

# A Most “Independent” Electorate

Perhaps no topic in electoral politics has received more attention in the last two decades than the decline in partisanship among American voters. As record numbers of people are declaring themselves political independents and splitting their tickets, analysts are scurrying to deal with the political implications of this growing multitude of “unanchored” voters.

For more than a generation, pollsters have been identifying Democrats, Republicans and independents by asking respondents to apply one of these labels to themselves. As gauged by the widely used National Election Study (NES) question (see question wording, p.52), the percentage of respondents describing themselves as independents has grown from just over twenty percent in 1952 to 35 percent in 1994, tapering off a bit from the all-time high of 39 percent which was reported, not surprisingly, in their 1992 pre-election poll (p. 49). This shift has been studied closely, with social scientists questioning just who these independent voters are, what prompted their move away from the two existing parties, and what such changes mean for the future of the two-party system.<sup>1</sup>

Although these debates are certainly far from settled, the amount of attention paid to the NES measure alone has resulted in a greater understanding of an important and growing sector of the American electorate.<sup>2</sup> As November 5th approaches, we know, for instance, that strong partisans are more likely to vote than pure independents. Indeed, while 90 percent of those calling themselves strong Republicans, and 86 percent of those calling themselves strong Democrats went to the polls in 1992, only 52 percent of “pure independents” say that they voted (p.50).

But while much has been learned by looking at the NES data, the Michigan measure is but one way of tapping party allegiance. By relying too heavily on it, we risk not fully appreciating the quite complicated story of the unanchored voter. Indeed, many have suggested the need to employ a variety of measures when looking at the upward trend in political independence.<sup>3</sup>

Towards this end, we include in this section a diverse collection of data in an attempt to look at all aspects of independence in today’s electorate. In addition to some of the more traditional indicators — like the NES and Gallup trends of self-described party identifiers — we present some different approaches to measuring this phenomenon.

Kenneth Dautrich looks at the instability of party identification in the 1990s, noting that when respondents are asked —

in the same survey — both the NES question and a modified measure of partisanship, distinctly different responses are elicited. Indeed, fully one-third of the respondents do not give consistent responses to the two questions. Further, by looking at data from a recent Roper Center panel study, he finds, in response to the same item, a sizable number of voters switching their party allegiance in the seven months between February and September (pp. 52-53). Dautrich’s findings serve as a reminder of the increasing difficulty involved in accurately assessing voters’ attachments to the political parties.

Yet, while the proportion of Americans calling themselves independents varies from survey to survey and from measure to measure, there is little doubt that a far higher proportion of the electorate identifies as independents, and behaves “independent” in voting, now than in the 1940s and 1950s. As far as independent voting is concerned, a recent Roper Center poll found sixty-five percent of respondents saying that they typically split their ticket when voting, and well over half reporting having voted for different parties in past presidential elections (p. 51).

Thirty-five years ago, Angus Campbell and his colleagues argued that few factors in voting behavior were of greater import than the “lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans” to one of the two major parties. Such loyalties, they believed, “establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place.”<sup>4</sup> If the trend towards political independence persists, this neat framework will likely continue to crumble, leaving a significant proportion of the voting population up for grabs in any given election.

## Endnotes:

1 See, for example, Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970); Philip Converse, *The Dynamics of Party Support: Cohort-analyzing Party Identification* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976); and James Sundquist, “Whither the American Party System? — Revisited” *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (1983): 573-593.

2 Bruce Keith and his colleagues argue, for example, that only a small segment of the electorate is truly without partisan ties. See Keith, et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1992).

