

RECONSTRUCTING PAST PARTISANSHIP: THE FAILURE  
OF THE PARTY IDENTIFICATION RECALL QUESTIONS\*

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\*We would like to thank Kristi Andersen and Lynda Powell for commenting on a draft of this paper.

The study of electoral change is often frustrated by severe limitations on available data. While high quality, representative national samples now exist for a three decade period, individual-level data are virtually nonexistent for the most recent realignment period, the Depression Era. Panel studies, which allow us to determine individual development and change, are still few in number, and no major American panel study extends more than eight years. Thus, the reaction of individuals to realignment forces, historical inquiries about pre-1950 politics, the stability of political attributes over long time periods, and so on, can only be approached indirectly.

In response to this limitation, analysts have relied partly on recall data. This is especially true for the study of partisanship, where recall questions begun in 1952 apparently provide a glimpse of history since perhaps the turn of the century. Yet no thorough test of the accuracy of recall of past partisanship has been made, even though appropriate data have been available for some time. Reconstructions of aggregate distributions of partisanship apparently support the validity of recall data (Andersen, 1976, pp. 80-82). However, as we shall show later, there are serious biases in the reconstruction which call into question the results of such a test.

In this paper we use panel data to test more adequately the accuracy of retrospective reports of party identification. We will show that a number of problems occur in the use of retrospective reports. First, all of the sets of party identification recall questions (of which there have been several) leave serious ambiguities in the reconstruction of past partisanship. Second, even if we gloss over problems of question wording, there is a significant amount of internal inconsistency in respondents' reports over time. The partisanship one would reconstruct for a given individual based on a report in 1972 might be different from that reconstructed for the same individual

based on a 1974 report. Third, the errors in recalling past partisanship and changes in partisanship are extraordinarily large. This is true even of individuals who are consistent in their reports over time and of subsets of the population such as individuals who are highly interested in politics. Finally, we show that recall errors have a bearing on how we answer major substantive questions in the study of electoral change.

#### RECONSTRUCTING PAST PARTISANSHIP

Our strategy is to use panel data to reconstruct partisanship at one wave from recall questions asked in a later wave and then compare the reconstruction with reports obtained in the earlier wave. Theoretically this is an almost trivial task. In each interview individuals are first asked their current party identification. Then they are asked if they ever changed their partisanship. If so, they are asked when they changed and what they changed from. This should allow a straightforward determination of the party identification of respondents for any given prior year. Unfortunately, in practice the operation is much more difficult.

Reconstruction of past partisanship using SRC/CPS questions can best be explained by reference to Table 1. This procedure applies to the interlocking 1972-74, 1974-76, and 1972-76 panels, which will be our major data base, and to the Jennings-Niemi 1965-73 panels.<sup>1</sup> Later we will introduce the small but important variation used in the 1956-60 panel. We assume familiarity with the basic party identification questions (Campbell, et al., 1960, chap. 6).

Three separate recall questions were asked--one for current partisans, one for current leaners, and one for current pure independents. In the case of current partisans, reconstruction of past partisanship is straightforward and can be gleaned quickly from the table. Only the "threefold" distinctions

are preserved. For example, current Democrats who say they used to be independent are not asked if they leaned toward a party. Within these limits, however, there is no ambiguity in reconstructing past partisanship.

Current leaners present more of a problem. First, they are not asked if they were ever partisans of the party to which they now lean. Nor are they asked if they were ever pure independents. Therefore, current independent Democrats who say "no, I never thought of myself as closer to the Republican party" may not have changed at all in the past or they may have been strong or weak Democrats or pure independents. Hence they have to be assigned to the highly ambiguous category number 3. An analogous situation holds on the Republican side (category 5). The second complication is that current independent Democrats who say "yes, I did at one time think of myself as closer to the Republican party" are not asked if they were Republican partisans or only Republican leaners. Hence they fall into the somewhat ambiguous category number 6.<sup>2</sup> The analogous category for current independent Republicans is 2.

Current independents also present some difficulties. The most straightforward interpretation is that respondents who say "yes there was a time when I thought of myself as a (Democrat) (Republican)" are former partisans. Then the categorization is unambiguous and can be simply observed from the table. This interpretation is the one that we use throughout the paper. Suppose, however, that former leaners do not understand the niceties of our coding scheme, and they also say "yes I once thought of myself as a (Democrat) (Republican)". Under this assumption, those who say "No" form a new category of former pure independents, while those who say "Yes" fall into categories 2 and 6. Since we cannot rule out this possibility, some of the analysis below was re-done using this second interpretation. While it naturally alters

Table 1

The Method of Reconstructing Past Partisanship

Strong Democrat		Weak Democrat		Independent Democrat		Independent		Independent Republican		Weak Republican		Strong Republican	
<p>[...] <sup>a</sup> was there ever a time when you thought of yourself as a Republican or an Independent rather than a Democrat? (If yes) Was that a Republican or an Independent?</p>				<p>Was there ever a time when you thought of yourself as a Democrat or Republican? (Which party was that?)</p>				<p>[...] <sup>a</sup> was there ever a time when you thought of yourself as a Democrat or an Independent rather than a Republican? (If yes) Was that a Democrat or an Independent?</p>					
No	1					No	4			No	7		
Yes, Rep.	7					Yes, Dem.	1			Yes, Dem.	1		
Yes, Ind.	4					Yes, Rep.	7			Yes, Ind.	4		
<p>[...] <sup>a</sup> was there ever a time when you thought of yourself as closer to the Republican party instead of the Democratic party?</p>				<p>[...] <sup>a</sup> was there ever a time when you thought of yourself as closer to the Democratic party instead of the Republican party?</p>									
				No	3	No	5						
				Yes, Rep.	6	Yes, Dem.	2						

<sup>a</sup> In 1976 a preface was used: "Aside from times when you may have voted for a candidate of another party."

