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Title: Reconstructing Past Partisanship: The Failure of the Party Identification Recall Questions.

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Dataset(s): 1956-58-60 NES Panel, 1972-74-76 NES Panel

Abstract

This paper uses panel data to test the accuracy of retrospective reports of party identification. Niemi, Katz, and Newman find a significant amount of internal inconsistency at the individual level in reports of party affiliation over time. Over one-half of the respondents in the 1972-74-76 panel failed to give accurate reports of their past partisanship. Moreover, data from the 1972-74-76, the 1956-58-60, and Jennings and Niemi panels indicate that the actual rate of change in individual-level partisanship is almost always likely to be greater than estimates derived from respondents' recollections. The authors also find that partisan recall questions do not accurately reconstruct aggregate distributions of partisanship. Based on this analysis, Niemi, Katz, and Newman conclude: (1) Traditional party identification recall questions -- and most likely any others that could be designed -- are woefully inadequate; (2) Partisan change may be a more frequent phenomenon than typically believed; and (3) The inability of respondents to reproduce reliably and correctly their past partisanship raises questions about whether party identification measures a durable "basic" predisposition.