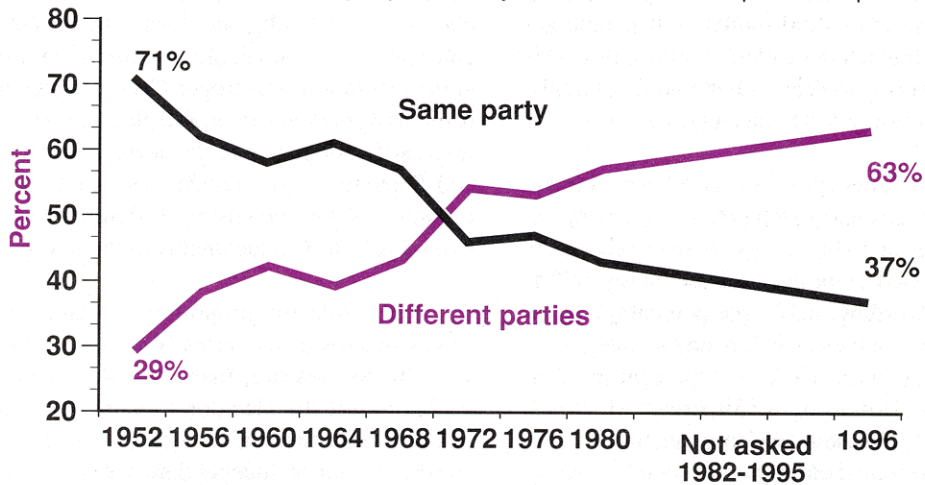
3 See, for example, Arthur H. Miller and Martin P. Wattenberg, “Measuring Party Identification: Independent or No Partisan Preference?” *American Journal of Political Science* 27 (1981):106-121.

4 Angus Campbell, et al., *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1960), p.121.

—Regina Dougherty

## Many More Americans Now Say They Vote for Different Candidates for President From One Election to Another

**Question:** Have you always voted for the same party, or have you voted for different parties for president?



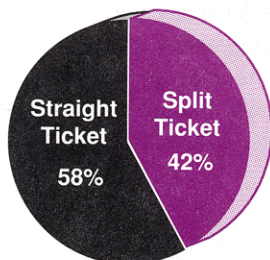
**Note:** Don't know/not asked/didn't vote calculated out of all questions.

**Source:** 1952-1980 Surveys by the Center for Political Studies, NES, University of Michigan, latest that of September 2-November 3, 1980; and 1996 by the Media Studies Center/Roper Center, February 1996.

### In General, Ticket-Splitting is Up

**1942**

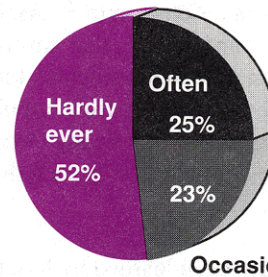
**Question:** Do you usually vote a straight ticket, that is vote for all the candidates of one party, or do you vote a split ticket, that is vote for some candidates of one party and some of the other?



**Source:** Survey by the Gallup Organization, July 16-21, 1942.

**1983**

**Question:** ...How often would you say you vote a straight party ticket...?

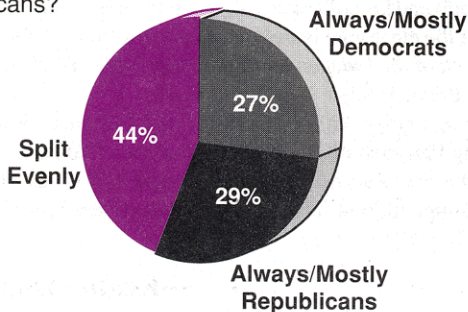


**Note:** For all pies on this page, don't know/not asked/didn't vote calculated out.

**Source:** Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, July 28-August 1, 1983.

**1995**

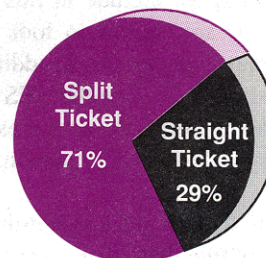
**Question:** ...[D]o you always vote for Democrats, mostly vote for Democrats, split your votes evenly between Democrats and Republicans, mostly vote for Republicans, or always vote for Republicans?



