes for Congress. Democrats garnered 57% of the pure Independent vote while the Republicans received 43%.

Attitudinal Differences Among Independents

Presidential approval ratings are one of the more common survey questions reported in the popular press, and results

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for partisan subgroups are often included in the analysis. But the more standard method of classifying partisans is again misleading. Leanners are more similar to partisans in their ratings of office holders than are pure Independents. Figure 2 displays Ohioans' average approval ratings of the last two presidents. An average of 82% of Republican leaners said they approved of President Bush, essentially no different than the rating (84%) weak Republicans gave Bush, however only 65% of pure Independents said they approved of Bush. The pattern of approval among Democrats for Bush is similar. (While the difference is not as stark as among Republi-

ing the Gulf War.) In fact, Democratic leaners were closer to strong Democrats in their approval of Bush than to either weak Democrats or pure Independents. The picture is reversed when examining approval for President Clinton, but the pattern is the same—leaners more closely resemble partisans than they do pure Independents.

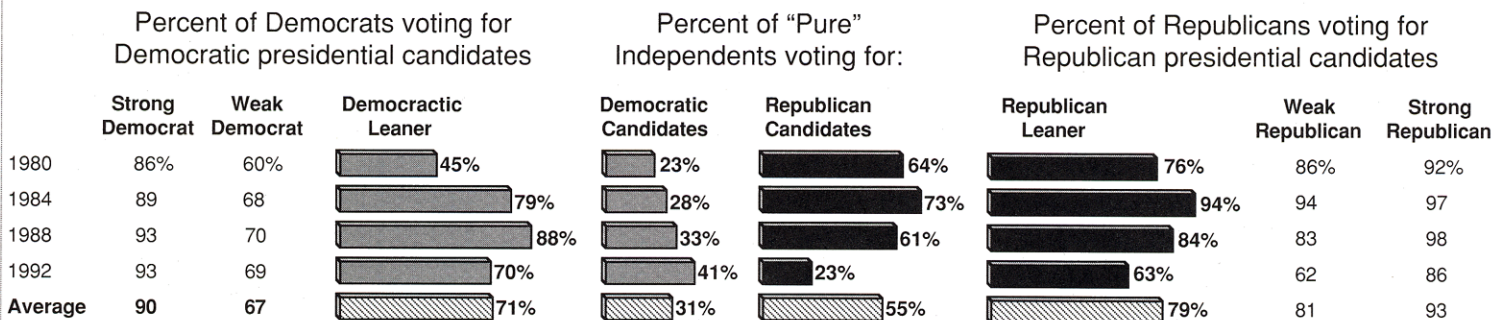
Differences in Ideology and Participation

Why do leaners behave more like partisans than Independents? While we cannot give a comprehensive, definitive answer to this question, we can show

much higher levels than pure Independents (see Figure 3). On average, 66% of Democratic leaners, and 67% of weak Democrats, said they voted for President over the last four Presidential elections. On average, 71% of Republican leaners, and 76% of weak Republicans, said they voted for President over the last four Presidential elections. By comparison, in this span an average of only 54% of pure Independents said they voted for President.

Partisan leaners also report participating in campaign activities at levels closer to those of their partisan counterparts than do pure Independents. Among

Figure 1: Pure Independents Don't Vote Like Leanners



Source: Surveys by the Center for Political Studies, (NES), University of Michigan, 1980-1992.

cans, this is primarily a result of the extraordinarily high approval ratings that Bush received from *all* Democrats dur-

