

“The Myth of the Independent Voter Revisited”*

David B. Magleby
Brigham Young University

Candice J. Nelson
American University

Mark C. Westlye
University of California, Office of the President (retired)

Party identification has long been seen as a fundamental, long-term influence on Americans’ political attitudes and behavior, and as the single most important predictor of the vote.¹ In 2008, more respondents were Independents, rather than Democrats or Republicans, comprising 39% of the American electorate.² Democrats came in at 34%, with Republicans at 26%. It was the fifth consecutive election (2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, ³ 2008) in which Independents constituted a plurality of the nation’s potential voters, and the eighth in the last ten elections where Independents were the plurality or were tied for that status.

The increase in the number of citizens identifying as Independent began in the 1960s, as Figure 1 shows. By the 1970s and 1980s this rise had been noted with interest – and some alarm – by political scientists, members of the media and politicians alike.

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¹ For the classic explication of the concept of partisan identification see Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960, 121; more recently, see Miller and Shanks 1996, 117; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002.

² National Election Studies’ (NES) standard opening question about partisan identification. All data, unless otherwise noted, are from the NES. The American National Election Studies (www.electionstudies.org). THE 1948-2004 ANES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers and distributors], 2005; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

³ The NES was not conducted in 2006, but other polling by Gallup and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press consistently found that throughout 2006 the modal response to their initial partisanship question was “Independent.” The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009.

Pundits as well as scholars attached significance to Independents being “the largest group in society.”⁴ At the same time the number of strong partisans was diminishing. The decline in strength of partisanship and the growth in independence were considered to have profound potential consequences for American politics and for democracy itself. Independents were seen as unconstrained by partisanship from responding to election-year appeals; they were “adrift without an anchor in a political world full of strong eddies and currents,”⁵ and their votes were “up for grabs.”⁶ With more and more voters becoming Independents, there could be wider and wider swings between the parties.⁷ Other anticipated consequences included weaker presidential mandates,⁸ greater opportunities for third parties,⁹ partisan realignment,¹⁰ and an increasingly fragmented Congress.¹¹ Perhaps the most alarming potential development was that the rise in Independents could bring not only party realignment but an end to the current party system.¹² Such a “dealignment” not only portended “the deterioration and disarray of *both* parties,”¹³ but “political instability and ineffective performance on a scale without recent precedent”¹⁴ or – simply put – “a loss of democracy.”¹⁵

⁴Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979, 47.

⁵Wattenberg 1986, 130.

⁶ Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1983, 240.

⁷Crotty 1984, 37; Kessel 1984, 279.

⁸Ladd, Jr. 1982, 77.

⁹Campbell 1979, 268; Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1983, 237. See also Gallup 1974, 1; Sussman 1984, 37.

¹⁰Niemi 1974, 215-17; Wattenberg 1987.

¹¹Hedrick Smith 1988, 685-686.

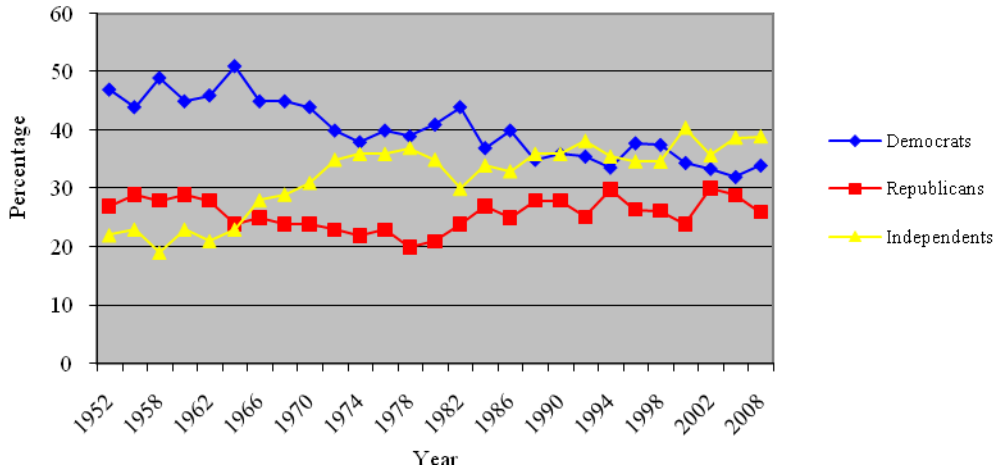
¹²Ladd, Jr. 1984-1985, 6; Campbell and Sumners 1990, 513, 520, 521; Carmines, McIver, and Stimson 1987; Schneider 1984, 100; Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984, 263; Beck 1988, 165.

¹³Sherrill and Vogler 1982, 282. (emphasis in original)

¹⁴Burnham 1982, p. 244.

¹⁵Pomper 1977, 41.

Figure 1
 Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in the United States, 1952-2008



Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004. The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

These concerns prompted us and three colleagues, including Ray Wolfinger, to look closely at Independents in the electorate from 1952 (the first year in which NES asked respondents for their party identification) through 1988, in *The Myth of the Independent Voter*.¹⁶ NES first asks respondents whether they generally identify as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, and then asks those answering “Independent” whether they lean toward one of the parties or not. Those identifying with a party are asked whether they identify strongly or weakly.¹⁷ We looked at how each of the seven

¹⁶ Keith, Magleby, Nelson, Orr, Westlye, and Wolfinger 1992. Two prior works on the same topic were Keith *et al.* 1977; Keith, et al. 1986.

¹⁷ Since 1952, the University of Michigan’s Center for Election Studies has asked: “Do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or what?” The follow-up question for partisans is: “Would you call yourself a strong Republican/Democrat or a not very strong Republican/Democrat?” Independents are asked: “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?”

types of identifier responded on various attitudinal and behavioral measures relating to politics, political parties, and candidates.

It turned out that leaning Independents (leaners) were just as partisan in their attitudes and behavior as declared partisans, if not more so. The differences between Independent Democrats and Independent Republicans were in most instances substantial. And most importantly, Pure Independents consistently differed from Partisan Independents in fundamental respects. The speculation that Independents might conceivably detach from the parties could realistically be applied only to Pure Independents, and their increases in number had been rather modest. Their proportion of the electorate went from six percent in 1952 to 13 percent in 1972; it was 11 percent in 1988. Moreover, in terms of those who actually vote in elections, Pure Independents, on average, comprised closer to 8 percent. *Myth* concluded that party identification was still the driving force of political behavior for most voters, including the majority of self-described Independents. It also demonstrated that these findings about Independents had for the most part been true for as long as data had been collected – a pattern that had been overlooked in much of the original analysis of party identification in the seminal book *The American Voter*.¹⁸ Properly measured and interpreted, “independent” citizens were not nearly as influential as many seemed to think might be the case.

In the years since the publication of *Myth*, the proportion of Independents in the electorate has not diminished, nor has the proportion of their subcomponents: two-thirds of them remain leaners. Table 1 presents the seven categories of identifier produced by the two-part NES survey question. After rising to 13-15 percent of the electorate throughout the 1970s, Pure Independents have since hovered between 8 and 12 percent.

¹⁸Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960.

The trajectory for Partisan Independents has been similar. In the 1950s, both groups of leaners were in the single digits; Independent Republicans have since the mid-1980s constituted 11-13 percent of the electorate, and Independent Democrats have risen from an average of 12 percent in the 1970s and 1980s to the 15-17 percent range in more recent years.

