

**BIRTH OF A QUESTION:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEC GALLUP**

Public Perspective: The party identification question is the most widely used political measure in American survey research. So far as we can tell, it's a Gallup invention. The first asking we can find is in a Gallup Poll of March 1937.

Alec Gallup: That's pretty much correct. I went through our surveys starting with number one. It was in 1937 that we first asked: "In politics, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, Socialist, or Independent?" It wasn't until 1946, however, that we began asking the party ID question all the time. For one reason or another, we had previously emphasized voting intention or voting experience questions. Any breaks reported were on the basis of how people had voted, or intended to vote, not their party identification. Then, in 1946, we shifted emphasis to the party ID approach.

Remember in those early years we had no experience on which to build. We were there early and nobody else had worked on this issue before, so we were constantly experimenting. As part of the experimentation we conducted split ballots every week. We were running six thousand case surveys, dividing the sample into a "K" ballot and a "T" ballot. We would try one question wording and then another. We asked every wording variation you could think of.

We were able to do all these split ballots with big samples because, in those days, interviews cost us only 10 cents apiece. Of course, our questionnaires were very short, 12-20 questions—not like today. We experimented with different orderings of the party labels in the questions, to determine the effect of asking Republican first—or last—for example. Today, some Democrats talk about broadening their political base by moving to the right. Back in the 1930s, of course, it was the other way around. We were asking questions on whether the Republican Party should "go more to the left," go more in the "direction of labor, and other liberal groups," or more in the direction of specific party figures to broaden its base. This was a constant theme.

PP: Did your father, by the way, keep a diary or some such record of his professional activities? Might he have referred to his thinking about measuring partisanship, and in particular his decision to use the now-famous party identification wording?

AG: No. But, as I have said, he was very open in all his work to experimentation. For example, one of the things we found in the party ID question is that we obtained somewhat different distributions in telephone interviews

than with in-person interviews. In fact, that is one of the reasons why we were slow getting into telephone interviewing. My father was always uncomfortable about it. Party ID is a highly visible item—and the two forms of interviewing consistently yield different results. It's one of the very few places where this happens. You don't see the differences in the case of presidential popularity or with almost any other political question. There are, in fact, only two or three questions where there are regular differences between in-person and telephone interviews. We regularly get higher Republican proportions in telephone interviewing. Religion is another case: The Catholic proportion is somewhat higher in the personal interviews.

PP: Are your telephone samples more upscale?

AG: We've always felt that that was part of the explanation for the differences. Still, there has to be something else. When you look at factors like education and income, they are a little more up-scale in the telephone samples—always have been. But not enough to entirely explain the differences in party identification.

But, as I say, the differences have made us uncomfortable. We had neglected the problem in the rush of surveys during the Gulf War. But we weren't using personal interviews during the war because we obviously needed to complete the surveys in the shortest possible time. But when the war ended, we resumed in-person interviews—and again noticed the differences in party ID figures depending on the method of interviewing. In any event, we feel that the two sets of data should be kept separate in charting trend lines.

PP: After World War II, in 1946 or 1947, you put the party ID question in the demographics where it's remained ever since. How formal or conscious was this decision—construing party ID as in some sense like gender or education—a fundamental, persisting attribute?

AG: It wasn't conscious. We just decided one week to do it. Actually, it was not quite a demographic, it was kind of a "semi-demographic." It never appeared with education, income, etc., but immediately before these items.

Our wording rather early on was: "In politics *as of today...*" Now we notice that there are some differences between our findings and those, for example, from CBS News and the New York Times. They ask: "Generally speaking, do you *usually* consider yourself...?" We feel that ours is the more realistic approach, in that it is more reflective of the current political climate. Our rationale is that you want something that is time sensitive. You don't want to know about a person's political or ideological history; you want to know where he or she stands now.

Measuring Things: Gallup and Party ID/continued

PP: Geoffrey Garin, in an interview in the last issue, remarked that the political world has changed significantly in one highly relevant regard since the time Gallup introduced the party ID measure. He said that analysts still treat party ID as if they were asking the respondent's occupation or gender—but it's not like that at all—it's gotten more fluid.

The first direct asking of partisan identification appears to be that by Gallup in March 1937. Gallup didn't ask a variant of the question again until November 1937—20 surveys later—attesting to the fact it was not yet established as the staple measure of the country's partisan makeup. It was not to occupy that status until the end of World War II. The March 31-April 14, 1944 survey was apparently the first to employ all of what became the standard elements of the Gallup wording; it added "today" to the question's preface.

1. Do you regard yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or a Socialist? (March 3-8, 1937)

Republican 30%
Democrat 50%
Socialist 2%
Independent (vol.) 15%
No Opinion 3%

2. Do you regard yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Socialist, or Independent? (November 14-19, 1937)

Republican 32%
Democrat 43%
Socialist 1%
Independent 22%
No Answer 2%

3. Which national political party do you feel most represents your viewpoint at the present time? (December 30, 1937-January 4, 1938)

Republican 33%
Democrat 56%
Socialist 4%
NA/DK 7%

4. In politics do you consider yourself a Republican or a Democrat? (September 15-20, 1938)

Republican 39%
Democrat 42%
Other (vol.) 4%
No Opinion 15%

AG: Yes, we think so. And this is another reason why, we think, it makes the most sense in asking party ID to emphasize right now, "as of today."

Alec Gallup is co-chairman of the Gallup Organization.

5. In politics, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, Socialist, or Independent? (December 2-7, 1939)

Republican 36%
Democrat 39%
Socialist 1%
Independent 20%
Don't Know 4%

6. In politics, do you consider yourself a Republican, Independent, Socialist or Democrat? (May 16-21, 1940)

Republican 34%
Independent 17%
Socialist/Other/NA 0.4%
Democrat 43%
DK 5%

7. If the Government required voters in every state to register NOW for the next Presidential election, would you register Republican or Democratic? (July 30-August 4, 1943)

Republican 41%
Democratic 46%
Other (vol.) 2%
Don't Know 11%

8. In politics—as of today—do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, Socialist or Independent? (March 31-April 4, 1944)

Republican 38%
Democrat 40%
Socialist 1%
Independent 19%
DK/NA 2%