<sup>b</sup> Reconstructed party identification:

1 = SD or WD; 2 = SD, WD, or ID; 3 = SD, WD, ID, or I; 4 = ID, I or IR;

5 = I, IR, WR, or SR; 6 = IR, WR, or SR; 7 = WR or SR

some of the specific percentage results, it does not change at all our basic conclusion about the inadequacy of this recall information.

All respondents who indicated a change on the partisanship scale were asked when they had changed. In reconstructing partisanship as of a given year, the timing information becomes essential. For example, a current Democrat who changed from a Republican identification in 1950 would be coded as a Democrat if we were reconstructing 1951 or later but would be coded a Republican for 1950 and earlier.

A special problem arises in regard to timing when we use panel data to test the accuracy of recall. The problem is created by those who report changing in the year in which the "criterion" partisanship was obtained. As an example, consider a 1974 Democrat who said that he changed from a Republican in 1972. Using the logic noted above, this person would be coded a Republican as of 1972. If in the 1972 interview he said he was presently a Republican, his recall would be considered accurate. But suppose that in 1972 he said that he was a Democrat. Was his recall incorrect? Possibly not, since he could have changed his identification earlier in 1972 (i.e., prior to the interview). (Alternatively, he may have changed more than once, with one of the changes occurring in 1972 subsequent to the interview.) In order to give respondents the benefit of the doubt, we arbitrarily coded as "correct" all respondents who reported changing in the year that we are reconstructing (i.e., we coded as their recall of 1972 what they said they were in the 1972 interview). In the 1976 interview this amounted to 32 cases-- about 2.4 percent of the respondents.

The procedures described above give us a reconstruction method for panels in which we use recall questions in the second wave to reconstruct party identification in the first wave. The method extracts as much definitive

information as possible from the questions that have customarily been used. Before applying the method to existing panel data, however, two additional problems must be confronted. One is relatively minor and arises when we have a three-wave panel, as in 1972-74-76, and individuals change during the panel period. It is possible that if we reconstruct 1972 partisanship from 1976 responses a respondent will appear to be incorrect, whereas if we use all three reports the individual would be perfectly correct.<sup>3</sup> Despite this possibility, we will use only 1976 responses in reconstructing 1972 partisanship. It is rare to have a three-wave panel at all, and rarer still to have one that encompasses the time period in which a particular change occurred. If partisanship is poorly reconstructed using two-wave data, the utility of the recall questions is called into question even if data from additional waves might increase the accuracy of reports slightly. In any event, just to be sure that this decision did not materially affect our results, we examined all cases in which a change was reported for 1974-1976 in the 1976 interview, and another change was reported for 1972-74 in the 1974 interview. It turned out that there was only a handful of such cases and none is coded incorrectly by our exclusive use of 1976 recall.

The remaining problem in using the recall questions is much more critical, and we devote the next section to it.

#### CONSISTENCY OF RECALL

Since respondents were asked the recall questions in each of three years, we have three independent reports of their past partisanship. This creates the possibility of inconsistent accounts, e.g., an individual who says in 1972 that he changed from a Republican to a Democrat in 1940 but reports in 1974 and 1976 that he has always been a Democrat.

Two types of "inconsistents" were defined. For the first type, we checked for consistency using a three-step process. First, answers were compared to see if respondents consistently reported whether or not they had ever changed. Second, if they reported changing, the years that they reported changing were compared. Third, also if they reported changing, the identifications that they reported changing from were compared. On the first and third criteria exact agreement was required for respondents to be considered consistent. On the second criterion, precise agreement was too stringent a requirement, especially since some of the changes occurred many years in the past. Consequently, we took the median value of the respondents' three reports and considered the respondent as consistent if the other two reports were within two years of the median.<sup>4</sup>

Two problems complicated this test for consistency. A minor problem was how to handle "don't know" responses concerning the year of change. We gave respondents the benefit of the doubt and arbitrarily considered "don't know" responses as consistent with other reports of the year of change.<sup>5</sup> The second problem involved respondents who reported changing during the panel period. If a respondent reported in 1976 that she changed in, say, 1973, her 1972 response could be different from, and yet be consistent with the 1976 report. Therefore, considerable care had to be exercised, and we could not simply compare responses mechanically for agreement.

