

Partisan Instability in the 1996 Campaign

While party identification perhaps remains the best single predictor of the vote, its prognostic force has recently been challenged on two fronts. First, real changes in the electorate — centered around the erosion of partisan ties — have reduced the influence of party ID on the vote.¹ Second, the standard party ID measures, including the one employed by the National Election Studies (NES) for over 40 years, seem to yield an incomplete and conceptually inadequate picture of the American electorate.² Now, data collected by the Roper Center in a February and September national panel study provide evidence of instability in party identification this election year as well.

In February of 1996, the Roper Center's asking of the NES party identification question (see box on this page) found that 36% of voters identified with the Democratic Party and 33% with the Republican Party, while 24% claimed to be independents. In the same survey, the Roper Center asked a modified party identification question (see box on this page). The same respondents answered this way: 28% said they identified with the Republican Party, 27% with the Democratic Party, and 41% said they did not identify with any party at all (Table 1).

While it might be argued that administering both of these questions to the same individuals in the same survey will result in measurement error, we feel confident in discounting such effects. In a July 1996 national voter survey, we split a 1,000 person sample, administering the NES ID to half of the respondents and the Roper Center ID to the other half. In the NES question, 34% identified as Democrats, 32% as Republicans, and 23% as independents. In the Roper Center question, 29% said Democrat, 28% said Republican, and 40% indicated no party identification. As these split sample findings are similar to our February survey findings, it appears that the question placement effects are negligible.

It is apparent, then, that the two questions elicit distinct responses. When given the option of not identifying with a

party (the Roper Center measure) as opposed to identifying as an independent (the NES measure), more voters choose to not identify. That the two items produce such varying results raises suspicions about the stability of the NES party identification measure.

But, the bivariate relationship between the NES question and the Roper Center question is even more instructive. In Table 2, we see that only three-quarters of Republican identifiers on the NES ID remain Republican identifiers on the Roper Center ID, and only two-thirds of Democrats on the NES question remain there on ours. (Three-quarters of those who claim to be NES "independents" say they do not identify with a party in the Roper Center asking.)

Indeed, 30% of Democrats and 22% of Republicans on the NES ID changed their answer to "no party" on the Roper Center ID.

Overall, 32% of voters did not give a consistent response (i.e. Republican/Republican, Democrat/Democrat, or independent/no party) to these two questions. In total, only 24% of registered voters identify with the Republican party on both askings, and only 24% identify with the Democratic Party on both askings. A majority — 52% — do not identify with one of the major parties on both questions. These data suggest a significant level of instability in partisan attachments based on two similar questions used to measure party identification in the same survey.

And even those who are "consistent" Democrats and "consistent" Republicans admit that they often do not vote

the party line. As Table 3 shows, when asked whether they typically vote a straight partisan ticket or split their ticket, about 6-in-10 say that they usually split. Further, about half of consistent Democrats and half of consistent Republicans say that when voting in past Presidential elections, they have voted for candidates of different parties.

In September 1996, we recontacted more than 500 randomly selected voters from the February survey. Once again,

A Note on Question Wording:

The two most popular versions of the party identification question are the Gallup and American National Election Study (NES) wordings. Both askings prompt respondents to choose between Republican, Democrat, or independent. NES puts respondents in the broader "Generally speaking" context, while the Gallup question focuses on the current "In politics as of today" environment.

In this article, the Roper Center tests an alternative question and makes direct comparisons with the NES version. The Roper Center version first asks respondents if they identify with a party. If they do, they are asked which one. In 1980, Jack Dennis developed a similar question (but asked respondents if they were "supporters" of a party rather than if they "identified" with a party).

NES ID: Generally Speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?

Roper Center ID: In your own mind, do you identify with one of the political parties or not? [If Yes:] Which political party do you identify with?

Gallup ID: In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent?

Table 1

A higher percentage of respondents choose not to identify with either party in the Roper Center ID than in the NES ID, but the gap narrows as the election nears.

February 1996				September 1996			
	NES ID	Roper Center ID			NES ID	Roper Center ID	
Republican	33%	Yes, Rep.	27%	Republican	32%	Yes, Rep.	28%
Democrat	36%	Yes, Dem.	28%	Democrat	36%	Yes, Dem.	35%
Independent	24%	Don't Identify	41%	Independent	26%	Don't Identify	32%

Table 2

Between one-fifth and one-third of those calling themselves Republican or Democrat in the NES ID don't identify with a party in the Roper Center ID.

