chapter 20

Independents and American Elections

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Many experts have claimed that the concept of party identification is the most important discovery of modern electoral research. People do not just vote for the Republican or the Democratic candidate; they also consider themselves to be Republicans or Democrats. *The American Voter* described such a partisan identity as a long-term, affective psychological attachment to a preferred political party.[1] These orientations are formed early in life, often before young people understand the content of these labels, and they largely endure through life even as the politicians and parties change.[2] Even if one temporarily votes for a candidate of a different party, there is a strong tendency to return "home" at the next election or even the next office listed on the ballot. Partisanship also is at the core of individuals' political beliefs, affecting how they think of themselves and politics. Thus, as Chapter 18 and Chapter 19 demonstrate, the concept of party identification is central to understanding how voters choose and how the electoral process functions. I agree. Knowing a person's partisanship is one of the most important tools for understanding how he or she will think and act politically.

But something is changing. Party ties have been weakening over the past several decades in the United States and most other established democracies. Because party identification is so important for political behavior, this downward trend has generated substantial scholarly and political attention. Starting in the mid-1960s, the number of Americans who expressed a partisan identity began to drop. By the 2012 election, more than four out of every ten Americans lacked a party identity. Today, fewer people express a party identification than at any time in modern electoral history.

This chapter examines this trend away from party attachments. It first shows the evidence that party ties are weakening and reviews the academic debates about the significance of this trend. The implications of weaker party ties depend on who these new independents are and why they are not attached to parties, which is the next topic. Then the chapter turns to the implications of weaker partisanship. What does this mean for the individual citizen, and what does this mean for the American electoral process?

THE EVIDENCE OF WEAKENING PARTY TIES

If you are talking with your friends about politics, it is natural for you to think about some friends as Republicans, view others as Democrats, and observe that some may seem independent of a firm partisan label. When scholars started studying voters through systematic public opinion studies in the 1950s, they noted the same patterns in people's opinions and voting choices. In an academic study of the 1952 election, the researchers introduced the concept of party identification, which became central to their social-psychological model of voting choice.[3] The survey asked a simple question:

> Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

If the respondents say they are a Republican or a Democrat, they are asked if they would call themselves a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat). If they say they are independent, they are asked if they think of themselves as closer to the Republican Party or closer to the Democratic Party.

In the 1952 election study, only a small share of the public (23 percent) claimed to be an independent, and in the follow-up question most of these people said they leaned either toward the Democrats (10 percent) or the Republicans (8 percent). Consequently, more than three-quarters of the public had some type of partisan identity, and the number is even higher if one includes "independent leaners." This pattern held fairly steady for the next decade.

Then in the mid-1960s the percentage of independents began to increase. At first it was unclear if this was a temporary reaction to the political turbulence of the period—with a war raging in Vietnam, civil rights divisions at home, and broader culture clashes of the 1960s. But this pattern

persisted. By the 2012 election, a plurality of Americans (43 percent) said they were independent of either major political party. Figure 20.1 displays the percentage of independents in presidential elections across the full time span of the American National Election Studies (ANES).[4]

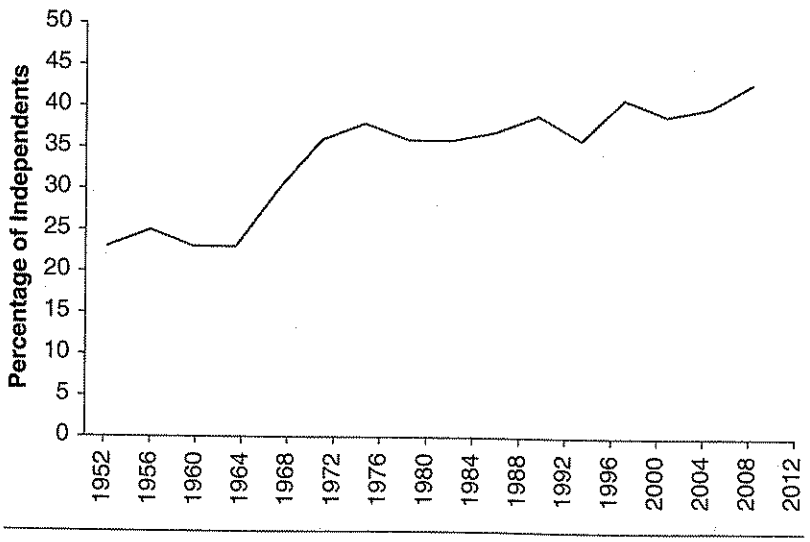
The decline in party attachments is generally described as a pattern of partisan dealignment, which means a persisting decline in the public's level of partisanship. In broad terms, the pattern of independents follows four distinct time periods. First, the years from 1952 until 1964 are often called the "stable state" period of partisanship. Even with the shift from Dwight Eisenhower's Republican victories in 1952 and 1956 to John Kennedy's and Lyndon Johnson's Democratic victories in 1960 and 1964, the percentage of Americans expressing partisan loyalties proved highly stable. About three-quarters of the public identified with a party, and one-quarter lacked party attachments.[5] A second period spans the years 1964 to 1976. This was an exceptional time in American politics. Most accounts of these years stress the political conflict over the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggle, and the counterculture movement as eroding public trust in politics and partisan loyalties. This was also a time of partisan realignment in the South, as Democratic identities among many white voters conflicted with the policies of the Democratic Party nationally. In the midst of this tumult, the percentage of independents grew to 38 percent of the public in 1976—the first election following the Watergate scandal and President Richard Nixon's resignation. Aware of these opinion trends, both parties tried to rejuvenate their support. Partisanship seemed to hold steady during this third period (1980 to somewhere from 1992 to 1996), neither increasing nor decreasing the percentage of independents. Since 1996, the percentage of independents has grown, although the percentage of pure independents seems to be dropping slightly and the percentage of leaning independents increasing slightly.