Respondents who "failed" this three-step test make up the first set of inconsistents. The remainder, of course, survived this initial test. Yet these include some respondents who would still be categorized differently depending on which report was used. These are respondents who said "I never



changed" in all three interviews (or in the first two interviews and then reported a post-1974 change) and yet reported a different partisanship in different interviews. Thus, for example, we might reconstruct a respondent as having always been a Democrat based on his 1972 interview and as having always been an independent based on his 1974 interview. These respondents form the second type of inconsistencies.

Considering that large numbers of respondents are thought to have never changed their partisanship, the proportion of consistent reports should be high. Consistency should also be high because of our liberal coding rules about the timing of change and because of the fact that all respondents who reported changing in the 1972-76 period could give different reports in the 1972 and/or 1974 interviews and yet be consistent. Also, of course, this is a minimal test in that it speaks only to the question of consistency and says nothing about the correctness of recall.

It is a bit of a shock, then, to find that over half of the respondents in the 1972-74-76 panel failed to give consistent reports about their past partisanship (37 percent type 1 and 16 percent type 2). True, some of the inconsistency arose simply from discrepancies about the year of change or the precise nature of the change. And, of course, the type 2 inconsistencies consistently avowed that they had not changed (even though they in fact did). But even ignoring all of this, fully a quarter of the sample gave inconsistent reports simply about whether or not they had ever changed.

Such consistency as there was came almost entirely from the large number of individuals who reported never changing. If we exclude these respondents, the magnitude of the inconsistency is staggering. Of the respondents who in 1972 said that they had changed (at some point in their lives), 91 percent gave contradictory information two or four years later. Or, to take another perspective, of the 96 respondents who in 1972 reported an extreme change--Democrats (Republicans) who said that they were once Republicans (Democrats)--84 percent failed to report consistently their partisan past.

These results are not encouraging. Nonetheless, let us forge ahead to consider how accurate respondents' recollections are over the 1972-76 panel. There are several reasons for doing so. The main reason is that a lot of the inconsistencies concern changes which occurred many years in the past, and reconstruction of 1972 partisanship from the 1976 recall questions might not be affected by such discrepancies. Even respondents who recalled a change in one interview and reported no change in another interview might still be properly reconstructed for the '72-'76 period. It is also possible that there is something about an off-year election, such as 1974, that decreased consistency. By using only the 1976 report, potential problems of mixing presidential election years and off-years are avoided. Finally, we can use the information on consistency below to see if we can identify a set of respondents whose recollections are highly accurate.

## ACCURACY OF RECALL

An initial assessment of accuracy in reconstructing 1972 partisanship comes from Table 2. The frequencies in italics (18.9 percent of the total) represent individuals who clearly recalled incorrectly their 1972 partisanship, even though we only test for accuracy at the threefold level.<sup>6</sup> This leaves approximately 80 percent of the cases judged to be accurate. However, it is likely that some of these cases are "accurate" only because we lack the information to really test their validity. Consider the cases in category 3. We are only able to classify these individuals as somewhere between SD and I; consequently all who were actually Democratic partisans or independents were counted as not giving an incorrect report. Surely this is a generous interpretation. The same point applies to categories 2, 5, and 6.

A more plausible estimate of the true level of error can be arrived at by considering the error rates in the relatively unambiguous categories (1, 4, and 7) along with judgments about how those in the ambiguous categories would have classified themselves if the recall questions had been clearer. The error rate among those who recalled themselves as partisans (1 and 7) was 21.2 percent; among those who recalled themselves as independents (4) it was 31.4 percent. It seems likely that those in the ambiguous categories would have disproportionately recalled themselves as independents since all were currently independents (i.e., in 1976). Putting these facts together, it seems likely that the true level of error is on the order of 25-30 percent.<sup>7</sup>

With a probable error rate of 25 percent or more, it is likely that any analysis of these data is risky at best. Nonetheless, it is possible that certain inferences might be relatively unaffected by even this amount of inaccuracy. For example, if the number of respondents erroneously reporting

Table 2

## 1972 (Reconstructed) by 1972 (Actual) Partisanship

1972 (Reconstructed) Partisanship	1972 (Actual) Partisanship							Total
	Strong Dem	Weak Dem	Ind Dem	Ind	Ind Rep	Weak Rep	Strong Rep	
1. SD or WD	160	226	<u>60</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>10</u>	497
2. SD, WD or ID	0	2	4	2	<del>3</del>	<u>6</u>	<u>0</u>	17
3. SD, WD, ID, or I	10	34	51	17	<u>10</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	125
4. ID, I, or IR	<u>6</u>	<u>26</u>	18	63	34	<u>11</u>	<u>5</u>	163
5. I, IR, WR, or SR	<u>1</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>8</u>	25	56	27	11	134
6. IR, WR, or SR	<u>0</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	2	3	1	1	12
7. WR or SR	<u>1</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>31</u>	125	132	318
Total	178	311	146	143	148	179	161	1266

NOTE: Italicized cells represent definite errors in recall using the threefold classification. Those in boldface gave incorrect responses about the direction in which they leaned, but we cannot unambiguously call their responses incorrect if we retain the general category of independents.

change and no change were identical, estimates of the proportion of changers in the sample would not be affected. Unfortunately, the errors do not have such nice properties.