**Source:** Survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal, March 4-7, 1995.

**1996**

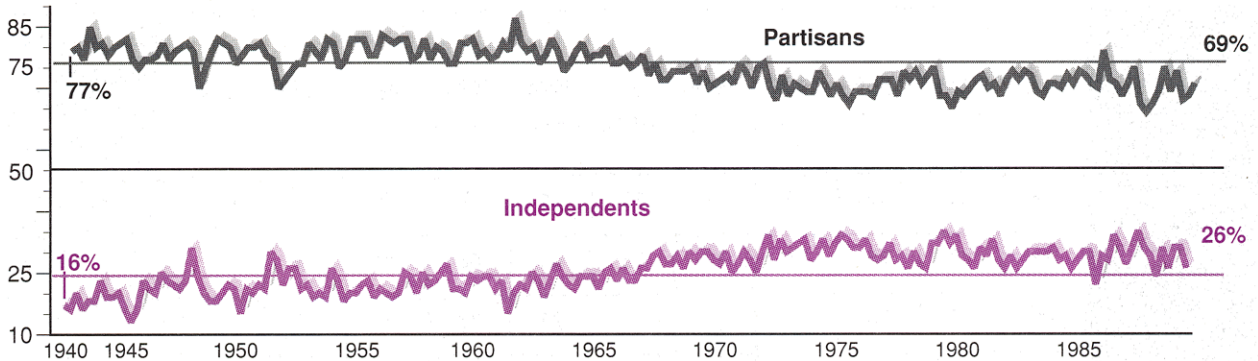
**Question:** When voting in elections, do you typically vote a straight ticket—that is for candidates of the same party, or do you typically split your ticket—that is vote for candidates from different parties?



**Source:** Survey by the Media Studies Center/Roper Center, February 1996.

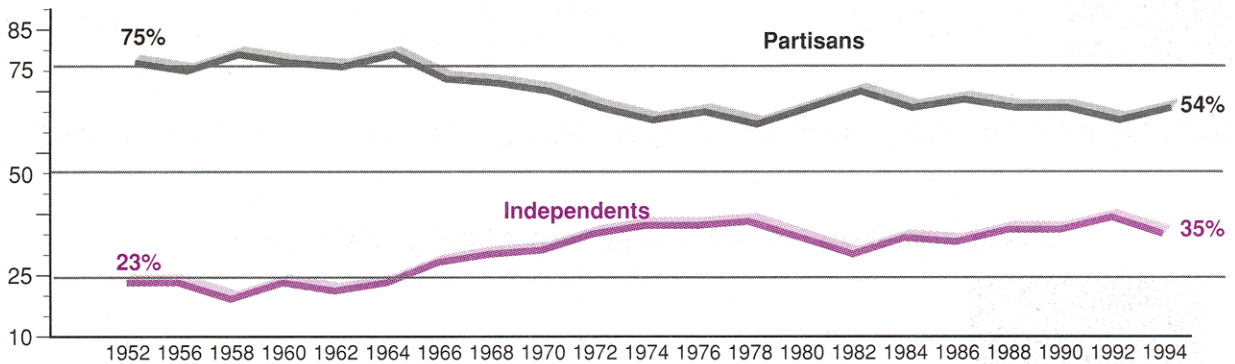
## Both Gallup and the NES Show Numbers of Independents Up Compared to Partisans

### Gallup—In-Person Interviews



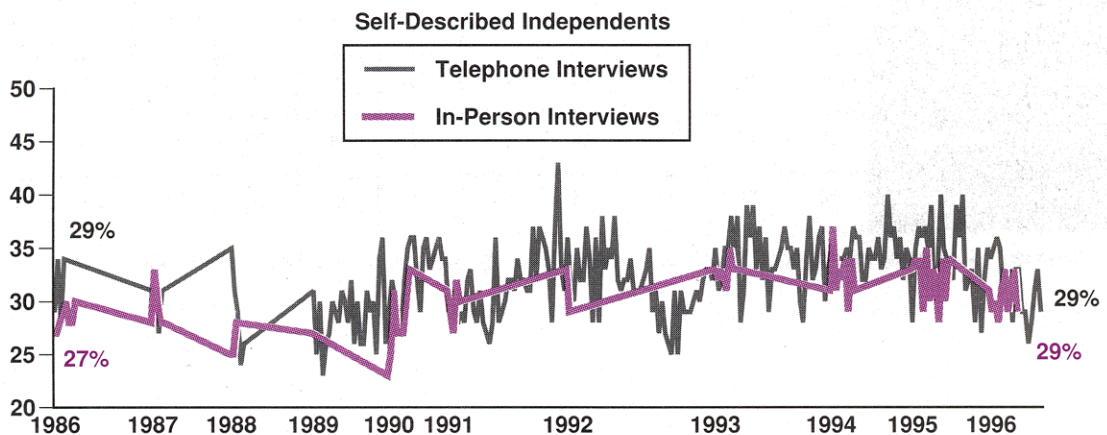
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