If one probes more deeply, one can see that these historical events leave their traces in partisanship trends. For instance, in the 1950s up to one-fifth of African Americans gave apolitical responses to the party identification question largely because of their exclusion from politics in the South and marginalization in northern states.[6] By the end of the 1960s this apolitical segment dropped to levels found in the rest of the public as African Americans strengthened their ties to the Democratic Party. In contrast, white southerners were heavily partisan in the 1950s, but the events of the 1960s and 1970s eroded these party loyalties. In the past several elections, the percentage of independents among southern whites roughly matches that of the entire electorate—so dealignment since the 1950s has actually been stronger among this group.

Other polling series show a similar partisan dealignment over time. The Gallup poll has an even longer time series of partisanship.[7] Although Gallup does not use the same question wording or the same scientific sampling methods as the ANES, the longitudinal trends are quite similar. From 1944 until 1964, less than one-quarter of the public said they were independents. Then there was a marked increase in the percentage of independents until the 1976 election, followed by a slight increase again in the past decade. Gallup reported that approximately two-fifths of Americans were independents at the time of the 2012 elections. Polls by the *Washington Post*/ABC use a simple version of the ANES party identification question. Over the past decade the percentage of independents has clearly increased—from under 35 percent in the early 2000s to nearly 45 percent in 2012. So regardless of methodologies, the dealignment trend in public attachments to a political party seems clear.

If partisanship structures the political behavior of average Americans as many experts argue, then the evidence that these orientations have weakened across the past several decades may be a cause for concern. Significantly fewer Americans now approach politics with a fixed party loyalty—although most people do still have party allegiances. When a plurality of citizens lacks party identities, this has the potential to reshape electoral behavior and the nature of citizen politics.

FIGURE 20.1 **The Percentage of Independents Increases**



SOURCE: American National Election Studies, 1952–2012

Is Dealignment Real?

There are several alternative explanations for this dealignment trend.[8] Perhaps the

most prominent explanations link dealignment to the specific issues and political events of recent U.S. history. For instance, in the 1960s, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War undoubtedly eroded some people's ties to their traditionally preferred party.[9] Political elites' decreasing emphasis on partisanship during this period was another potential source of dealignment, although weak partisanship continued even after party polarization revived in the 1990s.[10] Social modernization has also generally eroded bonds to social groups and hierarchic organizations of various types, and political parties may suffer as part of this spreading disenchantment with organizations. Other researchers suggest that dealignment reflects the growing political sophistication of contemporary publics, which diminishes the need for habitual party cues as citizens make their own political choices.[11] These explanations differ in the consequences they project as a result of weakened partisanship. However, they agree that mass partisanship has weakened significantly in America, These analysts see the electorate of today as different from that described in the pages of *The American Voter.*

In contrast, other experts question the existence of a dealignment trend, as do Chapters 18 and 19. For example, Bruce Keith and his colleagues doubted that the decrease in the percentage of party identifiers was a meaningful change—many partisans were supposedly "hiding" under the cloak of independence and nevertheless leaned toward a specific party.[12] These scholars made a sharp distinction between pure independents and independents who said they leaned toward a party on the second question probe. Most of the growth of independents has come among this group with party leanings. They argued that because it became "cool" to say you are an independent, many people claim to reject party labels but then state that they are closer to one party.