Table 1
Party Identification, 1952-2008

	Strong Democrats	Weak Democrats	Indep. Democrats	Pure Indeps.	Indep. Republicans	Weak Republicans	Strong Republicans	Apolitical
1952	22	25	10	6	7	14	14	3
1956	21	23	6	9	8	14	15	4
1958	27	22	7	7	5	17	11	4
1960	20	25	6	10	7	14	16	3
1962	23	23	7	8	6	16	12	4
1964	27	25	9	8	6	14	11	1
1966	18	28	9	12	7	15	10	1
1968	20	25	10	11	9	15	10	1
1970	20	24	10	13	8	15	9	1
1972	15	26	11	13	11	13	10	1
1974	18	21	13	15	9	14	8	3
1976	15	25	12	15	10	14	9	1
1978	15	24	14	14	10	13	8	3
1980	18	23	11	13	10	14	9	2
1982	20	24	11	11	8	14	10	2
1984	17	20	11	11	12	15	12	2
1986	18	22	10	12	11	15	11	2
1988	18	18	12	11	13	14	14	2
1990	17	19	12	11	13	17	11	2
1992	18	18	14	12	12	14	11	1
1994	15	19	13	11	12	15	15	1
1996	18	19	14	9	12	15	12	1
1998	19	18	14	11	11	16	10	2
2000	19	15	15	12	13	12	12	1
2002	17	17	15	8	13	16	14	1
2004	17	16	17	10	12	12	16	0
2006	No NES survey conducted							
2008	19	15	17	11	11	13	13	1

Note: Cross-section samples only, except in 2000; pre-election surveys in presidential election years. The NES was not conducted in 2006.

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; and The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

The persistently large proportion of Independents in the population has continued to prompt some pundits and politicians – and more than a few scholars – to believe, as many did before, that over one-third of the electorate have no party allegiance and are up for grabs in a given election. Concern has continued to be expressed about possible dealignment and the consequent health and stability of the American political system. In this chapter we will review recent scholarly research on this topic, revisit the findings and conclusions we and our colleagues reached in *Myth* eighteen years ago, and address, where needed, some of the claims and concerns that still circulate regarding the large bloc of Independents.

In previewing the 2008 presidential election campaign, a collaborative report of *The Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, and Harvard University called attention to “a broad segment of the electorate — about three in ten voters call themselves independents — ... [which] is poised to play the role of political power broker in 2008.”¹⁹ Candidate McCain claimed a special affinity with “Independents,”²⁰ while candidate Obama claimed to be “post-partisan” in his orientation.²¹ As candidates and political observers searched out the Independent vote, a number of scholars gave them reason to look. Kenneth Janda, Jeffrey Berry, and Jerry Goldman, for example, in the most recent edition of their textbook, defined the two in five Independents within the

¹⁹Balz and Cohen 2007.

²⁰Macgillis 2007; Associated Press 2008.

²¹Liasson 2007.

electorate as persons with “no party attachment.”²²

In 1998, Martin Wattenberg, a dedicated scholar of partisan decline, stated: “For over four decades the American public has been drifting away from the two major political parties.”²³ This point was made at the same time by Harold Clarke and Marianne Stewart: “...the most salient characteristic of partisanship since it was first measured in national election surveys in the 1950s has been its long-term erosion in what has become a protracted era of dealignment in the United States and other democracies.”²⁴ And Marjorie R. Hershey, while acknowledging that there are the above-described three subgroups of independents constituting about a third of the electorate, nevertheless concluded recently:

And there is a third group [in addition to Democratic and Republican partisans] that could truly be termed *dealigned* [emphasis hers], in that it feels no lasting loyalties and usually stays out of political activity....because so many Americans consider themselves independent of party, it is also an electorate capable of producing mercurial results.²⁵

When Ross Perot garnered 19 percent of the popular vote in 1992, other scholars explored the prospect that substantial party detachment in the electorate could lead to the success of a third party in American politics. On this, Michael Nelson observed:

²²Janda, Berry, and Goldman 2009, 246- 247. See also, Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir 2009, 341- 342 and Wilson and DiIulio Jr. 2008, 248. Some other current texts use media polls which do not differentiate the three types of Independents to examine partisanship, overlooking the critical distinctions in issue positions among Independents on issues: Dautrich and Yalof 2009. However, other scholars’ recent textbooks give a fuller and more accurate description of Independents: Samuel Kernell and Gary Jacobson correctly state that “weaker partisans are less loyal to parties and the pure independents split their votes nearly evenly between the two major party candidates” (Kernell and Jacobson 2008). Karen O’Connor and Larry Sabato point out that “independent ‘leaners’ in fact vote much more like real partisans” (O’Connor and Sabato 2008, 473). See also Thomas Patterson 2009, 197.

²³Wattenberg 1998, ix.

²⁴Clarke and Stewart 1998, 357-78.

²⁵Hershey 2009, 136.

Third parties have their greatest opportunity ... when there is a large pool of voters who are not strongly attached to either of the two major parties. Such a pool has existed throughout the last third of the twentieth century.... From 1988 to 1996 more new voters registered as independents than as Democrats and Republicans combined.... Dealignment, the word most usually used to describe the contemporary era, creates a fertile field in which third parties may flourish.²⁶

Within the past year, though there has been no prospect of an emergent third party, other scholars made the same claim:

Over the past two decades, a larger bloc of peripheral voters might have emerged who lack an enduring attachment to either of the two major political parties These independent voters are more likely to be mobilized episodically by “third” party and independent candidacies By “independent” we mean the large proportion of people (about one third of the electorate) who fail to identify with Democrats or Republicans²⁷

Basic Characteristics of Independents Unchanged

In 1960, the authors of the *The American Voter* concluded:

Far from being more attentive, interested, and informed, Independents tend as a group to be somewhat less involved in politics. They have somewhat poorer knowledge of the issues, their image of the candidates is fainter, their interest in the campaign is less, their concern over the outcome is relatively slight, and their choice between competing candidates, although it is indeed made later in the campaign, seems much less to spring from discoverable evaluations of the

²⁶Nelson 1997, 63-64.

²⁷Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2009, 101.

elements of national politics.”²⁸

In *Myth* we arrayed data showing that leaners tended to be more educated, more interested in politics and more politically aware than many partisan identifiers. They also were not neutral in their opinions about the political parties. By contrast, Pure Independents were typically the least educated group in the electorate, were among the most politically unaware and disinterested in campaigns or elections, and were inclined not to express an affinity towards the parties or the party system. These patterns did not emerge over time; they had been evident from the beginning of NES polling in the early 1950s.

Tables 2 through 6 look at these key characteristics of Independents in more recent years: education, interest in politics and the campaign, political knowledge, and affinity towards the parties in presidential election years. Table 2 shows that, just as was the case in previous decades, leaners in the first decade of the 21st century are just as well educated as partisans, and sometimes moreso than weak partisans. Pure Independents remain, as in the past, the least educated of the seven groups, and markedly so. In 2008, 54 percent of pure independents had no more than a high school education and only 13 percent reported having a college degree. In contrast, 60 percent of leaners had at least a high school degree, and fully a fourth of them reported holding a college degree.

²⁸ Campbell 1960, p. 143.

Table 2
Education and Party Identification, 1992-2008

Percentage of each partisan category within the given educational category.

Education	Strong Dem.	Weak Dem.	Ind. Dem.	Pure Ind.	Ind. Rep.	Weak Rep.	Strong Rep.
				1992			
0-8 Years	14	6	8	7	2	5	7
9-12 Years	49	49	45	48	44	38	35
Some college	17	22	23	28	28	28	22
College degree	20	22	24	17	25	29	36
				1996			
0-8 Years	7	6	4	7	2	3	1
9-12 Years	50	47	43	58	48	42	31
Some college	20	27	29	19	28	30	30
College degree	24	20	24	16	22	26	38
				2000			
0-8 Years	7	5	2	3	3	5	1
9-12 Years	42	45	49	55	38	34	31
Some college	24	31	26	25	32	32	30
College degree	27	19	23	16	27	29	38
				2004			
0-8 Years	6	5	1	12	4	2	2
9-12 Years	37	46	40	50	46	33	35
Some college	22	24	28	25	30	33	31
College degree	35	24	30	14	21	32	33
				2008			
0-8 Years	3	5	1	2	1	2	1
9-12 Years	37	39	41	52	38	29	32
Some college	23	28	33	33	35	28	30
College degree	37	28	25	13	26	41	36

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org); and The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

Identifiers' degree of interest in politics and the presidential campaign are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. As in the more distant past, strong partisans since the 1990s have been consistently the most interested identifiers. Leaners resemble weak partisans, although in some years their level of interest surpasses that of the weak partisans. Although their interest has fluctuated depending on the election year, Pure Independents remain the least interested in politics and campaigns.²⁹ In 2008, the percentage-point difference in interest level between the pure independents and leaners reached double digits with respect to both politics in general and the campaign in particular.

