

MEMORANDUM

for

"A Conference on Party Identification"

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies

FROM: Richard G. Niemi  
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My remarks regarding party identification fall into three categories growing directly out of the memo prepared by Professors Andersen and Eulau. The first set of comments concerns conceptualization, the second is about the use of a multi-wave panel, and the third is about lowering the respondent age limit to 14.

Conceptualization

My concern in the conceptual area is with the independent category and what it means. I arrive at this concern via a very particular set of empirical results. My collaborative work (The Political Character of Adolescence, p.39; Controversies in American Voting Behavior, p.308; The Politics of Future Citizens, p.142) and that of others (such as Converse, Elections and the Political Order, p.225) are often interpreted as showing that there is little partisan change either inter- or intragenerationally. If one looks at the corners of a simple 3 x 3 table--those cells showing change from a Republican to a Democratic identification or vice versa--this conclusion is indeed warranted. Yet if one counts as "change" those parent-child pairs or time 1-time 2 observations which fall in the partisan-independent categories, then there is a great deal of change. Even if one combines the "leaners" with the partisans, movement into and out of the independent category is still quite frequent. So is party identification changeable or not?

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At least in part it comes down to a question of how meaningful is the independent category and movement into and out of it. If this question can be answered more satisfactorily, it may alter significantly our view of the partisan character of the American electorate.

Posing the problem is much easier than even suggesting an answer. However, I see two possibilities for discussion. First, I think that a multi-wave panel within a single election year will help in this regard. Since I will discuss this study design below I leave most of my comments on it to that point. All I note here is that a multi-wave panel would help settle the question of the conceptual status of the independent category by allowing us adequately to determine movement into and out of it over a short period of time. If there is a good deal of movement, say, from strong Democrat to independent leaning Democratic during the course of a campaign, the initial independent response (i.e., to the root party identification question) must be interpreted differently than if this movement is very small.

A second approach to the question I raise deals with the kind of analyses that need to be done. That is, I believe that our basic measurement is less at fault than our theories and even our analyses about partisanship. Other than the multi-wave design, I think that the emphasis in this part of the conference discussion might bear on what analysis should be done (and why and of what theoretical importance it is). It would, of course, be important to discuss some other possible measurement strategies, such as asking people directly what they mean when they say they are an independent. It might be that some exploratory research along these lines ought to be conducted. Yet my emphasis would be on what can and should be done with what we currently have rather than on additions to or changes in the basic measurements.

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A second conceptual concern is in regard to the causes of change in partisanship. Since I believe that it is increasingly the view that partisanship interacts with voters' issue positions and their views of the candidates, it behooves us to design the study in such a way that we can adequately assess this interaction. To do so, it seems almost imperative that we employ a multi-wave panel design. It does not seem possible currently to devise a simultaneous equation model that can be properly estimated on the basis of a single cross-section survey. A multi-wave panel, by clarifying some of the temporal relationships involved, would therefore vastly improve our ability to make valid causal inferences.

#### Multi-Wave Panel

While I have thus far suggested reasons for adopting a panel design, there remain numerous questions about precisely how this kind of design should be implemented. My proposal would be that we utilize an overlapping panel design as defined by Kish (Survey Sampling, pp.471-74). Essentially this procedure means that the sample is divided into a series of random subsamples and selected subsamples are reinterviewed at later time periods. For example, one subsample might be interviewed at times 1, 3, 5 and 7, while another subsample might be interviewed at times 1, 5, and 7, and yet another subsample might be interviewed only at times 1 and 7.

Part of the reason for suggesting this kind of design is simply one of economy. Reinterviewing the entire sample four, five, six or more times would severely tax even the generous resources of the National Science Foundation. More importantly, there are theoretical reasons for suggesting overlapping panels. I think it would be useful to have one very short time period between

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interviews (say, two weeks) in order to get a good reliability estimate for party identification and many other measures. Yet one must worry about such contaminating effects as those of memory and of real change. By having random subsamples reinterviewed after varying lengths of time, we could make a much better assessment of these problems.

An overlapping design would also allow us to make thorough studies of the accuracy of recall over varying lengths of time and of the reliability of assessments of the party identification of parents, relatives, and friends. I am currently studying the reliability of recall over our eight-year panel, but it would be extremely useful to get short-term as well as these long-term assessments of the accuracy of recall. The importance of this again relates to the question of partisan change. Estimates of change based on recall suggest that change is quite infrequent, even over long periods of time (e.g., The American Voter, p.148). Even change into or out of the independent category does not seem all that frequent. However, my research to date suggests that recall questions lead to a serious underestimate of change, and particularly underestimates of change involving the middle categories. Even if there is little systematic distortion of aggregate reconstructions of past partisan profiles of the electorate (Andersen, in The Changing American Voter), estimates of individual-level change probably are seriously affected by recall error.