The leaning independents appear more similar to partisans than to pure independents on various aspects of electoral behavior. For example, they turn out to vote with significantly greater frequency than pure independents, and their voting choice generally reflects their partisan leaning. Supporting this position, Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler examined a broad array of partisan behaviors in the American public and concluded that "partisanship is alive and well, and as far as we can tell, it is as influential for us as it was for our parents and grandparents."[13] Karen Kaufmann, John Petrocik, and Daron Shaw echo these criticisms in describing dealignment as a major myth about American voters: "The often-reported decline in identification with parties and the increase in negativity toward parties are greatly overemphasized."[14] A recent replication of the early Keith et al. study argued that little had changed through 2008.[15] In short, some experts doubt that partisan ties are really weakening.

One crucial point is the interpretation of leaning partisans: Are they truly independents or hidden partisans? Their partisan-like behavior can be better understood if panel surveys are used to track the attitudes and voting choices of the same people across two elections. Such analyses show that leaners often switch their preferred party between elections to reflect their current choices; so at each election they appear as partisan actors because the party identification follow-up question asks about current partisan leaning.[16] But real partisans do not change parties frequently. In addition, leaning partisans tend to have greater political resources than traditional independents, which motivates them to follow politics and participate in elections. Another recent study of nonpartisans by Zoltan Hajnal and Taeku Lee reaches the same conclusions on the significance of dealignment and the previous misinterpretation of leaning independents.[17] Overall, the fluidity of their partisanship and voting preferences across elections attests to their independence.

Not only are more people saying they are nonpartisans to survey researchers, they are also registering to vote as unaffiliated with any political party. In California, for example, the percentage of the electorate registering without a party affiliation has increased from 12.8 percent in 1999 to 20.9 percent in 2013.[18] Among the young first-time California voters in 2012, nearly 40 percent registered as nonpartisans. This pattern is repeated in other states, even when registering as a nonpartisan excludes the person from voting in closed party primaries. This chapter shows that dealignment is also apparent in the behavior of the contemporary electorate, such as increased split-ticket voting and the fluidity of party choices during election campaigns.

Moreover, cross-national research demonstrates a similar dealignment trend in most other affluent democracies regardless of the structure of the party system, the form of electoral rules, or the performance of the government.[19] So dealignment does not appear to be a unique consequence of the United States' political history across the past several decades.

The resolution of this debate over dealignment lies not in debating whether the percentage of independents has increased in public opinion surveys but in understanding who the new independents are and the consequences of this dealignment trend, which are addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

Who Are the New Independents?

A major reason scholars were initially worried about the rise of independents is the negative image of these citizens painted by early electoral research. *The American Voter* found that many independents lived at the boundaries of politics:

> 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 . . . seems much less to spring from discoverable evaluations of the elements of national politics.[20]

Or as noted political historian Michael Kazin recently wrote about the rise of independents, "What if these voters are just a clueless horde?"[21] This research tradition calls for an appreciation for the beneficial effects of party identity for individual political behavior and the functioning of the democratic process, as shown in Chapters 18 and 19. From this perspective, an increase in independents would have negative effects for electoral politics and American democracy.

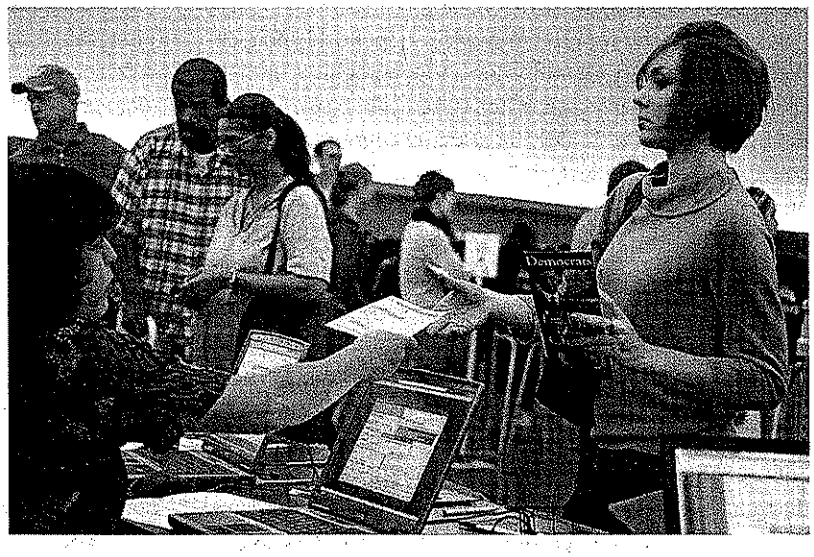
In contrast, American political thought offers a long tradition of praising the independent citizen as benefiting democracy. In his farewell address in 1796, George Washington warned about the baneful effects of the spirit of party. Thomas Jefferson stated his views even more starkly, saying, "If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all."[22] Nancy Rosenblum's book, *On the Side of Angels*, gives an extensive and thoughtful discussion of this antipartisan sentiment in U.S. history and political theory. The logic of this line of thinking is that nonpartisans can evaluate candidates more thoughtfully, without party blinders, and therefore make more reasonable voting choices. The problem was that empirical research argued that the theoretical model of a thoughtful, independent voter wisely evaluating the facts apparently did not exist in reality.