Table 3
Party Identification and Interest in Politics, 1964-2008

	Percentage Interested						Average 1992-2008
	Average 1964-1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	
Strong Democrats	71	82	78	69	86	80	79
Weak Democrats	60	63	49	51	58	68	58
Indep. Democrats	70	68	49	53	62	67	60
Pure Independents	57	53	32	39	54	53	46
Indep. Republicans	73	67	60	61	67	72	66
Weak Republicans	65	67	63	49	60	75	63
Strong Republicans	80	78	84	75	81	81	80

²⁹ Thomas Patterson conducted weekly interviews with 1,000 Americans to tap their interest in the 2000 presidential campaign, and found that leaners were no more likely than Pure Independents (or weak partisans for that matter), to be interested in the campaign. Patterson 2003, 44. Patterson's findings support our own.

Note: The entry in each cell is the proportion of respondents in the indicated party-identification category who said they follow politics most or some of the time.

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers]., 2008.

Table 4
Party Identification and Interest in the Current Election Campaign, 1952-2008

	Percentage "Very Much Interested"						Average 1992-2008
	Average 1952-1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	
Strong Democrats	45	56	42	40	61	68	53
Weak Democrats	25	32	13	18	24	39	25
Indep. Democrats	31	38	14	20	35	41	29
Pure Independents	22	29	9	18	25	28	22
Indep. Republicans	36	36	16	23	42	41	31
Weak Republicans	29	33	21	20	34	47	31
Strong Republicans	55	57	52	48	59	67	57

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

The value of separating the leaners from Pure Independents may be illustrated by reviewing a conclusion recently reached by the authors of *The American Voter Revisited*. Interested in examining the idea presented in *The American Voter*, that party identification is a long-term cue for how to view politics, Lewis-Beck *et al.* posited that “the stronger a person’s partisan attachment, the greater the person’s involvement in politics.”³⁰ They produced a table for 2004 showing that 57 percent of strong partisans were “very much interested” in the political campaign, 28 percent of weak partisans were very interested, and 40 percent of Independents (who in their table constituted 40 percent of all identifiers) were very interested. Ignoring the nonlinearity of these findings, Lewis-Beck *et al.* concluded that Independents are “less interested and involved in politics than are partisans.”³¹ As our Table 4 shows, the conclusion reached by Lewis-Beck *et al.* is correct despite the contradictory data in their table – so long as Independents are considered to be those without partisan leanings. Thirty-five percent of Independent Democrats and 42 percent of Independent Republicans reported being very much interested in the 2004 campaign compared to only 25 percent of the pure Independents. Aggregating all independents together loses this distinction. Partisan Independents were actually considerably more interested in the 2004 campaign than were weak partisans. As Table 4 shows, 2004 was not atypical; this has consistently been the pattern.

Another political characteristic discussed in *Myth* was the extent to which Americans are knowledgeable about politics. Table 5 looks at one aspect of such

³⁰Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpath, and Weisberg 2008, 126.

³¹*Ibid.*

knowledge – which party holds more seats in the House of Representatives. Looking at data through 1988, we found leaners to be relatively knowledgeable on this question, consistently more so than weak partisans. Pure Independents were notably least knowledgeable, averaging a percentage of correct answers little higher than would be yielded by guessing. In 2008, the ability to provide the correct response dipped among all identifiers, but the pattern of difference between partisan and Pure Independents remained: Pure Independents were markedly less likely than leaners to provide the correct answer.

Table 5
Party Identification and Knowledge of Congressional Control, 1960-2008

	Percentage Knowledgeable						Average 1992-2008
	Average 1960-1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	
Strong Democrats	69	67	84	64	69	59	68
Weak Democrats	62	59	76	47	54	52	57
Indep. Democrats	66	54	66	48	54	50	54
Pure Independents	53	51	56	29	37	44	43
Indep. Republicans	71	65	73	54	54	69	63
Weak Republicans	67	67	80	48	52	65	62
Strong Republicans	79	78	91	75	62	64	74

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004. The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

Another basic characteristic explored in *Myth* was Independents' views of the two political parties. We noted that one of the reasons political scientists gave for considering leaners as "true Independents" was their apparent lack of psychological ties to party. Not surprisingly, we found that almost all strong party identifiers gave their parties very favorable ratings and were decidedly cool toward the other party. Pure Independents were neither favorable nor unfavorable toward either party – they were neutral and often inclined to have no opinion on the question. Leaners resembled weak partisans in giving strong positive ratings to the party toward which they leaned, but being unwilling to rate the other party negatively.

To provide an update on this question, we have looked at identifiers' evaluations of the parties on the NES 100-degree thermometer scales for all presidential and off-years since 1978. Strong partisans' ratings of their own party are remarkably high, and have remained constant over the period – hovering around 80 degrees. Their ratings of the other party are even cooler than before, in both cases dropping from the 40-degree mark in the 1980s to below 30 degrees by 2008. Thus the distance between strong partisans' ratings of the two parties has grown over time. Table 6 shows this difference for all types of identifier by subtracting the rating of the Republican Party from the rating of the Democratic Party. To continue with the example, the disparity between Strong Democrats' ratings of the two parties went from 40 points in 1978 to 58 points in 2008. Pure Independents, at the other extreme, rated both parties around the thermometer's 50-degree midpoint in 1978 and 2008 and in all years between.

Leaners and Weak Partisans have not changed much over time, either, which means they continue to view the parties in non-neutral terms. Independent Democrats rate their own party favorably, on average about six points less positively than do Weak

Democrats. Independent Republicans have averaged about five points less positive than Weak Republicans about the Republican Party. Both groups of leaners rate the other party just a bit cooler than neutral. In terms of trends over time, Table 6 shows that Independent Democrats' feelings about the two parties have diverged in recent years. In the two most recent presidential elections, Democratic leaners' scores increased from the mid-high teens in the 1990s to the low 20s in 2004 and 2008. There is no corresponding change among Independent Republicans. In terms of how they view the parties, leaners remain partisans, and Pure Independents remain neutral.

Table 6
Party Identification and Comparative Ratings of the Democratic and Republican Parties , 1978-2008

	Strong Democrats	Weak Democrats	Indep. Democrats	Pure Indeps.	Indep. Republicans	Weak Republicans	Strong Republicans
1978	40	19	14	2	-10	-18	-37
1980	40	19	8	-3	-19	-22	-42
1982	47	22	17	-2	-17	-21	-41
1984	46	17	21	-1	-18	-21	-43
1986	45	19	17	0	-15	-20	-43
1988	43	21	20	-2	-21	-24	-45
1990	39	19	12	0	-13	-17	-38
1992	43	23	22	4	-14	-17	-44
1994	40	16	14	-1	-21	-21	-52
1996	47	24	17	0	-20	-21	-49
1998	43	28	19	5	-14	-19	-38
2000	44	29	16	1	-18	-25	-46
2004	56	27	23	5	-15	-26	-50
2008	58	32	24	2	-17	-27	-47
Avg.	45	22	17	1	-17	-21	-44

Note: This measure is achieved by subtracting the respondent's thermometer rating of the Republican Party from his or her rating of the Democratic Party. Cell entries represent the mean differential for each group.