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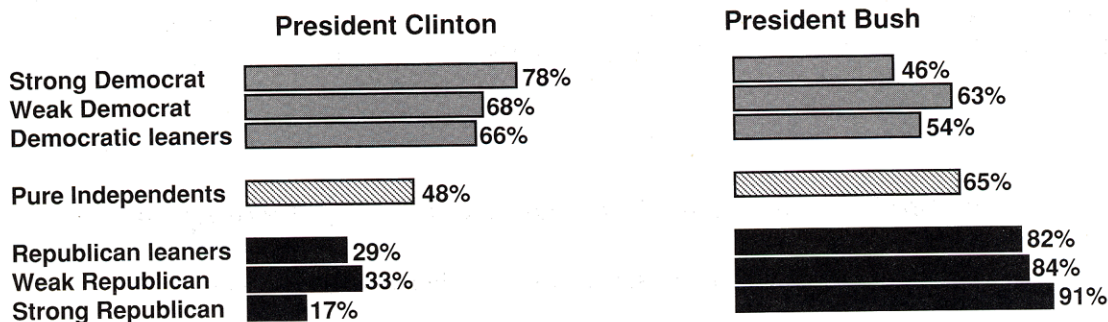
that in general, pure Independents are less ideological, participate in politics less, and care less about politics than partisan leaners. For example, in the National Election Studies (NES) from 1980 to 1994, on average, 29% of Democratic leaners identify as “liberal,” a higher percentage than weak Democrats (21%) while only 10% of pure Independents think of themselves as “liberal.” The differences between Republican leaners and pure Independents are even greater—43% of both Republican leaners and weak Republicans say they are “conservative” while only 21% of pure Independents say they are “conservative.”

Partisan leaners also report that they participate in Presidential elections at

Democrats, leaners report participating in one or more campaign activities (35%) at levels between those of strong Democrats (44%) and weak Democrats (31%). Similarly, Republican leaners report participating in one or more campaign activities (38%) at levels between those of strong Republicans (55%) and weak Republicans (36%). Once again, pure Independents report much lower levels of participation—only 25% reported that they participated in one or more campaign activities over the past four Presidential elections.

We could go on detailing the similarities between leaners and their partisan counterparts and the differences between leaners and pure Independents,

Figure 2: Ohioan's Average Presidential Approval Ratings



Note: Average Clinton rating based on survey data collected from May 1993 to May 1995. Average Bush rating based on survey data collected from April 1990 to September 1992.

Source: The Ohio Poll, conducted by the Institute for Policy Research, latest that of May 1995.

but we will report only one last example. Respondents to the NES were asked whether or not they care which party wins the presidential election. Not surprisingly, strong Republicans (89%) and strong Democrats (83%) are most concerned about which party wins. Republican leaners (60%), weak Republicans (66%), Democratic leaners (56%), and weak Democrats (59%) report about the same level of concern. Most pure Independents, on the other hand, really don't seem to care which party wins the election. For the past four Presidential elections an average of only 40% of pure Independents said they care which party wins the election. Excluding the anomalous three-man 1992 election, the percentage of pure Independents who say they care which party wins the election drops to 34%. This suggests that Ross Perot really did mobilize some new non-partisan voters.

Leaners are Partisan

The point of this discussion is simple: Leaners think and behave like partisans. They vote like partisans, they are ideologically similar to partisans, and their political attitudes and interests are like those of partisans. Leaners are partisans who just need a little nudge to admit it. Therefore public opinion researchers should treat them as partisans, not as Independents.

Why is this important? One recent example points out the danger of inaccurately classifying leaners as Independents. As the 1996 election campaign heats up, newspapers have reported several stories about Americans' lack of enthusiasm for both the Democratic and Republican parties, and the supposed desire of a sizable minority of the American people for the creation of a third political party. As evidence of this desire, many journalists cite poll results showing that about 40% of Americans consider themselves to be political Independents. This 40% is assumed to be the natural constituency of a new, centrist party. This is dangerously misleading and is an artifact of inaccurate reporting of party identification. An early August 1995 Gallup poll reports that 39% of Americans identify as Independents. However, when leaners are appropriately included as partisans, the percentage of Independents drops to nine percent, hardly an electorate clamoring for a new party.

Although it is slightly more costly to ask an intensity probe after the party identification question, we think the cost is easily justified by the increase in analytical power that the unfolded question provides in three ways. First, the full seven-point unfolded question substantially increases the variance of the party identification variable adding power to

more sophisticated analyses.