Resolution of this debate depends on who the new independents are. If they are groups at the margins of politics as in the era of *The American Voter*, then the increasing numbers of independents may have detrimental effects on electoral politics. But if the new independents do not fit the traditional model of independents, then the effect of dealignment may be different.

Researchers agree on one point: the growth in independence has a distinct generational component. In the predealignment period, it was typical that young people began their electoral experience with somewhat weaker partisan attachments, which then generally strengthened as they participated in more and more elections. But dealignment has spread because successive generations of young adults hold weaker and weaker party ties that did not significantly strengthen over time. For instance, the ANES found that only one-third of those under age twenty-five in the 1950s said they lacked a party affiliation. In the twenty-first century a majority of young people are nonpartisan. Even Barack Obama's mobilization of the youth vote in 2008 and 2012 had minimal influence on mobilizing young people overall to become more partisan (although those who became partisans were distinctly more Democratic). And the survey evidence suggests that if young voters begin with weaker party identities, they never catch up to the level of partisanship of older generations.[23]

While experts agree that the young are less partisan, they do not agree on how to interpret these findings. On the one hand, younger Americans today are among the best educated and most politically tolerant generation in U.S. history. They hold distinct political views on many contemporary issues, as witnessed by the Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012. They possess many traits that should make them good democratic citizens. On the other hand, a loud chorus of political scientists stresses the political shortcomings of younger Americans, who seem to lack engagement in society and appear more concerned with voting for contestants on reality television shows than in government elections.[24]

Two factors are primarily at play. First, tremendous changes in economic and social conditions have increased the cognitive mobilization of the public.[25] More people now possess the political resources and skills that better prepare



College senior Rachel Stout (right) registers to vote in 2008 moments before casting her first ballot ever. Although political scientists have found that young voters tend to lack partisan ties and are less likely to vote than older people are, Stout explained that she registered in 2008 because she felt more "invested" in this presidential election, in which Barack Obama was a presidential candidate, than during the previous one when she was also eligible to vote.

SOURCE: Chris Fitzgerald/CandidatePhotos/Newscom

them to deal with the complexities of politics and reach their own political decisions with less reliance on affective, habitual party loyalties or other external cues. Second, a rise of self-expressive values has prompted growing skepticism in political institutions (including political parties). This might lessen the likelihood that cognitively mobilized individuals will develop strong affective bonds to a political party as typically happened in the past.[26] The independent tendency of younger generations is one indicator of such value change.

Levels of cognitive mobilization can be assessed by combining civic skills, represented by education, with a motivation to apply these skills to politics, represented by political interest.[27] Independents would traditionally earn low scores on cognitive mobilization. However, cognitive mobilization has risen substantially over time as American society has modernized. This may have changed the characteristics of independents, especially the growing number of new independents. Many of these more cognitively mobilized citizens may eschew party identification because they possess the ability to make political choices without reliance on inherited party identities and because their values encourage autonomy and individual choice. Thus, the question is whether the new independents are also low on cognitive mobilization or whether social changes have produced a new type of independent: unaligned but also politically engaged.

This question can be answered by simply dividing the American public by whether they have a political identity and their level of cognitive mobilization. About one-sixth of Americans fit the traditional model of apolitical independents with no party identification and low cognitive mobilization. This percentage has not varied much over the six decades of the ANES. Despite social changes in the world and the ebb and flow of political events, there is a distinct minority of Americans who remain at the periphery of partisan politics.

More significantly, the ANES surveys show that the growth of independents has been almost exclusively among those who score high on cognitive mobilization while also rejecting a party identity. This group is labeled herein as "apartisans" to distinguish them from traditional independents. Apartisans have grown from about one-tenth of the public in the early 1960s to about one-quarter in 2012. Thus, the trend over time is clear-cut—there are two distinct types of independents, and apartisans are the primary source of dealignment.