Another advantage of an overlapping panel design is that some respondents could be interviewed after particularly significant events. For example, if there were several presidential-candidate debates in 1980, some respondents could be scheduled for interviewing after each one. This would make it more likely that we could assess the impact of such events on partisan as well as attitudinal change. Similarly, some respondents could be reserved for

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interviewing very close to the election. This would help us assess the effects of the last few days of intense campaigning.

Overall, then, I think that there are a number of reasons for adopting an overlapping panel design. What one gives up is large samples at each point in time and to some degree ease of analysis. What one gains is a far greater potential for understanding the dynamics of partisan (as well as attitudinal) development, interviews more sensibly spread across the entire campaign, and a far greater handle on the reliability of the partisanship questions.

Assuming some kind of panel design, it would be appropriate to devote some time at the conference to discussing just what the content of repeated interviews should be. Clearly we would not want to repeat entire hour-long interviews. It may well be that we want to limit some interviews to a few party identification questions and to obtaining the individual's issue positions and perhaps assessments of the candidates. This raises a number of interesting possibilities. For example, one might use telephone interviews to obtain this rather limited information. This in turn raises other possibilities. If one is going to use telephone interviewing because one has established some rapport with respondents and because the desired information is quite limited, one might then think of quite frequent interviews for at least selected subsamples. While I think it would be foolish to repeat the party identification question as often as once a week (because of memory effects), issue questions are less likely to be memorized by respondents because of their greater number, and respondents' positions could be asked relatively frequently. While there are limits to just how "fancy" one should make a study design at this point, I think that some imaginative possibilities like this ought to be considered briefly.

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Lowering the Age Limit

On the matter of lowering the age limit for interviews to 14 I can be quite brief. My main concern is that we think this idea through very carefully. I would be very favorable toward this idea if it got around one serious problem involving sampling--the severe undersampling of respondents in the late teens and early twenties (see Converse, The Dynamics of Party Support, pp.47-51). We can probably do little about this undersampling itself.<sup>1</sup> If we could really get a handle on what happens to party identification as young people go through late adolescence and early adulthood, and if we could develop an adequate young-adult base from which to judge life cycle effects through cohort analysis, then it would be worth adding 14 through 17 year olds.

However, I see two possible problems. For one thing, it is not at all certain that 14 through 17 year olds can be sampled much more adequately than young adults. Among other things, current laws on protection of human subjects would probably require that parents' permission was received to interview preadults. This alone might cut the response rate even though I suspect that the preadults themselves would be quite willing to be interviewed.

A more severe problem is that the addition of perhaps a hundred interviews does not come without cost. To add these interviews, something else would have to be given up. My basic predilection would be to emphasize adults. It seems to me that there is a strong feeling among socialization

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<sup>1</sup>However, we should at least explore the possibility of improving the sample by adding a separate sample of institutionalized populations--specifically the military and colleges. Given equal costs, I would prefer to substantially upgrade the sample of young adults rather than adding a sample of preadults. However, I suspect that the costs would not be equal.

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researchers currently that 1) there is a lot to be learned about the adult life cycle, and 2) there is moderate to considerable change well into adulthood, including change in partisanship (e.g., Jennings and Niemi, British Journal of Political Science, forthcoming). At the same time there is considerable concern that we are basically uncertain of the meaning of preadult orientations (Weissberg, Youth and Society, 1976). Therefore, to add 14-17 year olds to the study design without extremely good theoretical underpinnings would seem to me to be a mistake. Particularly since such changes in study design have a way of becoming permanent, I think that we should be very sure of ourselves before undertaking such a fundamental revision.

#### A Final Note

Though it is perhaps unnecessary to say so, I feel strongly that the basic partisanship question should not be changed in the foreseeable future. Questions may be added after the party identification questions to clarify and amplify the respondents' feelings, but these should be after the "generally speaking" question is asked. Even then, I think that we should be careful about what questions we ask, especially if we anticipate reinterviewing these respondents after a relatively brief period. Consider a simple example. Suppose we ask independents: "What do you mean when you say you are an independent?" Perhaps this would be followed up by still further questions about precisely how the respondent feels about the independent response. If such a line of questioning encourages an individual subsequently to reconsider his or her thoughts, this might well affect responses in later interviews. I tend to think that it would most often reinforce a person's feeling of independence. However, it go the other way. An individual who was unable

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to justify adequately his independent response and who realized that he or she had in fact been voting the same way over a long period of time might subsequently refer to himself or herself as a partisan. Therefore, let's keep the basic question as is and even be careful not to unwittingly bias our measurement of this key concept by follow-up items.