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

Overall, then, the difference between leaners and Pure Independents over the last two decades has changed very little. Leaners are better educated, more interested in and knowledgeable about politics, and in these respects they differ little from identifiers with the party towards which they lean. Leaners continue to resemble weak partisans in their evaluations of the major parties. In contrast, Pure Independents are a separate group, resembling none of the other six.

Voting Behavior of Independents Unchanged

Perhaps the most important implication for the political system of an increase in Independents is whether and how Americans vote, in presidential and other elections. In *Myth* we showed that leaners were just as likely to turn out to vote as weak partisan identifiers, though somewhat less likely than strong identifiers. By contrast, the roughly 10 percent of the electorate who did not lean toward either party were least likely to vote. Again, this significant difference between leaners and Pure Independents had existed since at least 1952. Table 7 presents NES data for all seven categories of identifiers, presenting the average for presidential elections between 1952 and 1988 and then for each presidential year since.

Table 7
Party Identification and Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1952-2008

	Percentage Who Voted						Average 1992-2008
	Average 1952-1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	
Strong Democrats	83	86	88	85	90	89	87
Weak Democrats	71	76	67	69	74	77	72
Indep. Democrats	72	74	66	65	68	68	68
Pure Independents	63	62	48	54	50	52	53
Indep. Republicans	78	73	72	73	72	76	73
Weak Republicans	80	78	77	74	83	87	80
Strong Republicans	90	88	94	92	94	95	93

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

Table 7 confirms the familiar pattern: leaners are considerably more likely to vote in presidential elections than are Pure Independents.³² What has changed recently is that the proclivity to turn out has decreased among all three types of independent identifiers while the turnout level for strong and weak identifiers has remained fairly constant. As a

³² Although on average turnout is lower for all categories of party identification in midterm elections, the pattern is much the same as in presidential elections. Except in 1998, when nearly as many Pure Independents went to the polls as Independent and Weak partisans, the turnout rate among Pure Independents has in recent years been considerably lower in off-year congressional elections than that of leaners.

result, in the last two presidential elections leaners' propensity to vote dropped below that of their respective weak partisans. The drop in turnout is more striking among Pure Independents, starting in 1996. Where turnout among Pure Independents had been averaging over 60 percent, that proportion dropped to 48 percent in the Clinton-Dole election and has not topped 55 percent since. Pure Independents comprised only 7 percent of the electorate in 2008, which is below their average for the 1952-2008 period. As was the case in the past, two thirds of the Independents (independent leaners) are nearly as likely to vote as are other partisans, behavior which does not match that of the other third (pure independents).³³

In our view, one of *Myth's* most compelling findings was Partisan Independents' "impressive tendency to vote for the candidate of the party they feel closer to; indeed in presidential elections *they are generally more loyal to their party than weak partisans.*"³⁴ That pattern holds today. Table 8 shows the average vote for presidential elections between 1952 and 1988 and for each election since. In 1992 Independent Democrats' loyalty rate dropped to a still-impressive 67 percent (most of the defectors voting for Perot). Since then, Independent Democrats have become increasingly loyal in each of the last four presidential elections such that in 2008 fully 90 percent of them – the highest rate since NES polling began – voted Democratic. Independent Republicans have also remained loyal, although Perot in 1992 and Clinton in 1996 were able to draw more than 20 percent of them away from the Republican standard-bearer. Over the period 1952-2008, on average 72 percent of Independent Democrats – but only 12 percent of

³³ As they did regarding interest in the campaign, Patterson found, regarding voter turnout in 2000, that leaners were closer to Pure Independents than partisans: "Independents and partisans are not the same when it comes to participation." Thus, he concluded, "The rise of the independent voter has contributed to the fall in election turnout..." Patterson 2003, 44.

³⁴ Keith *et al.* 1992, 65. Emphasis in the original.

Independent Republicans – voted for the Democratic presidential candidate. In sharp contrast, Pure Independents demonstrated no loyalty to either party: they have typically voted for the winner in two-party races and divided their votes three ways when a third candidate has emerged (1968, 1980, 1992).

Table 8
Party Identification and Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidates, 1952-2008

	Percentage Who Voted for the Democratic Presidential Candidate									
	Average 1952- 1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	Average 1992- 2008	Vote for Perot, 1992	Vote for Perot, 1996	Vote for Nader, 2000
Strong Democrats	85	91	94	97	97	93	95	5	3	0
Weak Democrats	63	65	82	85	82	83	79	18	8	1
Indep. Democrats	68	67	72	71	86	90	77	26	21	8
Pure Independents	32	36	31	43	51	50	42	40	22	6
Indep. Republicans	11	10	22	13	13	17	15	26	9	8
Weak Republicans	13	13	20	16	9	11	14	25	10	2
Strong Republicans	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	11	1	1

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers].

Table 9 shows the average vote for House elections for the period covered by *Myth* (1962-1990) and the vote for each House election since 1992. Prior to the 1990s,

leaners were on average nearly as loyal as weak partisans: three-quarters of Independent Democrats joined their kindred strong and weak partisans in voting Democratic, and two-thirds of Independent Republicans joined the weak and strong Republicans in voting Republican.³⁵ Since 1992, this relative pattern has held. In 2008, 84% of Independent Democrats voted for the House Democrat while Independent Republicans voted just as decidedly for the House Republican. Pure Independents typically did not heavily favor either party in 2008, voting slightly more Republican than Democratic.

Table 9
Party Identification and Vote for Democratic House Candidates, 1962-2008

	Percentage Who Voted for the Democratic House Candidate									Average 1992-2008
	Average 1962-1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008	
Strong Democrats	89	87	88	86	87	88	93	91	93	89
Weak Democrats	76	82	71	69	61	70	66	78	83	73
Indep. Democrats	74	76	64	70	64	71	67	77	84	71
Pure Independents	55	56	50	41	47	50	31	48	43	46
Indep. Republicans	32	36	25	18	25	26	28	32	20	26
Weak Republicans	27	34	22	20	27	16	27	17	21	23
Strong Republicans	14	18	6	3	8	12	7	10	7	9

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

³⁵ In most of these elections, the Democrats had majorities in the House and thus more incumbents running than the Republicans did. Given the power of incumbency in determining vote choice, the greater defection among Republican identifiers in the surveys is understandable — as is the turnout in the Republican direction during the subsequent years in which the GOP held a majority.

Myth concluded that “the [generally partisan] voting behavior of independent leaners [is] a spectacular refutation of the orthodox belief that party regularity is proportionate to strength of party identification . . . leaners do not always match or exceed weak identifiers on all measures of partisan affect, but *they are never neutral, and the extent of their affect almost invariably resembles that of weak partisans.*”³⁶ The conclusion is as valid now as it was for the period reviewed in *Myth*.

Party Identification Remains Important as a Voting Cue

One reason scholars have taken notice of the rise in the proportion of individuals claiming to be Independent is that the increase potentially undermines the well-established idea that the strength and direction of party identification underpin the voting behavior of Americans. This idea was the central tenet of Warren Miller’s (and colleagues’) *The American Voter*. Looking back 30 years later, Miller found, even without classifying leaners as partisans, that party was no less relevant in the determination of how to vote in the 1980s than it had been in the 1950s.³⁷ Larry Bartels looked more extensively at partisanship and voting behavior through the 1996 presidential and congressional elections.³⁸ Classifying leaners as partisans, and estimating the impact of party identification on presidential vote propensity, he found that while partisan identification became less and less correlated with voting in presidential and congressional elections from the 1950s through the mid-1970s, the reduction in the role of party identification then reversed itself with a steady rise such that: “By 1996, this trend has produced a level of partisan voting 77% higher than in 1972 – an average

³⁶ Keith *et al.* 1992, 67, 70. Emphasis in the original.

³⁷ Miller 1991.