This contrast between the two types of independents has important implications for how political scientists should interpret the growth of partisan independence in the United States. Rather than as a result of more people at the margins of politics, the growth of independents largely comes from those who are better educated and politically interested, and this is especially true among the young. These new independents are thus more likely to be engaged and informed about politics but approach elections much differently than do partisans or other apolitical independents. Rather than eroding electoral democracy, they can add to the democratic process.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEALIGNMENT

The significance of the increase in nonpartisans ultimately depends on how these citizens act in electoral politics and other aspects of political behavior. Recent scholarship points to the importance of political sophistication, which is the major contrast between traditional apolitical independents and the new apartisan independents. Paul Sniderman, Richard Brody, and Philip Tetlock, for example, demonstrated that those who are better educated and those who are politically sophisticated place more weight on issues as a basis of their electoral decision making; less sophisticated voters rely more on partisanship and social cues.[28] Other research showed that cognitive mobilization affects voting consistency and volatility and that sophisticated nonpartisans tend to use different modes of political action.[29] In short, there are strong reasons to expect that the political behavior of these new independents differs substantially from political scientists' traditional understanding of independents.

To give some focus to this presentation, the discussion concentrates on three areas that Angus Campbell and his colleagues initially described in *The American Voter*. First, this section describes the differences in participation patterns between old and new nonpartisans. Second, the discussion focuses on how these two groups generally differ in their calculus of making electoral choices. Finally, the discussion turns to the systemic consequences of a growing number of independents on campaigns and electoral outcomes.

Political Involvement

One of the major hypothesized effects of partisanship is to mobilize people to participate in the electoral process. Indeed, the historically lower level of engagement among nonpartisans is one of the factors that led to the negative imagery of independents. *The American Voter* and subsequent studies showed that independents were less likely to participate in campaigns and less likely to vote. In 1952, for example, only 49 percent of pure independents said they voted, compared to 82 percent of strong partisans. Martin Wattenberg more recently observed that "people with stronger party identification are bound to think they have more at stake on Election Day."[30] If this pattern persists, the declining percentage of partisans should signal diminished involvement in electoral politics and perhaps politics in general.

This may be one factor explaining why Americans are not voting at a higher rate than they did a generation ago.

However, one should expect that the growth of apartisans will change this pattern. The higher level of education and political interest of apartisans should stimulate participation in elections and other forms of political action. In fact, the 2008 ANES found that 86 percent of those with a party identification reported voting, compared to 83 percent of apartisans. Trailing far behind are the traditional apolitical independents with only 45 percent voting.

This result reflects a long-term pattern in voting turnout. The decline in voting has been concentrated among those with limited political skills and resources—those with limited income, education, or low-status occupations.[31] Traditional independents have followed this same trend of decreasing turnout. Ironically and unfortunately, those who need government help the most are dropping out of the process, and political parties and social groups are not mobilizing them to vote. Obama's successful mobilization of minority voters in 2008 and 2012 was a slight deviation from this general trend. In contrast, turnout levels among upper-status Americans have dipped only slightly over time.

Similar differences between the two types of independents exist for other forms of political activity. Apartisans rival partisans in their concern about the election outcome and participation in various campaign activities—with old independents remaining relatively unengaged. Contacting officials and participation in nonelectoral activities, such as protesting or Internet activism, mirror these same patterns. In fact, overall political activity tends to be greater among apartisan independents than among partisans, because the former's sophistication and nonpartisanship leads to a wider range of political activities than just participating in elections.

Thus, the growth of nonpartisans in recent decades is not a sign of spreading political disengagement by Americans. It is just the opposite. The decrease in turnout in recent decades has been concentrated among the traditional apolitical independents and the less sophisticated partisans. So cognitive sophistication, rather than partisanship, identifies where turnout has decreased. The new independents, because they are more politically sophisticated than traditional independents, turn out to vote at relatively high levels and participate in nonelectoral forms of political action. Dealignment may contribute to the broadening of the repertoire of political activity, which should strengthen the voice of the American public and thus benefit the democratic process in ways that *The American Voter* and traditional electoral behavior research had not envisioned.