Consider the number of changers. Table 3 gives the actual 1972 x 1976 turnover table. Using the threefold classification, 25.8 percent of the sample changed their responses. Do we arrive at a similar estimate using the retrospective data? Deriving estimates of perceived change is hampered by the ambiguities involved in reconstructing previous partisan positions. Nonetheless, some reasonable approximations can be made. In Table 4, the italicized cells contain individuals who clearly reported a (threefold) change in their partisanship between 1972 and 1976. This set of individuals only amounts to 2.8 percent of the sample. We might add to this set the 29 respondents in the boldface cells in Table 4; they at least changed the direction in which they lean, and some or all of them might have reported (had there been no question of ambiguities) that they shifted from a partisan to an independent position.<sup>8</sup> Adding them to the definite changers still gives us an estimate of only 5.1 percent--well below the percentage of actual changers. Only if we assume that all 263 respondents in the italicized bold-faced cells changed from a partisan to a leaner favoring the same party--a most unlikely situation--do we arrive at an estimate that closely approximates the number actually changing in the 1972-76 period.

Since this overall estimate is rendered so problematic by the ambiguities in the reconstruction, we might again consider those in the relatively unambiguous categories, 1, 4, and 7. Since these are respondents who in 1976 were partisans or pure independents, we can determine from Table 3 that 22.4 percent of them actually changed their threefold identification between 1972 and 1976. According to their recollection, in contrast, a mere 3.6 percent

Table 3

1972 (Actual) by 1976 (Actual) Partisanship

1972 (Actual) Partisanship	1976 (Actual) Partisanship							Total
	Strong Dem	Weak Dem	Ind Dem	Ind Rep	Weak Rep	Strong Rep		
Strong Dem	114	47	10	4	1	1	1	178
Weak Dem	64	166	41	22	8	12	3	316
Ind Dem	19	45	55	10	13	3	1	146
Ind	8	13	22	62	28	11	1	145
Ind Rep	7	5	13	33	61	23	7	149
Weak Rep	1	9	2	10	35	94	30	181
Strong Rep	4	5	3	3	11	52	83	161
<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>1276</b>

Table 4

## 1972 (Reconstructed) by 1976 (Actual) Partisanship

1972 (Reconstructed) Partisanship	1976 (Actual) Partisanship							Total
	Strong Dem	Weak Dem	Ind Dem	Ind	Ind Rep	Weak Rep	Strong Rep	
1. SD or WD	215	279	0	<u>3</u>	0	<u>5</u>	0	502
2. SD, WD, or ID	0	0	0	0	<u>17</u>	0	0	17
3. SD, WD, ID, or I	0	0	<u>127</u>	0	0	0	0	127
4. ID, I, or IR	<u>3</u>	<u>7</u>	5	141	5	<u>5</u>	<u>3</u>	169
5. I, IR, WR, or SR	0	0	0	0	<u>136</u>	0	0	136
6. IR, WR, or SR	0	0	<u>12</u>	0	0	0	0	12
7. WR or SR	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	0	<u>5</u>	0	191	120	321
Total	219	290	144	149	158	201	123	1284

NOTE: Respondents in italicized cells definitely recall changing their partisanship between 1972 and 1976; those in boldface cells recall at least changing the direction in which they lean. Some of those in boldface italicized cells probably would have recalled a change had the questions been unambiguous.

changed positions. The discrepancy between actual and perceived change is hardly attributable to the ambiguities in the reconstruction.

The high rate of incorrect reports might still allow some uses if the errors were highly concentrated. If, for example, it were the case that young people had extremely high error rates while all others had minimal rates of error, analyses using all but the young respondents would be meaningful for some purposes. If the errors were almost exclusively among those uninterested in politics or among those with little education, some kinds of analyses would be possible. Such results would also help us understand the reasons for the errors. This turns out, however, not to be a very useful approach. Error rates vary somewhat, but even the minimal estimates (comparable to the frequencies italicized in Table 2) are at least 13-14 percent. For instance, those who follow government and public affairs "most of the time" have an error rate of 14 percent. Even limiting the search to the consistent respondents (eliminating only type 1 or both types of inconsistent) does not reduce the error rate by very much. Among consistent reporters the error rate in various control groups never drops below 10 percent. (And if we had only a cross-sectional sample, there would be no way to identify consistent respondents in any case.)

The vast majority of the errors, and what variations there are in error rates, can be traced to the large discrepancy noted above between observed and real change. Among those who did not change over the panel period, accuracy was very high: 96.1 percent reported no change. Of those who did change, nearly as many (91.1 percent) also reported not changing. In other words, of the latter group, only 8.9 percent correctly reported that they had changed places on the partisan dimension. Even if we look only at extreme changers, a similar, incredibly high inaccuracy rate is found. Of the 36 respondents who changed from a Democrat to a Republican or vice versa, only 11 percent correctly reported the change, and 89 percent reported that they had not



changed at all--i.e., they did not even report an independent-partisan shift. Thus, high error rates occur simply because individuals perceive themselves as having very constant partisan feelings when in fact they change those feeling from time to time.

