

Rethinking Party Identification

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Despite its defects, which will be our focus, at the outset we recognize that we must retain the SRC/CPS measure even as we try to find a better one. The time series data which it provides back to 1952 is too valuable a resource to lose. For all of its problems, it will be necessary to extend this time series as far as possible into the future. We really have no choice in the matter since we cannot go back and reinterview the original respondents, using a superior question.

A new measure - and preferably multiple measures - should be included in future surveys, along with the traditional question. We can begin to devise substitutes by recognizing the defects of the traditional question. First, the measure is based on the premise that it taps a long-standing, relatively stable attitude. It is believed, or hoped, that respondents are expressing a basic loyalty, not a reaction to the candidates and events of the contemporary election campaign. In fact, this assumption is untrue for a large portion of the electorate, who evidence considerable short-term shifts, particularly during campaigns.

Second, the measure has been assumed to be, and treated as, a monotonic, ordinal variable, ranging from most Democratic (strong Democratic) to least Democratic (strong Republican). Given this assumption, we would predict that partisan voting would be monotonically related to party loyalty. In fact, it often is not, if we use a full 7-point scale. Further, confounded with the scale of party loyalty is a separate dimension, the strength of commitment to parties as such, whatever their designations. A "strong Democrat," for example, may be

strong in his affection for the Democrats, or he may be strong in his support of the party system generally. A "weak Democrat" may so identify herself not because of limited affection for the Democrats, but because of limited support for the party system generally. Recognizing the existence of two dimensions helps to deal with some anomalies, such as the fairly high degree of partisan behavior shown by "leaning" Independents and their considerable degree of political awareness.

Third, the traditional measure has tapped but one kind of loyalty, an affective quality. What people "consider themselves" is certainly important, but there are other important aspects. There is an evaluative quality, i.e., how the parties are regarded in their abilities to deal with specified questions, e.g. the economy, or maintaining peace. There is a behavioral side - formal affiliation with a party through registration, primary voting, and past voting records. There is a cognitive aspect, with respondents placing themselves in different ideological groupings. In the American federal system, there may also be different party loyalties relevant to state or national politics.

All of these characteristics need to be explored. Data available from the Eagleton Poll in New Jersey, which can be presented at the conference, show that these measures are somewhat independent. Thus, self-identified Democrats regard Republican candidates as better able to handle some policy questions. Use of party evaluations may therefore provide a firmer grounding for explanation and prediction than the purely affective question.

The problems cited above can be met. Instability in identifications could be assessed by having a long-term panel study, with the first wave of interviews before the presidential primaries. This wave need not be a full national sample,

but only of sufficient numbers to provide reliable baseline data. By adding respondents in later interviews, we would also have an estimate of the degree of contamination from repeated interviews of the early respondents.

The affective aspects of party identification should be conceptualized as a two-dimensional scheme, one dimension being the Democratic or Republican direction of identification, the other dimension the strength of support for partisan loyalty, as such. (Particular questions can be taken from such studies as Dennis'.) We could thereby differentiate the Independent who takes this stance because he dislikes both Democrats and Republicans from the Independent who normally rejects psychic affiliation with any party. This two-dimensional scheme would be firmly grounded theoretically, for it would provide the means to apply concepts of Downs and Popkin of the party as a cue-giver and the voter as an investor in information.

A series of measures should be devised to establish alternative meanings of party identification. They should include:

- a) Evaluation - which party, if either, is considered better able to handle salient national problems, such as the economy, foreign policy, government management, maintenance of law and order, etc.
- b) Ideological self-identification - does the respondent consider herself a "liberal" or "moderate" or "conservative" Democrat or Republican?
- c) Level of identification - state and local loyalties, as well as national.
- d) Behavior - we should ask more questions, and create more variables, which deal with actions: "Which party are you registered in - or would you register in if it was suggested?" "Which party do you usually vote for?" "Which party did your parents usually vote for?" We know most of

these questions actually have been asked, and we might now think of putting them together in a coherent fashion, perhaps to create a scale of party identification at least as useful as scales of political efficacy.

It is not clear which of these questions would be most useful, and we cannot expect to use all of them in any survey of reasonable length. But we do not need to make final decisions now, and regret our omissions later. A means for experimentation and large-scale pre-testing is available in state opinion polls. Let us now devise a series of questions for use in established academic polls in such states as California, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Wisconsin in the state elections of 1978. We will then have considerable data on the independence of these measures and their relationship to the traditional measure of party identification. Based on these results, a final series of measures can be devised by another conference for use in the 1980 and later presidential elections. We will then have the benefit of both our conceptual thinking and empirical results. For our part, the Eagleton Poll stands ready to cooperate in this venture.