Voting Choice

The classic party identification model argues that partisanship provides valuable political cues to help guide citizens through the complex world of politics. *The American Voter* described partisanship as a "perceptual screen" through which individuals interpret and evaluate political experiences. This cue-giving function of partisanship is strongest for voting behavior, because this involves making explicit partisan choices. Moreover, party attachments are relevant to a much broader range of political phenomena than are social group cues or other heuristics, because parties are so central to the political process. Issues and events frequently are presented to the public in partisan terms, and nearly all politicians are affiliated with a major political party. In summary, partisan cues are an efficient heuristic because they enable citizens to use their partisan identities to decide what policies and candidates "people like themselves" support and then to translate this into political choices.

If one accepts this logic, then an increasing percentage of nonpartisans may leave these citizens with fewer guideposts to direct their political actions. Traditionally independents had limited information about politics and even less knowledge of the issues of the day. Their choices, when they did vote, often appeared to be based on idiosyncratic or nonpolitical criteria. For example, their images of the personal attributes of a candidate might predominate over knowledge of the candidates' actual issue positions.

But what of this new group of young, cognitively sophisticated apartisans? Several studies show that apartisans are more issue oriented in judging the candidates in elections than either traditional independents or party identifiers.[32] Furthermore, apartisans are more likely to use their political values and issue positions in making their voting choices and inevitably discount party images because they lack firm party ties. They are more likely to approach each election without a preconceived notion of who they will vote for and make their decisions on the issues of the campaign. In short, apartisans are closer to the ideal of the thoughtful, rational independent voter that is discussed in democratic theory but was seldom observed in empirical research.

In contrast, partisans regardless of their level of political sophistication still give heavy weight to their own loyalties in making their voting choices, as demonstrated in Chapter 18. In most elections, less than one-tenth of partisans vote for a presidential candidate of the opposite party. There are issue beliefs and candidate evaluations that underlie these voting choices, but these attitudes almost always end up in the same decision.

Systemic Effects

Elections are the foundation of democracy because they give voters control over the selection of political elites. Elections are also important because they allow voters to update their decisions as events unfold. If each person voted the same way in each election, then elections would not be necessary. So the principle of change and reaction to events is essential to making elections work for democracy.

The changing characteristics of independents (and partisans) potentially contribute to electoral change in many ways. For example, other research has demonstrated that voters are making decisions later in the campaign; that is, they are making their choices—and changing their choices—in reaction to the events of the campaign.[33] This may partially reflect changes in the bases of political mobilization. The decrease in the number of partisans who vote on inherited partisan traditions should shift the sources of voting choice from long-term, habitual party ties toward more weight for short-term factors such as the issues and candidates of the campaign.

Evidence from the ANES shows that the new independents are significantly more likely to make their decision during the campaign. Conversely, most partisans enter elections with their decision already made, even before the campaign begins in earnest. The situation for traditional apolitical independents is more complex. Many fewer actually vote, and when they do vote they tend to be less changeable in their vote because they do not closely follow the events of a campaign. Traditional independents are also more likely to fluctuate between voting and nonvoting, while the new apartisan independents are more regular voters. Like perpetual sports fans, party identifiers know their home team and who to root for, even before the game begins. In other words, the shifting bases of mobilization contribute to making campaigns more important as a larger share of the public decide their vote later in the election process.

Another sign of the fluidity is when citizens shift their party preferences across elections. Recent elections have starkly demonstrated the changeability of the contemporary electorate. In the 2006 election, Republican candidates lost thirty-one seats in the House of Representatives and six seats in the Senate—giving the Democrats majority control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1994. The Republicans' losses were further compounded in the 2008 election, as Barack Obama won back the White House for the Democrats, and the party gained an additional twenty-one seats in the House and eight seats in the Senate. The 2010 election results then swung the partisan pendulum in the opposite direction, giving the GOP sixty-three additional seats and a majority in the House as well as six more seats in the Senate. Then, 2012 was a positive showing for the Democrats, with Obama winning reelection and the party retaining control of the Senate while making inroads to the Republican majority in the House.

Estimating the amount of vote change between elections is complex because of the limits of individuals' recall of their past vote and the changes in who votes between elections. The shift in presidential vote choice also depends on whether there is a viable third-party candidate in the election (as with Ross Perot in 1992 or John Anderson in 1980). The ANES surveys show that over the series of elections from 1964 until 2008, the new apartisan independents were nearly twice as likely as party identifiers or traditional independents to change their party vote between successive elections. Apartisans possess more information and more conceptual tools for judging the candidates at each election, thus vote switching is more likely to evolve from a deliberative decision-making process.

Another sign of dealignment's effects involves split-ticket voting, either between presidential and congressional choices or between national and local offices. Americans who identify with the Democratic Party or Republican Party report relatively low levels of split-ticket voting because of their reliance on party cues as a basis of voting choice. They might say they decide based on the merits of the candidate, but it is almost always a candidate of their preferred party. In contrast, apartisans are more likely to divide their party support between presidential and congressional offices and follow a split ballot across other elections. Traditional independents are less likely to vote in the first place and change their votes between elections about half as often as apartisans.