The importance of this finding goes well beyond the methodological point of explaining error rates. It means that the rate of actual changes in partisanship is almost always likely to be greater than estimates derived from individuals' recollections. This in turn means that our interpretation of partisanship might have to be modified. We return to these points in the conclusion after briefly examining other panel data and considering the question of reconstructing aggregate partisan distributions.

#### Accuracy Rates in Other Panels

The results from the '72-76 panel study are unambiguous. Yet it is always good to have confirmation from additional data sources. It is conceivable, though implausible, that respondents could give accurate retrospective accounts at times other than the mid-seventies. We have three other panels at our disposal. One is the SRC/CPS 1956-58-60 nationally representative panel. The other two are the youth and parent panels interviewed by Jennings and Niemi in 1965 and 1973 (Jennings and Niemi, 1975). The youths were a representative sample of United States high school seniors in 1965. The parent panel included one parent of each senior--randomly chosen when the student lived with both parents.

The retrospective questions used by Jennings and Niemi were identical to those used in the '72-76 panel (except for a short preface used in 1976, as noted in Table 1). The 1960 questions differed in one respect. Current partisans were not asked if they had ever been independents. Later we will

show that this has important consequences for the determination of aggregate distributions in the past. For the moment it should only mean that the proportion of the sample reporting a change, which severely underestimated true change in the '72-76 panel, will be depressed a bit more.

The major results for these three panels--together with the results already noted for '72-76--are presented in Table 5. Leaving aside the youth panel for the moment, the overall picture is highly congruent with that based on the '72-76 results. Incorrect reports are frequent--minimally about a fifth of all reports (col. 1). The reason for the incorrect reports is that huge proportions of the respondents see themselves as unchanging, even among those who did change according to their "current" reports (cols. 2-3). Of those changing from <sup>one</sup> party to the other, a fifth or less reported the change (col. 4), and most reported no change at all.<sup>9</sup> Reports of change are considerably underestimated (cols. 5-8). The actual amount of change when all respondents are considered is on the order of 4-5 times the reported amount (with an even higher ratio in '56-60 because of the difference in retrospective questions). For partisan changes, where we are dealing with small numbers, actual change is from 1.6 to 3.5 times that reported.

The retrospective accounts of the youth sample vary somewhat from those of the other samples. Not only do the youths change more, they report more change. This is manifested in considerably more of the youths who changed partisanship reporting that change correctly (col. 4). It also results in lower ratios of actual to reported change (cols. 5-8). Yet this does not mean that young people more often correctly report their partisanship histories. In fact, the proportion of incorrect reports is higher for this sample than for the others. This is partly a function of those who did not change reporting that they did, something that rarely occurred in the other three samples.

Table 5

## Summary Table of Panel Studies

Panel	Minimum Error in Reconstruction <sup>a</sup>	No Change Reported Among		Partisan (R-D or D-R) Changers	All Changes		Partisan Changes	
		Nonchangers	Changers	Report Change Correctly	Actual	Reported	Actual	Reported
1972-1976	18.9%	96.1% (952)	91.1% (314)	11.8% (34)	25.8%	5.1%	2.8%	0.8%
Youths, 1965-1973	29.4%	83.7% (630)	67.4% (460)	38.0% (71)	42.2%	25.2%	6.5%	5.4%
Parents, 1965-1973	19.9%	95.5% (825)	91.8% (243)	9.3% (54)	23.4%	5.4%	3.9%	2.1%
1956-1960	18.8%	97.7% (995)	93.2% (281)	21.3% (47)	22.9%	3.1%	2.7%	2.3%

<sup>a</sup> For columns 1 and 5-8 the N is the total number in the panel who responded with one of the seven partisan categories (Strong Democrat-Strong Republican) in both waves and who answered the recall questions: '72-76, 1276; youths, 1100; parents, 1140; '56-60, 1328.

Overall, the results from three additional panels strongly support the conclusion that retrospective reports of partisanship are inadequate.

#### ACCURACY OF AGGREGATE RECONSTRUCTIONS

Our entire analysis--whether of consistency or accuracy, of the total sample of parts thereof, of the '72-'76 panel or others--suggests that individual-level reconstruction of past partisanship is extremely tenuous. Is it possible, nonetheless, that reconstructions of the aggregate distribution of partisanship are accurate? It seems highly dubious. But since the recall data have been used to reconstruct and interpret partisan changes in the Depression Era (Andersen, 1976, chap. 5; 1979, chap. 4), some comments on this use are appropriate.

An initial problem is that the reconstruction method described earlier (Table 1) does not generate the usual trichotomy of Democrats, independents, and Republicans. This problem seems to have been "solved" by collapsing our categories 1-2 into Democrats, 3-5 into independents, 6-7 into Republicans.<sup>10</sup> This does have some justification in the following sense. The problem categories are 2-3 and 5-6. Now those classified as 2's and 6's are current independent leaners who said "Yes" to the (ambiguous) change question; under the collapsed categories they are considered to have changed. Those classified as 3's and 5's are current independent leaners who said "No" to the change question; under the collapsed categories they are considered not to have changed. While obviously this does not fully justify the collapsing scheme, it is probably the most sensible approach if one wants to make aggregate reconstructions of the traditional categories.