³⁸ Bartels 2000.

increase of 10 percent in each election, compounded over six election cycles – and 15 to 20 percent higher than in the supposed glory days of the 1950s that spawned *The American Voter*.³⁹ With respect to congressional elections, Bartels likewise found that voting according to party loyalty reached its nadir in 1978, but by 1996 was nearly back to its 1964 level.

In his discussion, Bartels suggested that the recent revival of the role of party identification stems from mass reaction to developments among the elites. The parties themselves, and their candidate standard-bearers, have taken clearer and more disparate stances on issues, so that many in the electorate see clearer differences between what they and their opponents stand for. The conversion of the always-conservative South to Republican control is often cited as a key element in the parties having more closely aligned their messages and stances with classic liberal and conservative ideologies. In Congress, the House and Senate have become more unified by party, with more party-line votes. Cable news and Internet sites unceasingly pound home these differences. Voters see this and align, or adapt, their own positions and allegiances. Some scholars have referred to the electoral portion of this phenomenon as “party sorting”: as clearer differences emerge between the two parties, voters more readily sort themselves as Democrats or Republicans.⁴⁰

Two positions have emerged in the literature with respect to party sorting.⁴¹ Some argue that while people find it easier now than they once did to identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans, due to party elites’ conveying clearer positions on a whole

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰ Levendusky (forthcoming), .

⁴¹ For a debate on party sorting and how much the electorate has polarized in recent years, see Morris P. Fiorina and Matthew S. Levendusky, “Disconnected: The Political Class versus the People,” as well as comments on that article by Alan I. Abramowitz and by Gary C. Jacobson, a rejoinder by Fiorina and Levendusky, and a rejoinder by Abramowitz, in Nivola and Brady, eds. 2006.

range of issues (abortion, gun control, tax cuts, gay and lesbian rights), in so doing they adopt *moderate* positions within their respective parties. Matthew Levendusky has taken this view, arguing that “when respondents sort, they choose a side, but they do not become ideological extremists.”⁴² Other political scientists see sorting as leading individuals to take distinct *ideological* positions, thus increasing polarization of the electorate.⁴³ For example, James E. Campbell has written that “as the Republican Party became more clearly the party of conservatives and the Democratic Party the party of liberals, the polarization of the electorate was revealed . . . moderates are now a political minority among American voters.”⁴⁴

Recent work by Morris Fiorina, Samuel Abrams, and Jeremy Pope and by Alan Abramowitz provides a context for looking at Independents in the discussion of how parties in the electorate may have changed. In their *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina *et al.* argued that while political activists, political parties and candidates, and others within the American political elites have recently become more ideologically polarized, the electorate has not.⁴⁵ While the press makes much of the current chasm between “Red States” and “Blue States,” American citizens in both types of state are fairly moderate, and no more polarized in their political views now than two

⁴² Levendusky (forthcoming), 69.

⁴³ The discussion of party sorting is not limited to political scientists, nor is sorting just about partisanship. Bill Bishop argues that over the last thirty years Americans have been sorting themselves into more and more homogeneous, and partisan, communities. Bishop sees this in a negative light: party sorting results in “balkanized communities whose inhabitants find other Americans to be culturally incomprehensible; a growing intolerance for political differences that has made national consensus impossible; and politics so polarized that Congress is stymied and elections are no longer contests over policies, but bitter choices over ways of life” (Bishop 2009, 14). Since the 2004 elections pollsters and political consultants have looked at voters not just from the perspective of their partisan affiliations, but also their lifestyles. Mark Penn, a pollster and strategist for President Bill Clinton and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, identified 72 different groupings of voters according to their lifestyles: working, retired, protestant, and Hispanics (Penn 2007); Sousnik, Dowd, and Fournier (2006) also sort the American electorate by lifestyles.

⁴⁴ James E. Campbell 2006, 153.

⁴⁵ Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006.

and three decades ago. Fiorina *et al.* reached this conclusion by looking at citizens' positions on a variety of economic and especially cultural policy issues, their evaluation of candidates and parties, and their ideological self-assessment.⁴⁶ The bulk of their analysis did not focus on differences among party identifiers, but they did observe that activists among the electorate⁴⁷ and strong party identifiers tend to be more polarized than the rest of the electorate, and that strong identifiers were somewhat more polarized in 2000 than they were a generation before. The authors pointed out, however, that polarization "fades out as partisan commitment declines": it is not a feature of the "less strong identifiers" and notably not of political Independents of any stripe. In particular, they said, "strong partisans are far more polarized than weak partisans and independent leaners" on feelings about the parties, and on ratings of liberals and conservatives.⁴⁸ In sum, Fiorina *et al.* argued that the population's views on almost all political matters are centrist – in the shape of a normal or "bell" curve – having mostly activists, activists plus Strong Republicans and Strong Democrats at the tails, and the rest of the population, including the leaners, clustered in the middle.

A different take on electoral polarization has been developed by Alan Abramowitz. In 2007 he pointed out that since Converse's observation that the U.S. electorate of the 1950s did not form ideologically-based opinions of candidates or elections, the electorate has become much better educated, and political elites (including party activists and candidates) have become more ideological in the messages they

⁴⁶Fiorina makes the interesting observation that a 2003 Pew Research Center report entitled *The 2004 Political Landscape: Evenly Divided and Increasingly Polarized*, extensively surveyed citizens' views over a number of years on dozens of current issues, and an objective analysis of their findings actually produces a picture that is the reverse of the report's title; Fiorina concludes that "Pew would have done better to give its report the subtitle... "An Ambivalent Majority" (p. 41). See Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 66.

⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that Fiorina *et al.* defined "activists" as partisans who report participating in "three or more (of five possible) campaign activities," (*ibid.*, 67), thereby presumptively excluding the Partisan Independents who met this criterion. We will return to this point later in this chapter.

⁴⁸ Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006, 68.

convey.⁴⁹ Abramowitz saw reason to expect, following the research findings of Hetherington and others, that the electorate has become more ideological in their thinking and voting.⁵⁰ Looking at the 2006 midterm elections, he found that while most Americans identified as moderate on the liberal-conservative continuum, when the same respondents were asked their opinions on twelve current issues the registered voters – but not the non-voters – divided between liberal and conservative positions. Only 17 percent fell in the center of the ideology scale. The liberals on the scale voted substantially for Democratic House candidates, and the conservatives on the scale voted substantially for Republican House candidates. With regard to party identification among voters in 2006, Abramowitz found that Democratic identifiers, including leaning Independents, were decidedly liberal on his issues scale, and Republican identifiers, including leaning Independents, were decidedly conservative. In keeping with the tendencies we have observed for leaners, Abramowitz found that Democratic and Republican leaners were more ideological than the weak partisans, scoring almost as ideologically extreme as the strong identifiers. Pure Independents were in the center of the scale.

⁴⁹Abramowitz 2007.

⁵⁰ Looking at NES data, Marc Hetherington found that “Americans in the 1990s are more likely to think about one party positively and one negatively, less likely to feel neutral toward either party, and better able to list why they like and dislike the parties than they were ten to thirty years ago” and that “greater ideological polarization in Congress has clarified public perceptions of party ideology, which has produced a more partisan electorate.” He suggested that voters should be “much better able to make ... ideological distinctions than in the past.” (Hetherington 2001, 628-629); Layman, Carsey and Horowitz provide a review of the scholarship that has abounded recently on the topic of party polarization in the electorate. (Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006).

