

## THE APARTISAN AMERICAN

Why would you want to be nonpartisan? If you're a partisan, you know what you stand for. People know what the Democrats stand for (tax and spend), they know what Republicans stand for (which is America), and then you can decide which one you want to support.

Stephen Colbert

*The Colbert Report* (August 10, 2011)

Lyse first heard Barack Obama speak at the Harkin Steak Fry in the summer of 2007, and she was immediately impressed by the candidate. She became deeply engaged in the Obama campaign, working for it throughout the fall, organizing a group of Obama supporters in her high school (Barackstars), and ultimately serving as an Obama precinct captain at the January 2008 Iowa caucuses. Lyse repeated this involvement in the fall presidential election and celebrated with Obama's victory in November. A picture of her with Obama at an Iowa campaign event graces her Facebook page.

After the election Lyse enrolled at the University of Iowa and became a political science major. This led to an internship working in the state legislature. Lyse seemed on course to become a Democratic politico. However, after the internship experience she returned home and changed

her voter registration from Democrat to independent (even though she remains a staunch supporter of President Obama).

What led Lyse to reject party affiliation and become an independent? Her story, and the story of millions like her, is the focus of this book. At the time of John F. Kennedy's election in 1960, only a quarter of the American public claimed to be independent, but this number has grown over the following decades. Since 2004 about 40 percent of the public call themselves independent, outnumbering both Democrats (about one-third of the public) and Republicans (just over a quarter of the public). The largest group of Americans today is independent of party identities.

The growing importance of independents can be seen in recent elections. Although parties and candidates necessarily cater to their base voters, increasing attention is being paid to the growing number of independents, who are more likely to shift votes between elections. If parties seek to increase their vote share since the last poll, independents are often where they search for these new voters. For instance, the vote swing to George W. Bush in 2000 came largely from independents, just as Obama's victory in 2008 depended on winning disproportionate support from independents. The Republican gains in 2010 also benefitted from independents swinging back toward the party. Moreover, if new political movements—groups as different as Ralph Nader's supporters in 2000 or the Tea Party movement in 2010—seek voters, they are most likely to find support among independents.

Furthermore, many of these new independents are like Lyse. They are young. Instead of the disengaged independents of the past, these new independents are often better educated and more interested in politics. However, despite their political interest they have not developed the partisan allegiances of their parents' generation. In addition, they are often cynical about both political parties and the current system of party competition. These are the new independents—the *apartisan Americans*—that give this book its title.

This book describes the growing number of Americans who are independent of partisan identities and the factors contributing to their growth. Even if political elites remain wedded to their partisan identities,

the citizens themselves are changing. Our goal is to document these changes and their implications for American electoral politics.

### THE CONCEPT OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Several years ago, I was a beginning political science professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee. On the day of the presidential election, I went to the polls to cast my ballot. While standing in the inevitable line, I started talking to the older woman standing in front of me. She told me about her experiences in a long series of election campaigns that began before I was born. Interesting stuff for a political science professor who studies elections. When she talked about the current election, she made an observation I'll never forget. She said, "I always vote for the best candidate in the election regardless of the political party. But it just seems that in every election the best candidate is a Democrat."

This woman is representative of a traditional pattern of partisan loyalties in American electoral politics. She had distinct political interests, but our conversation suggested that these interests were partially shaped by her initial partisan orientations. Being a Democrat was often a family tradition in Florida at the time. It was common to hear people say that they voted for the Democrats, as did their parents, their grandparents, and so forth back to the post-Civil War reconstruction of the South. And nationally most Americans identified with either the Democratic or Republican Party.

A generation or more ago, such partisan attachments were widespread among Americans. People did not just vote for the Republican or the Democratic candidate, they considered themselves to be a Republican or a Democrat. *The American Voter* describes such a partisan identity as *a long-term, affective psychological attachment to a preferred political party*.<sup>1</sup> Party identification was viewed as similar to identifying with a religious denomination or social class.<sup>2</sup> These orientations were formed early in life, often before young people understood the content of these labels, and they largely endured through life even as the politicians and parties changed.<sup>3</sup> Even if one temporarily voted for a candidate of a different party, there was a strong tendency to return "home" at the next election

or even the next office listed on the ballot. Partisanship also was at the core of individuals' political beliefs, affecting how they thought of themselves and politics.