### NES—In-Person Interviews



Source: Survey by the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, American National Election Studies.

## With a Few Exceptions, Gallup's Telephone Interviewing Shows More Independents Than Its In-Person Interviewing



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

**Independents Are Less Likely to Participate Than Strong Partisans; Strong Republicans Are More Active Than Strong Democrats...**

**Party Identification and Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1952-1992**

|                           | 1952  | 1956 | 1960 | 1964 | 1968 | 1972 | 1976 | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 | 1992 | Percent of all respondents in 1992 who identified as: |
|---------------------------|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|---|
|                           | <i>percentage who voted (self-reported turnout)</i> |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |   |
| <b>Strong Democrats</b>   | 79  | 83   | 85   | 83   | 87   | 79   | 81   | 83   | 86   | 79   | 86   | 17  |
| <b>Weak Democrats</b>     | 71  | 72   | 78   | 74   | 72   | 73   | 69   | 66   | 70   | 64   | 76   | 18  |
| <b>Indep. Democrats</b>   | 80  | 73   | 73   | 73   | 71   | 71   | 73   | 70   | 64   | 69   | 70   | 14  |
| <b>Pure Independents</b>  | 74  | 78   | 75   | 63   | 65   | 53   | 57   | 56   | 61   | 50   | 52   | 12  |
| <b>Indep. Republicans</b> | 82  | 74   | 85   | 85   | 82   | 77   | 74   | 77   | 78   | 66   | 73   | 13  |
| <b>Weak Republicans</b>   | 80  | 82   | 87   | 84   | 80   | 80   | 74   | 78   | 75   | 78   | 78   | 15  |
| <b>Strong Republicans</b> | 94  | 82   | 91   | 92   | 87   | 88   | 93   | 90   | 88   | 90   | 90   | 11  |

**...With One Exception: Did Bush Turn Strong Republicans Off in 1992?**

**Party Identification and Campaign Activity, 1952-1992**

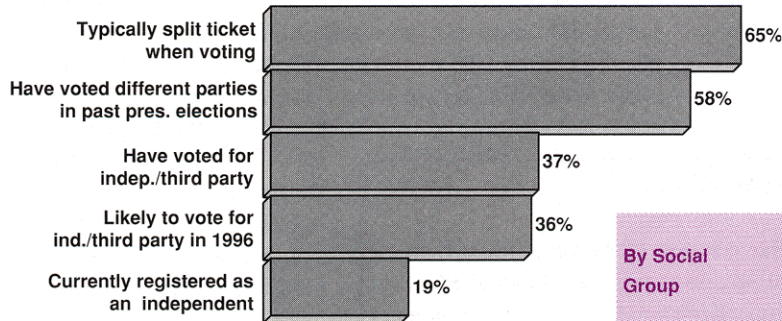
|                           | 1952   | 1956 | 1960 | 1964 | 1968 | 1972 | 1976 | 1980 | 1984 | 1988 | 1992 |
|---------------------------|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                           | <i>percentage who gave money, went to a meeting, or otherwise worked in the campaign</i> |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| <b>Strong Democrats</b>   | 10   | 20   | 19   | 13   | 19   | 17   | 22   | 13   | 21   | 13   | 23   |
| <b>Weak Democrats</b>     | 5  | 13   | 9    | 9    | 9    | 11   | 16   | 8    | 10   | 8    | 17   |
| <b>Indep. Democrats</b>   | 14   | 13   | 11   | 8    | 15   | 15   | 14   | 8    | 10   | 14   | 12   |
| <b>Pure Independents</b>  | 9  | 8    | 11   | 5    | 10   | 7    | 14   | 6    | 8    | 5    | 8    |
| <b>Indep. Republicans</b> | 9  | 15   | 17   | 15   | 13   | 13   | 19   | 12   | 10   | 10   | 12   |
| <b>Weak Republicans</b>   | 9  | 14   | 19   | 18   | 13   | 17   | 15   | 20   | 11   | 13   | 15   |
| <b>Strong Republicans</b> | 18   | 21   | 33   | 42   | 31   | 24   | 39   | 30   | 21   | 23   | 12   |