Table 10
Party Identification and Liberal/Conservative Self-Classification, 1964-2008

	Strong Democrats	Weak Democrats	Indep. Democrats	Pure Indeps.	Indep. Republicans	Weak Republicans	Strong Republicans
1972	3.5	4.1	3.5	4.1	4.4	4.6	4.9
1974	3.6	3.9	3.7	4.1	4.5	4.6	5.1
1976	3.6	3.9	3.7	4.1	4.7	4.7	5.4
1978	3.7	3.9	3.5	4.0	4.6	4.8	5.3
1980	3.6	4.0	3.7	4.3	4.8	4.8	5.4
1982	3.7	4.1	3.8	4.4	4.7	4.8	5.5
1984	3.6	3.8	3.6	4.1	4.7	4.7	5.2
1986	3.7	4.0	3.8	4.3	4.6	4.6	5.2
1988	3.7	4.0	3.7	4.2	4.7	4.6	5.5
1990	3.7	3.9	3.8	4.3	4.4	4.6	5.1
1992	3.5	3.8	3.6	4.1	4.8	4.7	5.3
1994	3.5	3.9	3.8	4.5	4.9	4.7	5.6
1996	3.4	3.8	3.7	4.2	4.90	4.9	5.7
1998	3.5	3.9	3.6	4.3	4.5	4.8	5.5
2000	3.4	3.8	3.6	4.3	4.7	4.9	5.6
2002	3.3	3.6	3.5	4.2	4.8	4.9	5.8
2004	3.0	3.6	3.3	4.3	4.8	4.8	5.6
2008	3.4	3.7	3.7	4.1	4.9	5.1	5.7
Avg.	3.5	3.9	3.7	4.2	4.7	4.8	5.4

Note: Cell entries are the mean scores for each group on a scale from 1 (Extremely liberal) to 7 (Extremely conservative), and 4 is moderate.

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers].

Given the divergent portraits of leaners that emerge from these two studies, we looked at a variety of measures that address the ideological tendencies of the partisan independents. We began by examining how the seven groups of identifiers placed

themselves over the years on the NES liberal-conservative-liberal scale, where 1 is most conservative, 7 is most liberal, with 4 being the midpoint. The data in Table 10 suggest that Americans generally prefer to identify themselves as fairly moderate. The mean score for the electorate in 2008 was not far from the middle – at 4.3, and there were few respondents placing themselves at either extreme. Nonetheless, there are variations by party identification. In 2008, Strong Democrats saw themselves a little below the midpoint, at 3.4. Strong Republicans were in firm but not extreme conservative territory at 5.7. Weak and Independent Democrats were at the same spot to the left of center, 3.7. Likewise, Weak and Independent Republicans were close together to the right of center, at 5.1 and 4.9. Pure Independents were nearly at midpoint, at 4.1.

Table 10 shows little indication of increased ideological polarization over time among either Democratic or Republican identifiers. Strong Republicans' average scores have edged to the right, beginning in 1994, and Strong Democrats dipped slightly below 3 in 2004, but the three-decade trajectory hardly supports a claim that Democrats are identifying as decidedly liberal and Republicans as decidedly conservative. Table 10 also shows that leaners have continually “sorted” with the party towards which they lean. Independent Democrats ideologically have usually fallen between Strong and Weak Democrats, while Independent Republicans have scored themselves somewhat less conservatively than Weak and Strong Republicans. Pure Independents, as expected, have stayed consistently near midpoint

As noted, Abramowitz observed that Americans are generally disinclined to identify either as liberal or conservative. To see whether identifiers, notwithstanding their preference for a moderate label, look at issues in an ideologically consistent manner, we looked at where outright partisans, leaners, and pure Independents placed themselves on

specific economic and social issues that permit liberal and conservative stances. Table 11 arrays how each of the seven groups of identifier scores on an index of four economic issues between 1984 and 2008.⁵¹ Each of the four questions has a possible score of 1 for most liberal and 7 for most conservative. On the index, Partisan Independents consistently resembled their respective outright partisans – somewhat to the left of center with an average score of 14.6, where the most liberal score possible is 4 and the most conservative score is 28. In most years Independent Democrats placed themselves between Strong Democrats and Weak Democrats, averaging 14.6. Independent Republicans averaged 18.0, which was virtually identical to the score of Weak Republicans. The average score for Pure Independents, 15.8, is close to the midpoint of 16.

Table 11
Party Identification and Economic Issue Index, 1984-2008

	Strong Democrats	Weak Democrats	Indep. Democrats	Pure Indeps.	Indep. Republicans	Weak Republicans	Strong Republicans
1984	14.3	15.2	14.5	16.8	17.6	18.2	19.7
1988	13.7	15.3	14.6	15.6	17.7	17.8	19.7
1992	13.1	14.0	13.5	15.3	17.5	17.2	18.7
1994	14.2	15.0	15.0	14.9	17.6	17.6	20.8
1996	14.2	15.7	15.5	16.9	18.0	18.5	21.1
2000	14.8	15.8	15.3	16.0	19.2	18.6	20.6
2004	12.7	14.2	13.9	15.8	17.9	17.4	20.6
2008	12.3	13.8	14.2	15.1	18.4	19.4	21.2
Avg.	13.7	14.9	14.6	15.8	18.0	18.1	20.3

Note: Cell entries represent the mean score for each group. The scale was obtained from adding respondents' scores on 7-point scales for the following issues: government health care, government guarantee of jobs/quality of life, level of government services/spending, and defense spending. The scale ranges from 4 (most liberal) to 28 (most conservative), and 16 is a neutral score.

⁵¹ The index includes NES questions about government-paid vs. private-paid insurance plans, government seeing to it that people have jobs, government providing services even if it requires spending increases, and increasing or decreasing defense spending.

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

All three types of Democrat scored somewhat more liberal on the economic index in 2004 and 2008 than earlier. In 2008, both Weak and Strong Republicans reported their most conservative scores, and Independent Republicans were more conservative than in any year but 2000. Pure Independents continued to place themselves in the middle of the ideological spectrum. Such increased party sorting does not imply polarity, which on our scale would be indicated by single-digit scores for those taking a solidly liberal stand, and scores in the mid-20s for those taking a solidly conservative stand. Even in 2008, where the strongest ideological differences emerged, Strong Democrats scored 12.3 and Strong Republicans 20.3, with weak partisans and leaners positioned even farther from the polar extremes.

In positing that most Americans are not ideological, Fiorina was primarily considering social issues rather than economic. We looked at the four NES questions, included in the survey since 1986, that address traditional versus “new” lifestyles.⁵² While these questions do not ask respondents to take stances on specific issues of the day as the economic index did, they do provide a continuum that distinguishes between a

⁵² The questions for the lifestyle index were taken from the opinion section of NES. Respondents are asked whether they agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement.” The statements used in the index are:

“The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society.”

“The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes.”

“This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties.”

“We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own.”

traditional or conservative view and one that is more adaptive to nontraditional approaches to living. Table 12 shows the scores over time of each type of identifier on an index of the four items, each of which was a five-point scale.

Table 12
Party Identification and Lifestyle Index, 1986-2008

	Strong Democrats	Weak Democrats	Indep. Democrats	Pure Independs.	Indep. Republicans	Weak Republicans	Strong Republicans
1986	13.6	13.5	13.0	13.5	14.2	13.7	14.6
1988	13.3	13.4	12.8	13.2	13.8	14.3	15.2
1990	13.3	13.4	12.9	14.0	13.6	13.7	15.1
1992	12.5	13.0	12.4	13.0	14.5	14.0	15.8
1994	13.1	13.6	12.7	13.8	14.8	14.4	16.1
1996	13.0	13.4	12.8	13.1	14.3	14.8	16.5
1998	12.0	12.9	12.9	13.4	14.9	13.6	15.5
2000	12.9	12.9	12.4	13.7	13.9	14.5	15.9
2004	11.4	11.8	11.2	12.8	13.9	13.8	15.7
2008	11.6	12.3	11.5	12.8	14.0	13.7	15.6
Avg.	12.7	13.0	12.5	13.3	14.2	14.1	15.6

Note: Cell entries represent the mean score for each group. The scale ranges from 4 (most liberal) to 20 (most conservative), with 12 as neutral.

