OSU

The Ohio State University

Department of Political Science
223 Derby Hall
154 North Oval Mall
Columbus, Ohio 43210
Phone 614 422-2880

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies
FROM: Herb Weisberg, Ohio State University (Winter Quarter: UC Irvine)
RE: Party Identification

I am becoming increasingly concerned about our current measurement procedures for party identification. I fear we have accepted the measurement of its strength without ever conceptualizing what the strength of identification really means. As an example of the problem, I have related the usual 7-point party identification scale to a party preference scale based on the thermometer ratings of the parties. Specifically, I subtracted the thermometer score the respondent assigned to the Republicans from that the respondent assigned to the Democrats. These party preference scores could theoretically range from +100 (a score of 100 for the Democrats minus a score of 0 for the Republicans) to a score of -100 (a score of 0 for the Democrats minus a score of 100 for the Republicans). If strength of identification meant what we thought, the mean party preference scores would be linear--or at least monotone--with the party identification categories. However, the actual party preference scores by party identification category for 1972 were: strong Democrat 30.5, weak Democrat 10.9, independent leaning to the Democrats 12.6, pure independent 0.1, independent leaning to the Republicans -6.4, weak Republican -13.9, and strong Republican -23.0. Not only is linearity violated, but so is monotonicity. The simple solution of combining weak identifiers with independent leaners, which

seemed to be a main theme of papers on this topic at the 1977 APSA meetings, has no justification from this perspective, given the lack of monotonicity. I view this as a test of the reliability of the calibration of the party identification scale, reliability in the sense of equivalent measures with nonsystematic bias, and I interpret these results as negative: the party identification scale categories lack reliability.

Unfortunately, the party preference scale does not constitute an acceptable replacement for the party identification scale. The largest problem is that fully two-fifths of the citizenry give identical ratings to the two parties, and only a quarter of these are pure independents according to the party identification question.

I see several alternative operationalizations as worth considering:

a. The present party thermometers could be asked, followed by asking people who rate the two parties identically: "Do you generally like the Democrats or Republicans more?"

b. The thermometer question could be modified to ask people to rate the Democratic party and the Republican party rather than Democrats or Republicans. This greater specificity might decrease the number of people giving equal ratings to the two parties. So might asking about the two parties one right after the other, rather than having some intervening group as in the current studies.

c. A more direct party preference question might be used: "Do you generally like the Democratic party or the Republican party more?"

d. The respondents could be handed a card with a scale ranging from 0 for Democrat to 50 for Independent to 100 for Republican and be asked to place themselves on the scale according to where they would locate themselves between the parties.

The present party identification question is better suited for monitoring gains by third parties, and that fact might suggest some further modification in the questions outlined above.

Additionally, let me emphasize the importance of retaining the current party thermometers. I am finding them useful in my current research in terms of yielding a new classification of partisanship. It permits the analyst to separate:

a. those concerned partisans who like their own party (a score above 50) and dislike the other party (a score below 50) -- 22% of the voters in 1972
b. those satisfied partisans who like both parties (scores above 50) -- 49% of the 1972 voters
c. those who like one party and are neutral about the other -- 14% in 1972
d. those who are neutral about both parties -- 13% in 1972
e. those who dislike one party and are neutral about the other -- 1% in 1972
f. those alienated partisans who dislike both parties (scores below 50) -- 1% of the 1972 voters.

This typology leads to new testable hypotheses: Are concerned partisans less likely to defect in their voting? Are alienated partisans less likely to vote?

Finally, this typology begins to suggest that party identification might be different things at once. Our models have generally treated partisanship as if it served the same purposes for everyone. It is probably more realistic to realize that it may have different standings for different citizens. For some citizens, it may be the long-term source of identification that it is generally portrayed to be, while for others it may be a short-term result of voting choice. In particular, I would expect that party identification would be more of the long-term character for the concerned partisans, but more of the short-term character for other respondents. An open-ended question regarding what the respondents mean when they classify themselves as Republicans, Independents, or Democrats would be very useful in distinguishing these different situations.