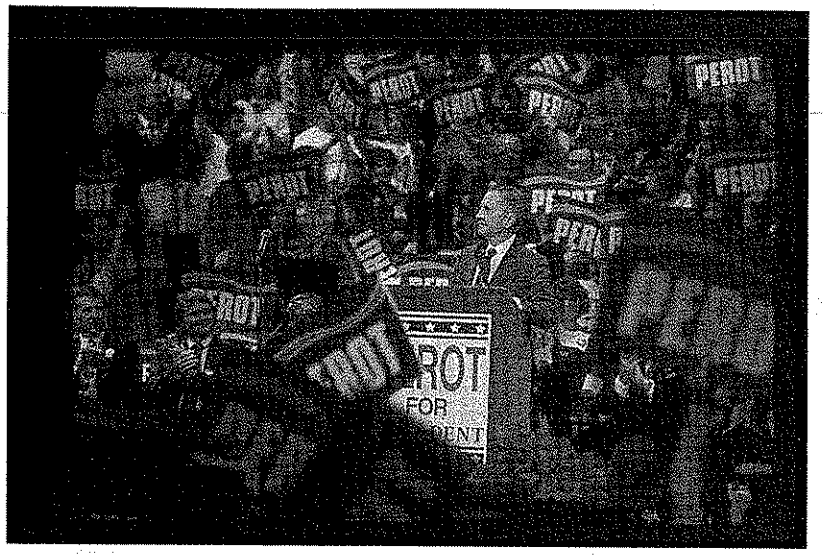
The same pattern holds when looking at support for third-party presidential candidates over the past few decades. Whether the candidates were conservatives (George Wallace and Perot), moderates (Anderson), or liberals (Ralph Nader), apartisans were the most likely to support these new challengers. This is because apartisans are open to political change and will support a third-party candidate who shares their values. Partisans, in contrast, largely remained true to their party and supported its presidential candidate even when a third-party candidate was running. Traditional independents were unmoved by these challengers because of their limited political involvement.

Thus, the changing characteristics of independents are producing real changes in their patterns of electoral choices, with these new independents following campaigns more closely, making their choices on the events occurring in the political environment, and perhaps changing their votes by the next election. This evidence also challenges the argument that those who claim to be independents are really partisans who hide their loyalty under the guise of independence. These new independents are a major source of potential change in electoral politics.

INDEPENDENTS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

The evidence presented here argues for a disaggregated view of the American public, especially nonpartisans. Apolitical independents are a persisting share of the electorate, but the growth of independents since the 1960s has come disproportionately among the better-educated and those interested in politics. The participation patterns and political sophistication of these two groups are dramatically

different. There is little reason to treat independents as a single bloc that still fits the model of nonpartisans from the 1950s. Partisans are similarly divided.[34] Partisans in the 1950s tended to be more engaged and sophisticated than independents, but only relative to the traditional apolitical independents. Now a widening divide is seen. On the one side are less sophisticated partisans who still place heavy reliance on habitual party cues, without being able to fully explain their electoral decisions. Compared to apartisans, these partisans appear less sophisticated and knowledgeable about politics. On the other side are sophisticated partisans who have a richness in political skills and understanding that was rare in the 1950s. In short, neither independents nor partisans are homogeneous types.



Texas billionaire businessman and third-party presidential candidate Ross Perot, center, surrounded by a sign-waving crowd of supporters at a campaign rally on November 1, 1992. Nonpartisan and apartisan voters are more open to change than partisan voters and thus are more likely to support third-party challengers.

SOURCE: Photo by Shelly Katz//Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Such differences need to be integrated into models of electoral and political behavior. Party identifiers expect their party to present the issues and structure the campaign in terms of the party's history and traditions and its core principles. Campaigns are a rallying call to support one's team against its opponents. The new independents see the political world through different lenses. These independents closely follow the issues and events of the campaign. They do not vote to support "their team" but to support their policy interests. And if their interests change or the parties' positions change, then their voting choices may also shift. This makes current electoral politics more fluid and unpredictable, and all else being equal, it should make electoral politics more democratic.