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004.; The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

Over the years, all three types of Democratic identifiers averaged scores between 12 and 13. Pure Independents averaged 13.3. Independent and Weak Republicans were both at 14.1 for the period, and Strong Republicans averaged 15.6. Strong Democrats become gradually more liberal between 1986 and 2008, and Weak Democrats become

more liberal from 1998 on. Independent Democrats were the most consistent – and liberal – in the decade between 1986 and 1996, and they too became even more liberal in the ensuing years. This tendency of Democratic identifiers to respond more liberally in 2004 and 2008 resembles the pattern seen above with economic issues. All three types of Republican identifiers maintained similar ideological outlooks on lifestyle issues over the two decades but did not trend to the right. Pure Independents remained consistently in the middle.

We then looked at three specific social issues that have been prominent recently: abortion, gay marriage, and gun control. The NES presented these questions as only three-point scales, leaving little room for differentiation. Nonetheless, combining the items into an index (with 3 representing the liberal response on all three items and 9 the most conservative) we found that leaners again resembled their respective partisans. Independent Democrats, with a score of 4.5, were on average slightly more liberal than Strong Democrats (4.7), followed by Weak Democrats (5.0). Independent Republicans (5.7) scored between Weak (5.5) and Strong Republicans (6.3). Pure Independents scored 5.5.

The patterns we have observed with respect to the ideological differences among the various types of identifiers are consistent with Fiorina et al's view that the electorate is not resolutely polarized, though some edging apart has appeared recently. However, his suggestion that the electorate is essentially a bloc of centrists is not an apt characterization, at least with respect to party identification. Abramowitz' observation that voters in 2006 were divided ideologically on issues, and that this disparity of view is reflected in their identification with party, appears to apply to the electorate at large, and has for decades. Whereas Pure Independents consistently place themselves at or near the

center of the ideological spectrum, Partisan Independents consistently share the ideological views of outright partisans. There are clear differences between Democrats and Republicans, including leaners, on economic and social issues, as well as with respect to ideological self-identification. But these differences are not so great as to warrant the term “polarized.”

Leaners Agree with Partisans About Candidates

As we observed at the outset, various scholars, pundits and politicians who have remarked on the growing “bloc” of independents in the electorate have fixed on the notion that, because this group has little or no allegiance to parties, candidates who play their cards right will be able to capture this sizable potential vote. At this point in the chapter – equipped with the knowledge that Partisan Independents prefer the party towards which they lean, and lean liberal and conservative ideologically – we can speculate that the two groups of leaners are unlikely to unite in their evaluations of the individuals who emerge into the political limelight. The NES provides the opportunity to measure the electorate’s opinions of political notables over a period of years. Table 13 presents the mean score for the seven categories of party identification on their thermometer ratings of presidential and vice presidential candidates, U.S. House and Senate candidates, plus prominent political figures from each political party; the media and other public forums. Each score represents the average thermometer rating a particular political figure received over time, in most cases for numerous election years.

Table 13
Party Identification and Evaluation of Political Figures, 1964-2008

	SD	WD	ID	I	IR	WR	SR
Democratic Pres. Candidate ^I	77.0	64.5	64.1	52.6	43.1	43.9	31.2
Dem. V. Pres. Candidate ^{II}	70.8	60.3	60.3	51.7	46.6	47.8	39.2
Dem. House Cand. ^{III}	70.3	63.9	61.2	57.2	52.9	54.6	47.4
Dem.Senate Candidate ^{IV}	70.8	61.8	60.8	54.3	47.7	50.7	40.5
Bill Clinton ^V	77.5	67.6	64.5	51.7	40.6	41.7	25.3
Hillary Clinton ^{VI}	73.8	63.5	60.4	50.0	39.8	41.2	25.5
Rep. Pres. Candidate ^{VII}	39.3	51.0	47.0	58.0	70.3	72.1	82.4
Rep. V. Pres. Candidate ^{VIII}	38.1	46.3	43.4	51.0	59.6	60.5	70.9
Rep. House Cand. ^{IX}	49.6	55.2	53.0	57.1	60.9	62.4	69.3
Rep. Senate Candidate ^X	43.4	51.4	48.8	53.3	60.1	60.8	68.8
Ronald Reagan ^{XI}	42.6	53.3	49.1	59.6	70.7	70.2	79.3
John McCain ^{XII}	49.0	53.3	52.6	54.7	62.7	63.5	69.3
George Bush ^{XIII}	25.8	39.6	36.2	50.2	64.9	68.1	81.6
Condoleezza Rice ^{XIV}	40.5	50.5	48.3	55.4	64.7	65.4	73.6
Rush Limbaugh ^{XV}	18.7	31.2	31.3	37.5	48.9	48.6	58.1
Ralph Nader ^{XVI}	46.5	49.0	53.8	48.6	48.4	44.3	41.7
Ross Perot ^{XVII}	38.0	43.8	46.1	48.2	47.4	42.2	35.4
Colin Powell ^{XVII}	61.2	65.3	65.0	66.5	74.1	75.2	81.1

Source: Sapiro, Virginia, Steven J. Rosenstone, and the National Election Studies. AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE, 1948-2002 [Computer file]. 12th ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004. The American National Election Studies (ANES; www.electionstudies.org). The ANES 2008 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers], 2008.

Note:

Cell entries are respondents' mean thermometer scores.

I. 1968 to 2008

II. 1968 to 2008

III. 1978 to 2008

IV. 1978 to 2008

V. 1992 to 2008

VI. 1992 to 2008

VII. 1968 to 2008

VIII. 1968 to 2008

IX. 1978 to 2008

X. 1968 to 2008

XI. 1968 to 2004

XII. 2000 to 2008

XIII. 2000 to 2008

XV. 2000 to 2008

XV. 2008

XVI. 2000 to 2004

XVII. 2002 to 2004

Partisan Independents resemble their fellow partisans in their feelings about political luminaries. Like partisans, leaners rated the presidential and congressional standard-bearers from their own party positively and candidates from the other party negatively. As we have seen on other measures, there is a striking similarity between leaners and their fellow weak partisans. With respect to the candidates of the party towards which they lean, the average difference between Independent Democrats and Weak Democrats over the years is only one percentage point across all four candidate types (President, Vice President, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House). Independent Republicans declare essentially the same degree of coolness about Democratic candidates as do Weak Republicans; over time 1.8 points out of 100 are all that separates them on average. Independent and Weak Republicans viewed candidates of their party equally warmly, the average difference over time being 1.2 points on the 100 point scale.

Do Independents opt out of parties because of specific political personalities? Table 13 provides little evidence that leaners are drawn differentially to particular individuals. Independent and Weak Democrats had identical views of Colin Powell, Rush Limbaugh and John McCain, and their mean scores over time are never more than five points apart on the 100 point scale for Bill and Hillary Clinton, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Condoleezza Rice. In each case, it is noteworthy that Independent Democrats had the chillier ratings of the two groups, which for the four Republicans was more consistent with Strong Democrats than the Weak Democrats. They gave slightly higher scores than Weak Democrats to Ralph Nader and Ross Perot, but again the differences are five points or less.

The mean thermometer scores of Independent Republicans were identical with those of Weak Republicans on Rush Limbaugh (49 points) and Condoleezza Rice (65).

Independent Republicans were one degree more positive about Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Ronald Reagan and were one degree less positive about John McCain, and Colin Powell. The widest difference between Independent Republicans and Weak Republicans was on George W. Bush, where Independent Republicans evaluated him at 64.9 and Weak Republicans at 68.1. Republican leaners were more positive about Ralph Nader and Ross Perot than were Weak Republicans, but the difference never exceeds five degrees. It is also the case that all seven types of identifier had similar scores on Nader and Perot, the range for both being a low of 35.4 and a high of 53.8.

