

The Dimensionality of Party Identification and the
Meaning of Independence: Memorandum for a
Conference on Party Identification

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As an operationalized variable, American party identification is quite well defined. It is constructed from the respondent's answers to an agreed upon series of questions. The first asks whether he thinks of himself as a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent. If he selects either of the first two, he is asked the strength of his identification (although that word is never used) -- either strong or weak; if not, he is asked whether he considers himself to be closer to the Democrats or to the Republicans. Combining answers to these three questions yields the familiar seven-point index of partisanship. This index is only an empirical indicator of a theoretical construct, also called party identification, the meaning of which is far from universally agreed.

In fact, the three questions underlying the party identification index are each of a quite different type. The first asks the respondent to assign himself to one of three apparently distinct categories. The second asks about strength of feeling, while the third asks about perceived proximity (in some unspecified sense). Combining them into a single index that is then treated as a unidimensional variable glosses over a number of problems and ambiguities inherent in the disparate nature of the questions. In this memorandum, I

want to point briefly to two interrelated difficulties of this type as possible subjects for discussion at a conference on the meaning of party identification. One concerns the dimensionality of party identification. Should we consider strength of partisanship as a measure of distance on a partisanship dimension running in the American case from Strong Democrat, through Independent in the middle, to Strong Republican at the other extreme, or should strength and direction of partisanship be treated as two independent variables with interactive effects on a variety of dependent variables? Second, and already raised by the Anderson-Eulau memorandum, is the problem of independence. Is it a separate and distinct identification, as suggested by the first party identification question, is it simply the absence of any positive political attachment as suggested by some findings from the 1950's, or is it a kind of halfway house between Democratic and Republican identifications as suggested by its placement in the center of the seven-point index of partisanship?

Traditionally we have considered strength of partisanship to be a measure of distance on a scale of party identification modelled as a line segment. This model has prove quite useful in producing monotonic relationships between party ID and such variables as vote or social class, and neatly single peaked or single troughed relationships between ID and variables like turnout, interest in politics, and split-ticket voting. In other contexts, however, it is less fortuitous. One implication of this model is that when a person changes party ID, he should be most likely to switch to one of the most proximate points on the scale, and much less likely to shift greater distances. While this prediction is

confirmed for individuals changing in intensity but not direction of partisanship, as I have shown elsewhere (Comparative Politics, forthcoming, draft copies available on request), in neither the United States nor in Great Britain is it confirmed for individuals changing directions of preference. Instead, for example, Strong Democrats becoming Republicans were most likely to become Strong Republicans. Analysis of the transition probabilities from the U.S. panel study with a multi-dimensional scaling routine, rather than giving an approximation of the conventional linear scale, yielded the highly suggestive two-dimensional pattern illustrated by the attached figure. Here, strength and direction appear as two independent attributes. Among the implications of this separation discussed in the Comparative Politics article is the possibility that there might be Strong and Weak Independents, corresponding to the Strong and Weak Republicans and Democrats.

This, then, returns us to the original point about the party ID questions. We have never asked Independents how strongly they identify with that label. Recent findings that many "new Independents" behave more like strong partisans than like the Independents of the 1950's might suggest in these terms that there are now more Strong Independents than before, perhaps representing the conversion to independence of previously strong adherents of one of the two parties.

Investigation of strength of independence also raises the need to understand precisely what it means to be an Independent. This is especially intriguing in light of the dramatic increase in the number of Independents

in the United States in recent years. I would suggest two possibilities. First, one might be "a-partisan". The a-partisan Independent would be one who does not orient himself toward politics in terms of parties. Given a different party system, or changes in the positions of the current parties, he would presumably continue to identify himself as an Independent. Alternatively one might be a "bi-partisan". The bi-partisan Independent would be one who does structure his political thinking in terms of parties, but is repelled by the parties between which he must choose, indifferent between them, or for some other reason unwilling to positively commit himself to one party. Unlike the a-partisan, the bi-partisan might be expected to form a partisan attachment if given a different set of choices or an environment more supportive of partisanship. This distinction would be of particular importance in assessing the likelihood of a realignment of party support.

One can also suggest other behavioral differences between the two types. Both types would be expected to shift from one party to another between elections. A-partisans, however, should be significantly more likely to cast split-ticket ballots, while bi-partisans would be more likely to generalize from one candidate of a party to another. Thus, for example, evaluation of the President's performance should have a greater impact on the midterm election choice of bi-partisans.

In terms of research, and particularly with an eye to the design of the 1978 and 1980 election studies, where do we go from here? First, a question about strength of feeling ought to be asked of the Independents. Analysis of the relationship between this new variable and such other

variables as turnout, interest, previous partisan conversions, etc. should enable us to tell better whether, and for what purposes, the linear party ID scale should be replaced by a two-dimensional model. Second, effort should be devoted to the problem of separating a-partisan from bi-partisan Independents. The clear relevance of this distinction to the possibilities of partisan realignment or partisan decay makes it of considerable practical, as well as, theoretical, importance.

Two Dimensional Configuration of Party Identification,
United States, 1956-1958