Such heterogeneity can also affect how candidates present themselves. The partisan rhetoric a candidate may use to appeal to the former group of partisans can alienate the latter group of independents. Conversely, the bipartisan or postpartisan approach that many apartisans would find appealing may be off-putting to a candidate's partisan core. Candidates and parties in competitive races thus face a fragmented electorate with different expectations. It is hard to win an election relying only on the partisans of one party, but appealing to the new independents requires a different campaign approach. Bridging these different styles can affect the turnout levels of both groups as well as their partisan choices. Such heterogeneity within the electorate, and the need for differentiated campaigns that recognize these differences, should be an element of American elections for a considerable period.

Finally, one should not want to overstate the findings, because understanding the world of politics is still a difficult task for many voters. Yet the shift in cognitive mobilization has the potential to move the electoral process toward the ideal of democratic theory—voters making independent judgments on the candidates and issues of the day, rather than voting on the basis of habitual party loyalties. The authors of *The American Voter* recognized this ideal and then dismissed its applicability to the American electorate. More recent research suggests that the growth in new apartisan independents has moved the electorate closer to that normative ideal.

NOTES

1. Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960), chap. 6. For a more recent restatement of this position see Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

2. Robert Hess and Judith Torney, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (New York: Aldine, 1967); M. Kent Jennings and Richard Niemi, *The Political Character of Adolescence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974).

3. Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren E. Miller, *The Voter Decides* (New York: Row, Peterson, 1954); see also Chapter 18 in this volume.

4. The percentage of independents is higher in midterm elections but generally follows the trends apparent in presidential election years.

5. The American National Election Studies (ANES) coding of partisanship has changed slightly over time, primarily involving the coding of apoliticals and missing data categories. The new method essentially produces a lower level of nonpartisans in all years, especially in the early surveys when voter registration rules and social pressures led many African Americans into the apolitical category.

6. Bruce Keith, David Magleby, Candace Nelson, and Elizabeth Orr, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), chap. 2.

7. The Gallup poll developed a question that asks, "As of today, do you regard yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent in politics?" This is generally viewed as closer to immediate party preferences because it asks about politics "as of today" and lacks the implicit identity reference.

8. See Russell J. Dalton, *The Apartisan American* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2008); Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter*.

9. This was the primary explanation in Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). This is also consistent with Morris Fiorina's partisan leaning model, except that this pattern has persisted and has a distinct generational component. Morris Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

10. Marc Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 619–631.

11. Dalton, *The Apartisan American*; Russell J. Dalton, "Partisan Mobilization, Cognitive Mobilization, and the Changing American Electorate," *Electoral Studies* 26, no. 2 (2007): 274–286.

12. Bruce Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

13. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, *Partisan Hearts and Minds*, 51; see also Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter*.

14. Karen Kaufmann, John Petrocik, and Daron Shaw, *Unconventional Wisdom: Facts and Myths About American Voters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.

15. David Magleby, Candice Nelson, and Mark Westlye, "The Myth of the Independent Voter Revisited," in *Facing the Challenge of Democracy: Explorations in the Analysis of Public Opinion and Political Participation*, eds. Paul Sniderman and Benjamin Highton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

16. Two of the authors of *The American Voter* also stated that the follow-up question taps current references rather than deeper party identities: Warren Miller, "Party Identification Re-Examined: The Reagan Era," in *Where's the Party?*, eds. Warren Miller and John Petrocik (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1987), 24; Philip Converse and Roy Pierce, "Measuring Partisanship," *Political Methodology* 11, no. 4 (1985): 143.

17. Zoltan Hajnal and Taeku Lee, *Why Americans Don't Join the Party* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), chap. 8.

18. California Secretary of State, www.sos.ca.gov/elections.

19. Russell J. Dalton and Martin Wattenberg, eds., *Parties Without Partisans* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

20. Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 143.

21. Michael Kazin, "The Trouble With Independents," *The New Republic*, April 26, 2011.

22. Cited by Nancy Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5.

23. Michael Lewis-Beck et al., *The American Voter Revisited* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), chap. 7.

24. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Renewal of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Martin Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2011).

25. Dalton, *The Apartisan American*.

26. Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

27. Dalton, *The Apartisan American*, chap. 3.

28. Paul Sniderman, Richard Brody, and Philip Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

29. Dalton, *The Apartisan American*.

30. Martin Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 64.

31. Wattenberg, *Where Have all the Voters Gone?*; Paul Abramson, John Aldrich, and David Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), chap. 4.

32. Dalton, *The Apartisan American*, chap. 7; Russell J. Dalton, "Apartisans and the Changing German Electorate," *Electoral Studies* 31 (March 2012): 35–45.

33. Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties Without Partisans*, chap. 3.

34. Joseph Bafumi and Robert Shapiro, "A New Partisan Voter," *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 1–24.

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