Independent Republicans and Independent Democrats are hardly up for grabs, then, for the same candidates. Their thermometer scores are often 20 points apart, which is a far greater distance than they are from their respective partisan brethren.⁵³

How Independents are Classified Does Matter

Our earlier work prompted Jody Baumgartner and Peter Francia to observe recently that “it is not necessarily the measure of party identification that is the culprit in propagating the myth of the independent voter but rather how some have used the data for this measurement.”⁵⁴ We hope that, in addition to quashing the notion that there is a large bloc of unattached voters out there who are choice pickings for a clever candidate or whose size portends party dealignment, our findings will encourage analysts of the American electorate to refine their approaches so as to measure most accurately that which they are seeking to assess.

⁵³ We looked also at how identifiers have rated “liberals” and “conservatives” over the years. Independent leaners were warm toward liberals and cool toward conservatives to just about the same degree as are weak Democrats, and very similar to Strong Democrats. Independent Republicans were the mirror image, warm to conservatives and most resembling Weak Republicans but scoring close as well to the ratings of Strong Republicans.

⁵⁴ Baumgartner and Francia 2008, 44.

Take, for example, the research of Saunders and Abramowitz on whether the ideological views of “active partisans” differ from those of the electorate at large.⁵⁵ Party leaders, the authors submitted, should take a keen interest in satisfying such activists because they are essential to providing vital resources, they act as opinion leaders, and they are an important primary voting bloc; indeed, candidates ignore the political opinions of “active partisans” at their peril.⁵⁶ The authors began their process of identifying active partisans by excluding more than one-third of their sample – the Independents, including the leaners – and then built a measure of activism to tease out the “most active citizens” from the remaining weak and strong partisans. The authors compared the opinions of these “activists” to those of the rest of the electorate and found gaps in ideological stance. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, we would expect to see a considerable number of Partisan Independents who fit their definition of party activists. But the authors preemptively lumped all leaners into the comparison group of inactive citizens.

As we noted earlier, Fiorina *et al.* also developed an “activist” group from among strong and weak partisans -- after removing the leaners. But, by this measure,⁵⁷ there are significant numbers of activists who identify as leaners – indeed, there has been a higher

⁵⁵Saunders and Abramowitz 2004.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 286.

⁵⁷Fiorina *et al.* 2006, 67; The activist measure includes those who responded “yes” to at least three of the following questions:

“During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates?”

“Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners or things like that in support of a particular candidate?”

“Did you do any other work for one of the parties or candidates?”

“Did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your house?”

“Did you give money to a political party during this election year? Did you give money to and individual candidate running for public office?”

proportion of activists among Independent Republicans than among Weak Republicans since 1996 and a higher proportion of activists among Independent Democrats than among Weak Democrats since 2004. If Fiorina *et al.* had counted these activists, the comparison charts in their Chapter 3 would likely have demonstrated more accurately the point they wished to make.

Our aim here is not to call into question these two articles' claims about political activists. But one does wonder in both cases whether shifting the not-insubstantial subset of leaners might not have produced more accurate tests of their hypotheses, and thus produced gaps of different sizes than were found.⁵⁸ In this and other research questions, where leaners are classified can make a difference in political analysis, one that extends beyond questions relating to dealignment or viability of third party candidacies.

Conclusion

Eighteen years ago we distinguished three quite different types of independents: Independent Democrats have pro-Democratic views and vote predictably Democratic, Independent Republicans have pro-Republican views and vote predictably Republican, and Pure Independents are not grounded in a party. Contrary to the speculation about a large and growing group of Independents who were “up for grabs” we found the proportion of Pure Independents, the only volatile group of Independents, to be a small and stable fraction of the electorate.⁵⁹ We concluded that “independents, defined inclusively, have little in common. They are more diverse than either Republicans or

⁵⁸ Abramowitz made this very point in his subsequent work (2007) and in a recent Internet commentary, where he encouraged readers to take note that the views of leaners on most major issues have been very similar to those of regular partisans, as has their voting behavior: “It therefore makes no sense to view independents as a homogenous bloc of floating voters. Independents are sharply divided along party lines just like the rest of the American electorate.” (Abramowitz 2009). As Baumgartner and Francia have put it, “an understanding of how leaners and Independents behave politically [has] receive[d] short shrift.” (Baumgartner and Francia, 2008, 44)

⁵⁹ Keith *et al.* 1992, 14.

Democrats. Most of them are not uncommitted, and they are not a bloc. They are largely closet Democrats and Republicans.”⁶⁰ That observation remains the case today.

In *Myth* we stopped short of adducing causes for *why* individuals in the electorate identify as independents rather than as partisans. We noted then that Pure Independents were more likely than other identifiers to claim alienation from the political system, and were most likely to express disapproval of the political parties. Likewise, the leaners’ slightly less sanguine (than the partisans’) view of the parties may have helped explain their not immediately acknowledging a party identification.⁶¹ This chapter’s review of more recent data leaves open the possibility that Independent leaners may avoid party labels because of their less positive view of the party towards which they lean.

Since *Myth*, only a few scholars have shed light on this elusive question. In the *New American Voter*, Miller and Shanks argued that party identification is akin to religion – that an individual has a visceral identity, a “sense of oneness,” with the group.⁶² In their view, the group with which one identifies provides to the faithful parishioner, or to the political party follower, “many cues for normative assessments of the outside world,” including what is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable.⁶³ They suggested that Independents, including leaners, classify themselves as “non-partisan” because they reject this sense of oneness with party and, presumably, take their cues for assessment from elsewhere.

It is encouraging to see that in recent years some studies have looked at survey data in order to explore other possible reasons for individuals’ calling themselves Independents. For example, Steven Greene used a survey of one Midwestern county’s

⁶⁰ Keith *et al.* 1992, 4.

⁶¹ Keith *et al.* 1992, 199-200.

⁶² Miller and Shanks 1996, 121.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

electorate, and cited several “clear and compelling reasons why seemingly partisan individuals choose to identify themselves as independents”:

A greater reliance on cognition and less on affect in forming overall partisan evaluations, less partisan social identity and greater independent social identity, negative attitudes toward the party system, and intergenerational transmission of independence are all key factors that determine whether an individual will be a true partisan or an independent leaner.⁶⁴

More recently, Liu and Lucas proposed that citizens are more likely to identify as Independents when they are subject to perceived disagreement (“cross pressure”) within their personal communication networks.⁶⁵ Using findings from time-series panel data (mid-December 1999 through mid-Jan 2001), they tentatively suggested that when a person lives among family and/or friends who support candidates from a party other than the one with which the individual identifies, it is simpler to call oneself an Independent than to consider oneself as a “defector” to the other party’s candidate.

While it is good to see such findings offered with caution, given the limitations of the data, we applaud the continuation of research that may give greater insight into why Americans identify as Independents. It is also noteworthy that party identification has remained a central concept in the study of individual political behavior, and that the traditional method of measuring it retains value. In closing, however, we would raise an eyebrow to arguments – such as that made in *The New American Voter* – that one should “ignore the differentiation of independent leaners,” and in conducting voting behavior studies, group all Independents together. Miller and Shanks acknowledged that leaners

⁶⁴Greene 2000, 530.

⁶⁵Liu and Lucas 2008.

can have opinions that favor one party over the other, and that they can “behave very much like partisans.”⁶⁶ But they also termed such behavior on the part of leaners a phenomenon of the moment – a “coincidence.”

There are undoubtedly multiple reasons for some Americans to think “Independent” before thinking “party” when asked in a survey how they generally consider themselves. However, when the data show, year-in and year-out for over five decades, that *leaners hold opinions favoring their “leaned-toward” party*, the notion that the pattern may be due to “coincidence” has to leave one somewhat perplexed. The more appropriate way to consider the impact of the independent voter is to focus on Pure Independents, apart from leaners. As things stand today, much of the speculation about Independents, and indeed some from academia, perpetuate a myth.

⁶⁶ Miller and Shanks 1996, 127.

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