Using this approach, the most obvious point is that reconstruction of past party identification from SRC/CPS data collected in the 50's and 60's almost certainly underestimates the proportion of independents in the past. The distortion is probably greater and greater the further one goes back in

time. To see this, consider the following table, which is what we have after eliminating all of the ambiguities in the reconstruction by the above collapsing scheme and considering only the threefold partisan distinctions:

		19yy (Actual)			
		D	I	R	
19xx (Recon- structed)	D	$D_1$	$D_2$	$D_3$	$D_1 + D_2 + D_3$
	I	$I_1$	$I_2$	$I_3$	$I_1 + I_2 + I_3$
	R	$R_1$	$R_2$	$R_3$	$R_1 + R_2 + R_3$
		$D_1 + I_1 + R_1$	$D_2 + I_2 + R_2$	$D_3 + I_3 + R_3$	

The entries-- $D_1$ - $D_3$ ,  $I_1$ - $I_3$ , and  $R_1$ - $R_3$ --are determined by the recall questions. The aggregate distribution of partisanship in the reconstructed years (19xx) is found in the row marginals,  $D_1 + D_2 + D_3$ , etc., while the aggregate distribution for the year used to generate the reconstruction (19yy) is found in the column marginals,  $D_1 + I_1 + R_1$ , etc.

Now recall the fact that until the 1972 survey, the recall question for partisans did not ask whether current partisans were ever independent in the past. Therefore, for all reconstructions on data prior to 1972,  $D_1$  and  $I_1$  cannot be distinguished; the same holds for  $R_3$  and  $I_3$ . In practice, these have been collapsed into  $D_1$  and  $R_3$ , respectively, so that  $I_1 = I_3 = 0$ . This in turn means that the number of independents in the reconstructed distribution can never be greater than the number in the current population. It would equal the current population number only if every one of the current independents reported having never been a partisan.<sup>11</sup>

Next, consider what happens as we reconstruct earlier and earlier years.

will tell us that they were once partisans. But as the number of former partisans in this group creeps up, the number of former independents in the total sample moves inexorably down since, as noted, there is never anyone who can report having changed from an independent position. It is unlikely, however, that many additional independents will say that they were partisans as we move backward in time through any given four-year time period. This suggests that the decline in the estimated number of independents will be a gradual one. Indeed, that is exactly what the reconstruction shows. The proportion of independents is estimated to be 16 percent in 1948 and declines by at most 2 percent in a four-year interval to reach 9 percent in 1920 (Andersen, 1976, p. 83).<sup>12,13</sup>

Strictly speaking, since we do not know the true proportions of independents, we cannot be sure that the declining estimates represent increasing underestimates of the true numbers. In part it depends on how one categorizes apolitical respondents, who were probably in plentiful supply in the 20's (see footnote 16). Yet it would be awfully coincidental if the true proportions matched estimates that, due to the questionnaire design, are necessarily lower than the 50's and 60's proportions and almost necessarily decline as we go back further in time.

If the proportion of independents is underestimated, estimates of the proportion of Democrats and Republicans must be overestimated. We think that the greatest distortion is in the proportion of Democrats. Our reasoning is quite simply explained in terms of the 3x3 table presented above. Suppose there was a shift toward the Democrats between the year one is trying to reconstruct (19xx) and the year one is using to generate the reconstruction (19yy). This surely happened between the twenties and the fifties; it possibly also happened between the thirties or forties and the fifties (as older

Republican cohorts dropped out of the population). This means that the proportion of "current" Democrats-- $D_1+I_1+R_1$  in the table--is larger than the reconstructed proportion-- $D_1+D_2+D_3$ --if the reconstruction is accurate. Correspondingly,  $D_3+I_3+R_3$  is less than  $R_1+R_2+R_3$  if the reconstruction is correct. (It is impossible to be sure about the proportion of independents without making further assumptions.) Now if the proportions of partisans recalling that they never changed are reasonably symmetric ( $D_1/D_1+I_1+R_1 \approx R_3/D_3+I_3+R_3$ ) and are overestimates of true stability, the overestimate of the Democrats will be disproportionately larger because of the larger base of current Democrats. Similar reasoning indicates that  $D_3$  and  $R_1$  will underestimate the number of current Democratic and Republican partisans who arrived at their (current) identification by changing their partisanship. But the underestimate is likely to be more severe for the reconstructed Republicans ( $R_1$ ) because, given the assumption about the population shift, the actual number of Republican to Democratic changers (as a proportion of current Democrats) is surely larger than the actual number of Democratic to Republican changers (again, as a proportion).

The first of these two biases is likely to be greater in the absolute numbers involved. That is, the  $D_1$  and  $R_3$  cells contribute most heavily to the reconstructed number of partisans. Therefore, for the Democrats, at least, the overestimate from the first bias is likely to be greater than the underestimate from the second bias. The estimate of the number of Republicans is likely to be more accurate, or at least a smaller overestimate.

This analysis of the reconstruction of partisans is obviously built on a number of assumptions, most notably that the recall of "no change" by partisans is the same for Republicans and Democrats. There is no guarantee

that our assumptions are correct. But that is partly the point. The reconstruction may or may not be accurate, but under some reasonable assumptions the estimates are likely to bias the proportion of Democrats upward and the proportion of independents downward.

