

MEMORANDUM ON THE MEANING AND MEASUREMENT  
OF PARTISAN IDENTIFICATION

submitted by

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Partisan Identification

A renewal of interest in the meaning and measurement of partisan identification has been prompted by a variety of research findings in the past five to ten years. Although it is not newly discovered, one of the principle anomalies of recent years has been the observation that "Independent-leaners" on the CPS seven point scale appear to be more reliable voters for the respective parties than are the "weak partisan identifiers." Since the seven point scale assumes a dimension in which weak identifiers are closer to the party than are leaners, several recent papers have been directed at explaining this unexpected phenomenon.

The purpose of this memorandum is to argue that the anomaly above is due to a lack of uni-dimensionality in the partisan measure. We suggest that the original conceptualization of partisan identification in terms of a reference group orientation (Campbell, et al., The American Voter) is still the best theoretical base for partisanship, but modifications or controls may be necessary for the measurement instrument itself. In so suggesting, we reject as theoretically and methodologically incorrect the recent attempts to construct a "closet partisan" explanation of partisan leaners (see the following 1977 APSA papers for such an interpretation: Keith et al., "The Myth of the Independent Voter," and Miller and Miller, "Partisanship and Performance: 'Rational' Choice in the 1976 Presidential Elections," p. 19)

A review of the reference group notion suggested in the American Voter along with consideration of the questions used for devising the partisan scale show a distinct lack of isomorphism. The reference group idea is that of a "psychological identification" involving "the individual's affective

orientation to an important group object . . ." and implying an "attracting or repelling quality of the group as the relationship . . ." "(T)he political party serves as the group toward which the individual may develop an identification, positive or negative, of some degree of intensity."

Following the simplest and most traditional strategy of methodological analysis, we ask how the CPS questions related to these defining qualities. The first partisan question asks simply if a respondent "thinks of (himself/herself) as a Democrat, Republican, Independent or What?" Although the first question clearly does not get at all of the possibilities of negative and positive orientations implied in the defining statement, it does have a sort of "face-validity." Specifically a respondent who replies by giving the name of either major party, has defined self by referring to the party. The seven point scale, however, is composed by asking two additional questions, one to persons who respond in terms of either major party and a different one for those who respond in any other terms. These two additional questions are of a different type and the latter is not consistent with the usual use of the seven point scale.

The second question for "partisans" asks whether the person considers the identification "strong" or "not very strong." Again there is a prima facie validity with the idea of a degree of intensity at least in so far as the idea of a "positive attraction" to the party is represented. However, the second question for Independents (or other non-party responses from the first question) asks whether the respondent feels closer to one party or the other. Whatever the term "closer to" might mean, there is every reason to believe it does not fall on a dimension of "identity" with either party. Respondents to this second question have already refused to identify with either party. We can only guess, then, that the second question for independents involves

some sort of recent evaluation (perhaps cognitive, or perhaps affective) of the parties.

If indeed the dimension captured by the second question for independents is a recent evaluation, then we may well expect that evaluation to be directly tied to the immediate election period. However the second question for partisans remains a question of intensity of self-identification. Looking at the partisan scale from this point of view, the fact that Independent-leaners will some time behave more consistently toward the party in the short run is not surprising.

The foregoing argument is not without empirical support. The findings of Dobson and St. Angelo on stability of each of the seven point scale positions is relevant. Their analysis shows that on panel studies, the least stable categories over the three-election period of 1956 to 1960 are the Independent-leaners. Overall from 1956 to 1960 only about 10% of each of the "leaning" categories were consistent. On the other hand the heaviest consistencies were found in the strong partisans followed by the weak partisans. Given a reference-group-attachment interpretation of the partisan questions and an evaluative interpretation of the second question for independents, these stability figures make sense while the occasionally higher voting rate of the leaners are also interpretable.