After reviewing four decades of electoral research on partisanship, Herbert Weisberg and Steve Greene concluded that "Party identification is the linchpin of our modern understanding of electoral democracy, and it is likely to retain that crucial theoretical position."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I have stated that a "strong case can be made that the concept of partisan identification is the most important development in modern electoral behavior research."<sup>5</sup>

So what makes party identification so important? The concept of party identification has reached such prominence because these orientations affect many different aspects of political behavior. The developers of the concept stressed its functional importance:

*Few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place. And they are an important factor in ensuring the stability of the party system itself. . . . The strength and direction of party identification are of central importance in accounting for attitudes and behavior.*<sup>6</sup>

Partisan identities serve as an organizing device for the voters' political evaluations and judgments.<sup>7</sup> For instance, once a person becomes psychologically attached to a party, he or she tends to see politics from a partisan perspective. Being a Democratic identifier makes one more likely to be sympathetic to Democratic Party leaders and the policies they advocate and skeptical of the leaders and policies of the Republican Party. Faced with a new issue or political controversy, the knowledge of what position is favored by one's party is a valuable cue in developing one's own position. The authors of *The American Voter* thus described partisanship as a "perceptual screen"—through it one sees what supports one's partisan orientation and filters out dissonant information. The stronger the party bond, the more likely is the selection and distortion processes of information.

Moreover, in comparison to other potential political cues, such as class or religion, party attachments are relevant across a much broader range of political phenomena 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 political party. When an elected official appears on television, it is almost always with a “D” or an “R” following his or her name. Furthermore, as researchers have studied the information shortcuts that voters use to orient themselves to politics, partisanship has emerged as the ultimate cost-saving device.<sup>8</sup> Partisan cues are an efficient decisional shortcut because people can use their partisan identities to decide what policies to support and oppose.

This cue-giving function of partisanship is strongest for voting behavior, because it is here that citizens make explicit partisan choices. Philip Converse described partisanship as the basis for a “normal vote”; that is, the voting outcome expected if voter decisions were based solely on standing partisan commitments.<sup>9</sup> If issues or candidate images come into play, their influence can be measured by their ability to cause significant defections from normal partisan predispositions. For the unsophisticated voter, long-term partisan loyalty and repeated experience with one’s preferred party provide a clear and low-cost cue for voting. Even for the sophisticated citizen, a candidate’s party affiliation normally signifies a policy program that can serve as the basis for reasonable electoral choice. Like the Tallahassee resident at the beginning of this section, people say that they vote for the best person regardless of party, it just happens that their party routinely nominates the best candidate.

Similarly, partisanship gives party leaders an expected base of popular support that generally (within limits) supports them at the next election. Each election does not begin as a blank slate. Republicans and Democrats start campaigns with standing commitments from their core supporters, and partisan ties encourage a stability and continuity in electoral results. This is another consequence of Converse’s notion of a normal vote. Electoral change normally occurs at the margins of these partisan coalitions, especially among independents.

Partisan ties also mobilize people to become politically engaged. Just like a sports loyalty, an attachment to a political party draws an individual into the political process to support his or her side. Participation in

campaign activities is generally more common among strong partisan identifiers.<sup>10</sup> Political parties can more easily mobilize partisans to turn out at the polls, and partisans feel a stronger personal motivation to support their party and its candidates. Partisans often think of elections as a contest between “my party” and the “other guy’s.”

Finally, partisanship encompasses a set of normative attitudes regarding the role that political parties should play in the democratic system. Herbert Weisberg expressed the formal theory for this view, arguing that party identification is multidimensional—tapping evaluations of specific parties, independence from parties, and support for the *institution* of the party system in general.<sup>11</sup>

In summary, partisanship is a central element in the functioning of citizens’ political behavior and party systems. Partisan ties:

- bind individuals to their preferred political party, as well as the system of party democracy;
- help orient the individual to the complexities of politics;
- provide a framework for assimilating political information and understanding political issues;
- act as a guide in making political judgments;
- mobilize individuals to participate in parties, elections, and the processes of representative government;
- provide a source of political stability for the individual and the party system; and
- shape images of partisan politics, elections, and the process of representative democracy.

Thus, the extent of partisanship is an important political variable, and changes in these feelings over time may affect the functioning of party-based democracy. In broad terms I agree with the above descriptions and believe party identification is the most important single question to ask in an election survey because it has such broad effects on individual electoral behavior.

### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF PARTISAN DEALIGNMENT**

Because party identification is so important for political behavior, the initial signs of eroding partisanship in the 1960s generated substantial

scholarly and political attention.<sup>12</sup> Party support normally ebbs and flows between elections, but after the 1964 election the number of Americans who expressed a partisan identity began a substantial decline. There was a partial respite from this in the 1980s, but the downward slide started again in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Today, fewer Americans express a party identification than at any time in modern electoral history.

Despite these trends, another scholarly perspective claims that evidence of declining partisan attachments overstates the problem. One argument holds that a changing political climate stimulates people to say they are independent of any party while simultaneously feeling an enduring attachment to one party. For example, Bruce Keith and his colleagues claimed that the decrease in the percentage of party identifiers through the 1980s was a myth—many partisans were supposedly hiding under the cloak of independence while actually favoring a specific party.<sup>14</sup> A recent reassessment repeats this claim: “As things stand today [2011], much of the speculation about Independents, and indeed some from academia, perpetuate a myth.”<sup>15</sup> Other research emphasizes the continuing partisan ties among the majority of Americans and the continuing impact of partisanship on political behavior.<sup>16</sup> A skeptic might suggest that this is similar to arguing that people who go to church are still religious and perhaps becoming even more religious while ignoring the fact that fewer pews are full every Sunday.