We need not rely, however, only on our assessment of how the reconstruction might be biased. Readily accessible Gallup data strongly suggests that the estimates derived for the very late 30's and throughout the 40's are biased in exactly the direction we indicated. Uncorrected poll results from 1937 show 15 percent of the electorate independent and 50 percent Democratic. This single poll conforms quite well to the figures generated in the reconstruction by Andersen (1976, p. 83). But all of the other results reported for party affiliation in the Gallup Poll show higher levels of independents--19 percent (1939), 20 percent (1940), 21 percent (1946), and 29 percent (1948). The proportion of Democrats is reported to have been 42 percent (1939), 41 percent (1940), and 39 percent (1946), with no results reported for 1948.<sup>14</sup> These figures are subject to some errors, of course, because of biases in Gallup's sampling procedures at that time. Yet Glenn's (1972) corrected figures for 1945 and 1949 show 20 percent independents in both years with 43 percent and 45 percent Democratic in the two years.<sup>15</sup>

A thorough analysis of Gallup data is not our purpose here. It would involve at the very least a further correction for the underrepresentation of southern respondents, which might yield a small change beyond that made by the correction for the maldistribution of respondents by education.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Gallup sometimes reports a no opinion group of about 4 percent; these are probably what were called apolitical respondents in The American Voter (Campbell, et al., 1960, chap. 6). These individuals, too, were probably underestimated by the Gallup Poll as they appear to have been largely



southern blacks.<sup>17</sup> This is important because there is a precedent for combining apolitical respondents with independents (Converse, 1976, p. 166), a classification that seems quite appropriate if one is thinking about political mobilization.<sup>18</sup>

This digression onto the question of aggregate reconstructions is now long enough, for it is not intended to convey any certain picture of what happened in the New Deal realignment. It is intended, however, to drive home the point that the questions on partisan recall provide as unreliable a guide to aggregate reconstructions as to the reconstructions of individual stability and change.

#### CONCLUSION

The most unambiguous conclusion to our analysis is the methodological one: The party identification recall questions used heretofore--and most likely any others that could be designed<sup>19</sup>--are woefully inadequate. By this we mean that responses are unreliable in the technical sense that they are inconsistent across time (when it can be shown that they should not have changed) and that they inaccurately reproduce past partisanship at both the individual and aggregate levels.

Beyond that we are on softer ground. Nonetheless, the results lend support to two other conclusions, one of which has received widespread attention recently. The first, and admittedly more speculative conclusion concerns the proportion of the population that changes partisanship over a lifetime. Estimates of this proportion have always been based on retrospective accounts since no very-long-term panel exists in which partisanship was obtained. Using retrospect data, estimates of the number of changers are very low. From data presented in The American Voter (Campbell, et al., 1960, p. 148), for example,

one calculates that only 10 percent of the population in 1956 had ever changed from a Republican to a Democrat or vice versa and that of only 9 percent switched from a partisan to an independent position (with no estimate possible of the number switching from an independent to a partisan position). In the 1976 (cross-section) sample, the proportion reporting that they had ever changed parties is even smaller--6 percent. The proportion moving in and out of the independent category (or changing the direction in which they lean) is 21 percent, somewhat higher than in 1956 because we have an estimate of movement both ways.

If we were to "correct" the 1976 figures by the ratios of actual to reported changers for the cross-section samples (Table 5), we would arrive at an estimate of partisan changers as high as a fifth of the population. Partisan-independent shifts would characterize virtually everyone in the population and/or some individuals would move in and out of the independent category repeatedly. We hasten to add that such a "correction" is extremely tenuous. However, it seems at least as reliable as basing estimates only on the raw, uncorrected reports of change.<sup>20</sup> Partisanship--even with our highly tentative corrections--is very stable relative to other predispositions, notably policy preferences and candidate judgments. Yet partisan affiliation is not immune to change over long periods of time, and partisan and especially partisan-independent change may be a more frequent phenomenon than is typically believed.

Our results also add to recent speculation concerning the meaning of party identification as currently measured. The question has been raised, for example, as to whether partisanship and independence are separate dimensions so that it is possible for individuals to have partisan and independent feelings simultaneously (Weisberg, 1978). While our results do not speak directly to such issues,

the inability of respondents to reproduce reliably and correctly their past partisanship does raise questions about whether we are measuring the durable, "basic" predisposition that party identification supposedly is.

Thus, while our strongest conclusion is methodological, arguing against utilizing retrospective accounts of partisanship, our results raise very real substantive questions about the long-term stability of partisanship on the one hand, and about just what it is we are measuring on the other.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The 1972-74-76 and 1956-60 panels are representative cross-section samples of the United States. The data were originally collected by the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan and were supplied to us by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The Jennings-Niemi panels are described below.