There are several other issues in the isomorphism between concept and measure in partisan identification. The conceptual apparatus of partisan identification implies both negative and positive orientations toward parties. The measure, on the other hand, gets only at positive attraction to the two major parties and an uncertain identification with the term "Independent." The failure to get at negative attractions to the party may or may not be problematic, but clearly a more thorough investigation of the implications are

in order. Let us take as an example the problem of using the seven-point scale as an ordinal measure running from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican." Some assumption must be made about the attraction of the opposition party. A strong Democrat might be assumed to be simply indifferent to the Republican party, or he might be assumed to be negatively attracted toward the Republican party, or he might even be positively attracted toward the opposition party also.

It really does not matter which assumption is taken, but it is necessary that the one chosen be consistent for all partisan identifiers. Consider the problem of comparing a partisan who is negatively attracted toward the opposition with one who is indifferent. Given short term influences against the party of identification the one who is negatively referenced toward the opposition party should be well reflected by the current scale. However the one who is indifferent toward the opposition party should find it much easier to vote for the opposition party.

Again there is empirical evidence which suggests in fact that partisans do not follow a single line in their orientations toward the opposition party. We used the thermometer scale evaluations of partisans toward the opposition party to get an indication of negative, positive, or indifferent affect toward the opposition. Although the thermometer scale is a very good indicator of "affect", we recognize that it does not imply "identification" in the sense that the first party question does. A person replying to the thermometer scale does not define self in evaluating the party. Nevertheless if a person is "negative referencing" to the opposition party, the thermometer value for the opposition party should be below the '50' mark of indifference. Over the election period of 1964 through 1972 the highest percentage of any partisan category having a negative view of the opposition was 45% (the 1964 strong

Republicans). In 1972 the highest was the strong Democrats with only 31% holding negative affect toward the opposition party.

This memorandum has been designed to show that there are serious questions concerning the relationship between concept and measure in the partisan identification variable. There is a great deal more empirical research which can be brought to bear on the subject, but the attempt here is to keep the argument brief. The final issue, then, is the question of what reasonable strategies are open to reconsideration of the measure and what rewards might be expected. First it would appear that the basic theoretical notion of partisan identification is very solid. The fact that the idea of "identification with" the party is conceptually distinct from both short term influencing factors and the actual behavior of voting is a strong point for the concept. Using an adequate measure, one is able to distinguish these elements in survey research. Furthermore, the first partisan question has a prima facie isomorphism with the concept. This is evidenced by the stability of the three point measure over time and in relation to behavior. Furthermore, the second question for partisans seems to fairly reflect the idea of intensity of attraction in the reference-group definition of partisanship.

It seems, then, that we should consider the following issues. First, what is/are the meaning(s) of those who reply independent to the first partisan question? Do they identify with a self-proclaimed group of "Independents?" Is "Independent" simply a convenient term for those who do not wish to reflect their political apathy? Or is the Independent category genuinely a middle-ground between the two parties. If there are some who are in fact identifying with the idea, "independent", then is there a question of intensity of feeling and is that question relevant to political behavior?

Secondly, we should like to know if some persons, regardless of their answers to the first partisan question, use one or both of the parties as a negative reference group. Finally, using the information obtained from the previous queries, we should like to determine the dimensionality of our partisan concept. Can we construct a single dimension measure of partisan identification? Even with the current anomalies, is the current measure the best? Perhaps a two dimension measure using the two parties as different axes would be a proper technique, or if "independent" has meaning as a reference group itself, perhaps we would wish to construct a three-dimensional measure.

The fruits of these queries should be many in understanding partisanship in the United States. In the first place answers to many of the queries answer existing questions forthrightly. For example the apparent anomaly of leaners versus weak partisans might be explained directly. Furthermore, we may well gain insight into the changes which seem to be appearing in partisan loyalty. The percentage of people willing to identify with each party seems to be declining in recent years. Perhaps answer to questions about negative referencing and the number of dimensions involved in partisan identification may lead us to understand the nature of the changes in identification.

Finally the importance of a reconsideration of concept and measure seems very important for the simple reason that the partisan identification scale has been one of the most important and (overall) stable measures in the study of political behavior. As one of the most successful measures developed in political science, its validity and the nature of that validity may well be the most instructive area of current research.