Roper Center ID	NES ID (February 1996)			Roper Center ID	NES ID (September 1996)		
	Rep.	Dem.	Ind.		Rep.	Dem.	Ind.
Yes, Rep.	76%	1%	11%	Yes, Rep.	77%	1%	12%
Yes, Dem.	2%	69%	11%	Yes, Dem.	4%	78%	21%
Don't Identify	22%	30%	78%	Don't Identify	19%	20%	67%

Note: See p. 52 for complete question wording.

In the February survey, 24% of respondents were "consistent" Republicans, identifying themselves with that party in both the NES ID and the Roper Center ID. By the same measure, 24% were "consistent" Democrats, and 18% "consistent" independents. We see that even consistent Republicans and Democrats tend to split their ticket when voting. Similarly, about half of both consistent Republicans and Democrats report having voted for different parties for president in past elections.

Table 3

Even "firm" identifiers split their tickets extensively.

	Consistent Rep.	Consist. Dem.	Consist. Ind.
Vote Straight Ticket	38%	43%	8%
Vote Split Ticket	62%	57%	92%

Note: See p. 51 for complete question wording.

	Consistent Rep.	Consist. Dem.	Consist. Ind.
Always voted same party for president.	49%	48%	14%
Voted different parties for president.	47%	48%	77%

Source: Surveys by the Media Studies Center/Roper Center, February and September 1996.

Table 4
A panel study shows voters changing their party identification over a short period of time.

		NES ID—February 1996		
		Republican	Democrat	Independent
NES ID—September 1996	Republican	81%	4%	9%
	Democrat	7%	76%	15%
	Independent	11%	20%	62%

we asked both the NES ID and the Roper Center ID. As Table 4 shows, there was significant movement in the NES measure over time. In the NES ID, 81% of Republicans (in February) remain Republicans in September; 76% of Democrats remain Democrats; and 62% of independents remain independent. In all, only 71% offered the same response to the NES asking at both time points, just as only 70% of respondents offered a consistent response to the two party identification questions in February.

These data provide preliminary evidence that, going into next month's election, party identification is relatively weak and thus unstable. Our data show that many voters switch their party identification based on the wording of the question, even in the same survey. Our panel data also demonstrate that even on the same question, a sizable number of voters have switched their party allegiance from February to September of this year. Further, many of those who consistently identify with the same party

(regardless of the question wording) often do not act like consistent partisans in the voting booth.

Endnotes

¹See, for example, Martin Wattenberg, *The Decline of American Political Parties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²Many criticisms of the NES party measure relate to the idea that two independent concepts are present in one item. The item asks respondents to choose between the two parties on the one hand and independence on the other. The problem is that only one response is accepted, thus not allowing partisans to also express feelings of political independence. This assumption of unidimensionality has been a source of controversy for nearly 20 years.

In our February 1996 national survey of registered voters, we repeated a question that Jack Dennis included on several 1980 NES pilots: "Do you ever think of yourself as a political independent, or not?" This allows us to measure political independence as a distinct concept from partisanship. It shows that 44% of voters think of themselves as political independents. This is 20 percentage points more than those who identify as independents on the NES question, and suggests

that the political independence and partisanship concepts measured singularly by NES do in fact confuse two important concepts.

As further evidence of this confusion, one-third of those identifying as Republicans and one-third identifying as Democrats on the NES question say they also think of themselves as political independents on the modified question.

See Jack Dennis, "Political Independence in America, I: On Being an Independent Partisan Supporter." *British Journal of Political Science* 18:77-109 (1988), and "Political Independence in America, III: In Search of Closet Partisans," in *Political Behavior* 14:3 (1992); Susan E. Howell, "The Behavioral Component of Changing Partisanship" in *American Politics Quarterly* 8:279-302 (1980); Bruce Keith, et al, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); John R. Petrocik, "An Analysis of Sensitivities in the Index of Party Identification" in *Political Methodology* 1:31-47 (1974); David Valentine and John R. Van Winger, "Partisanship, Independence and the Partisan Identification Question," in *American Politics Quarterly* 8:165-186 (1980); and Herbert Weisberg, "A Multidimensional Conceptualization of Party Identification" in *Political Behavior* 2:33-60 (1980).



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