Source: Surveys by the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, American National Election Studies.

# The American Electorate is Remarkably Unanchored in Partisan Terms

Findings of a New National Survey by the Roper Center

**Questions:** When voting in elections do you typically vote a straight ticket—that is for candidates of the same party, or do you typically split your ticket—that is vote for candidates from different parties?; Have you always voted for the same party for president or have you voted for different parties for president?; In 1996, how likely is it that you would vote for an independent candidate for president? Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely or not at all likely?

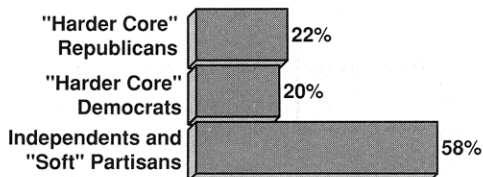


| By Social Group | Votes for Different Parties for President | Typically Votes Split Ticket | Typically Votes Straight Ticket | Very/Somewhat Likely to Vote for an Independent |
|-----------------|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| 18-29 yrs. old  | 31%                                       | 46%                          | 36%                             | 52%   |
| 30-44 yrs.      | 59%                                       | 65%                          | 27%                             | 41%   |
| 45-59 yrs.      | 68%                                       | 77%                          | 20%                             | 36%   |
| 60+ yrs.        | 64%                                       | 65%                          | 28%                             | 18%   |
| Less than H.S.  | 51%                                       | 55%                          | 33%                             | 42%   |
| H.S. Grad.      | 59%                                       | 64%                          | 26%                             | 37%   |
| Some College    | 56%                                       | 61%                          | 30%                             | 38%   |
| College Grad.   | 59%                                       | 68%                          | 25%                             | 32%   |
| Post Grad.      | 61%                                       | 76%                          | 20%                             | 29%   |
| Republican      | 50%                                       | 59%                          | 32%                             | 27%   |
| Democrat        | 51%                                       | 56%                          | 37%                             | 29%   |
| Independent     | 74%                                       | 84%                          | 9%                              | 58%   |

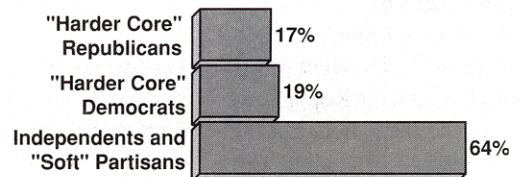
Source: Survey by the Media Studies Center/Roper Center, February 1996.

## Another Measure of Electoral Independence

August 5-9, 1995



September 2-4, 1996



Source: Surveys by CBS News/New York Times.

In this exercise we redefined partisans and independents using three variables: 1. The standard party ID question; 2. A question asking respondents whether their opinion of the Republican party is favorable or unfavorable; and 3. A question asking whether their opinion of the Democratic party is favorable or unfavorable. A "harder core" Republican is one who is self-identified with the party, holds a favorable opinion of it and has an unfavorable opinion of the opposition. The construction of "harder core" Democrats is exactly parallel. Everyone else goes into the third category of independents and "soft" partisans. In four calculations of this measure using other survey data over 1995 and 1996, the proportion of the electorate classified as independents and soft partisans never dropped below 52%.