Secondly, the unfolded party identification item allows researchers to

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choose the appropriate coding for the analysis they are conducting. For historical analyses, the traditional coding makes sense because it can be linked to an historic Gallup trend that stretches back to the 1930s. But including leaners with partisans makes more sense if the variable is to accurately represent the attitudes of the electorate towards its elected officials and, more importantly, as a predictor of electoral behavior.

Finally, the unfolded variable allows researchers to develop more refined analyses of the electorate. For example, the Institute for Policy Re-

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search has developed a methodology to identify "swing voters," those voters who do not consistently vote for members of one party or the other, that is based, in part, on the seven-point party identification item. We are confident

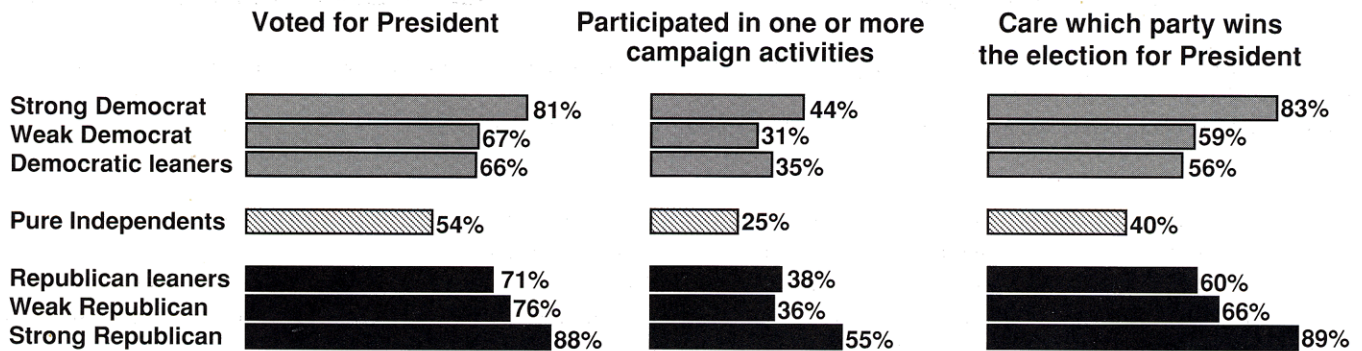
that other researchers have found other uses for the full seven-point party identification scale.

While public opinion researchers cannot always control how their data are

interpreted, it is critical that we report data in ways that limit its misuse or misinterpretation. Since party identification is one of the two most frequently used measures by students of politics, we should be sure that we get it right.

Figure 3: On Average, Pure Independents Much More Apolitical

Average result based on last four Presidential elections



Source: Surveys by the Center for Political Studies, (NES), University of Michigan, 1980-1992.

Endnotes:

¹ While the actual question used to measure partisanship has evolved over time, the main response categories reported have remained constant.

² Other researchers use slightly different party identification questions, primarily one developed by the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Michigan. There is no significant difference between results obtained using the Gallup, or the SRC version of party identification. See G.F. Bishop, A.J. Tuchfarber, and A.E. Smith, "Question Form and Context Effects in the Measurement of Partisanship: Experimental Tests of the Artifact Hypothesis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, 1994, pp. 945-954.

³ Petrocik first reported this phenomenon. J.R. Petrocik, "An Analysis of Intransitivities in the Index of Party Identification," *Political Methodology*, Vol. 1, Summer 1974, pp. 31-47. See also, G.F. Bishop and A.J. Tuchfarber, "Trends in the Structure of American Political Attitudes, 1956-1976: Change or Stability?," paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 1978. For the most complete analysis of the behavior of leaners see B.E. Keith, D.B. Magleby, C.J. Nelson, E. Orr, M.C. Westlye, and R.E. Wolfinger, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴ We also suspect that it is possible to further subdivide even the "true" Independents into third party identifiers, apoliticals, people who truly do not know which party they belong to, and people who are truly independent of the either major political parties, but we will not pursue that argument here.

⁵ National data used in this paper comes from American National Election Studies (NES) conducted by the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies. We are responsible for all analyses and interpretations.

⁶ For all of the NES analysis, third party identifiers, apoliticals, etc. are excluded.



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