<sup>2</sup> It is conceivable that a former Republican partisan would say that he was never closer to the Republican party because the word "closer" implies only leaning toward the party. We ignore this extremely remote possibility.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., consider an individual whose "actual" party identification (i.e. based on contemporary reports) was Democrat, independent, Democrat in 1972, 1974, and 1976, respectively. Suppose the individual recalled in 1976 that she changed from an independent position in 1975. If we reconstructed 1972 from only her 1976 recall she would be considered incorrect, since she would be coded an independent for all years prior to 1976. Yet in her 1974 interview she might have correctly recalled that she changed from a Democrat in, say, 1973. Therefore her recall is perfectly correct if we take all reports together.

<sup>4</sup> Another technicality is that it is possible for respondents to be coded as inconsistent because they reported a specific year in which they changed in one wave and reported a range of years in another. For example, a respondent could report in two waves that he changed in 1958 and in the third wave that he changed during Eisenhower's presidency (coded as 1955). Such a respondent may be consistent, but the present coding scheme for year of change does not even allow us to determine all cases in which respondents reported change as a term. Still, this situation could affect a maximum of 14 respondents who are coded as inconsistent.

<sup>5</sup> Technically, in order for a respondent who recalled in 1976 that he changed in 1973 to qualify as consistent, it is necessary for him to have also reported a change in 1974. However, in order to extend the coding rule of  $\pm 2$  years to all respondents, we coded as consistent those who first reported a change in 1976 and recalled it as occurring in 1972 or 1973. An analogous situation holds for those who report having changed in 1974 and recall it as having occurred in 1970 or 1971. This affects only 8 cases.

<sup>6</sup> Using the alternative interpretation noted earlier of how currently-independent-formerly-leaning respondents would answer the recall question, the error rate is changed by less than a percent.

<sup>7</sup> There is some justification for eliminating all of the ambiguities by collapsing categories 1-2 into Democrats, 3-5 into independents, and 6-7 into Republicans (see p. 18 below). Using this scheme the error rate is 26.6 percent.

<sup>8</sup> Interpreting these 29 as changers is in line with the collapsing of categories that we will do later (p. 18 ).

<sup>9</sup> The relatively high percentage correctly reporting change in 1956-60 may be due in part to the question wording. Partisans in 1960 who would have incorrectly reported changing from an independent, had they been asked, were automatically counted as correct.

<sup>10</sup> This is presumably the procedure used by Andersen (1976, 1979) for 1960-1972, although it is never made explicit. In 1952-1958 the questions were actually less ambiguous. Independent leaners were asked the same question as the one that pure independents have always been asked (see Table 1).

<sup>11</sup> Another way of saying this is that the estimates of the number of independents can only be correct if during the 1920-1972 period no independents became partisans.

<sup>12</sup> The initial estimate (i.e., for 1948) is 7 percent lower than the first real figure (1952). This seems like a 7 percent drop in four years. But the estimate for 1948 is based on the 1952-72 combined data set. Therefore the average time period between the survey and the year being reconstructed is about fourteen years.

<sup>13</sup> One part of Andersen's test of the validity of the recall data is her Table 5.4 (1976, p. 82). This test is marginally affected (by less than a percent) by how she handled the 1972 data in which partisans could for the first time say that they had been independents. The test might be greatly affected, though we cannot be sure, by the change in questions that occurred in 1960 (see footnote 10).

<sup>14</sup> The surveys referred to are as follows: 1937: #72; 1939: #180A; 1940: #203K; 1946: #374K; 1948: #419K. All results are taken directly from volume 1 of Gallup (1972). "No opinion" responses were eliminated by Gallup before percentaging. This is commented on below.

<sup>15</sup> Glenn's data are from entirely different surveys than those cited above. The 1949 result is based on a pooling of three separate surveys.

<sup>16</sup> Glenn's data are corrected for underrepresentation of low education individuals and for the decline in the sex ratio in older cohorts. Glenn comments elsewhere that ". . . it [rarely] seems necessary to adjust the data simultaneously for the underrepresentation of both southerners and low education persons . . ." (1977, p. 38). However, since southerners (with respect to party identification) were atypical of the population as a whole/in the '30's and '40's, this may be one of those instances in which there should be a further correction.

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion by Converse (1972, pp.303-307). SRC/CPS estimates of the "apolitical, don't know" group in the 50's average about 5.5 percent, Campbell, et al. (1960, p. 124). Among southern blacks, however, the estimates were much greater (28 percent in 1952 and 31 percent in 1956).

<sup>18</sup> Though it is almost totally speculative, it seems likely that the number of apolitical respondents would have been higher in the 20's than later because of the recency of women's suffrage. Andersen recognizes this point in talking about "potential" Democrats and Republicans.

<sup>19</sup> One might propose, for example, getting around the question ambiguities by laying out the seven-point partisanship scale and asking respondents if they would have placed themselves elsewhere than their current position at some time in the past. The 1979 "pilot" study, however, showed that a seven-point scale format for partisanship yields dramatically different results from the traditional questions.

<sup>20</sup> The "actual change" figures in Table 5 also suggest that lifetime changes are more frequent than is suggested by the retrospective questions. For example, the 1972-76 (partisan) change alone is almost half as much as the "ever changed" figure from the recall questions. Similarly, the youth panel result suggests that the amount of change early in adulthood equals or surpasses what is given as lifetime change by the recall questions.



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