Chapter 2 takes up this debate by presenting the evidence of Americans’ weakening partisanship. Furthermore, voters aren’t simply shedding their party attachments in the United States; there is an erosion in partisan loyalties across a wide set of nations. The pattern of weakening partisanship is thus not unique to the United States or due to the specific institutional or political conditions of American politics.<sup>17</sup>

The key to judging the significance of dealignment is to understand the factors contributing to partisan voters becoming independents. Chapter 3 examines alternative explanations of why the distribution of mobilization types has changed over time. Chapter 4 describes who comprises this new group of independents.

Based on the initial theory of, and empirical research on, party identification, one should predict that weakening party ties among the public would have a negative consequence for democracy. Decreasing

partisanship should reverse all the beneficial functions described above. For example, turnout should decrease (it has), people should become more fluid in their political views and voting choices (they have), and skepticism about the process and institutions of representative democracies should increase (it has). Indeed, the first evidence of American dealignment was greeted by a chorus of academic angst.

However, contemporary electoral researchers are divided on the significance of partisan dealignment, which justifies the additional research presented here. The classic party identification model predicts that non-partisans are less knowledgeable and less involved in politics, so dealignment should erode the bases of electoral politics and representative democracy. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s, most independents fit this characterization.<sup>18</sup> This empirical finding led to a normative argument that partisanship was good for democracy and independence was bad.

However, many of the new independents follow a different course, earning the apartisan label described earlier in this chapter. Apartisans are interested in politics and are often politically sophisticated, but they lack a partisan identity. Indeed, there is a deep philosophical tradition that sees independence from political parties as a benefit to democracy.<sup>19</sup> These new independents may come closer to the model of the rational citizen that is lionized in democratic theory but seldom found in the early empirical studies of public opinion. A sophisticated independent might be politically engaged and even vote but lack firm commitments to a specific party. Such an independent might actually judge the candidates and sometimes pick the best candidate regardless of party.

The second half of this book focuses on the implications of partisan dealignment. Chapter 5 investigates the participation patterns of partisans and apartisans and how these have changed over time. Partisans should understandably focus on electoral politics because of their partisan loyalties. Apartisans may be more likely to adopt different forms of political participation that are more direct and less partisan. Thus, changes in party identification may coexist with changes in patterns of political participation.

The next three chapters examine how changing patterns of political identity are affecting electoral politics. Chapter 6 discusses differences in how apartisans and party identifiers perceive political parties and how



these perceptions have changed over time. Chapter 7 analyses the voting choices of Americans and how apartisans differ significantly from the traditional image of independents by introducing more issue-based voting into the electoral process. Chapter 8 considers how changing patterns of political mobilization contribute to a more volatile electorate that is more willing to split the ticket.

Finally, I am a strong believer that we better understand contemporary American politics through comparison—either to politics of another time or in other democracies. Much of this book looks at changes over time in the nature of partisanship and independence in the United States and the consequences of these changes. Chapter 9 expands these comparisons to look at the United States in cross-national context. The major lesson is that “we are not alone”—many of the changes in American politics described in this volume are occurring in other Western democracies. This suggests the explanations for change and their implications don’t lie in the specifics of American political history or political institutions, but in broader forces affecting other modern democracies.

### **PLUS ÇA CHANGE, OR REAL CHANGE?**

As the percentage of independents has grown in public opinion surveys, this has generated substantial debate on the implications of this trend for American politics. Some experts claim that this change is ephemeral and little has really altered. These experts say that people are acting the same as ever and perhaps just expressing themselves in different ways.

The answer to this debate has real political implications. One of the most prominent examples came from George W. Bush’s campaign strategist, Matthew Dowd. In 2000 Dowd argued that the percentage of truly independent voters was small and decreasing, and therefore the Bush administration could ignore them and focus on mobilizing its base among strong Republicans.<sup>20</sup>

Others have seen the dealignment trend as altering the content and dynamics of American politics. Both Democratic and Republican candidates try to mobilize their core supporters, and most Americans still have an attachment to one of the parties. But at the same time, candidates now campaign more consciously for the support of independents to increase their electoral base. As *Washington Post* columnist David

Broder observed in 2009, “Independent voters make up the swing vote in almost every contested election—including the presidential race.”<sup>21</sup> Apartisan independents are too large a group to ignore in elections, and their preferences can and do often shift election outcomes.

Some political observers go even further. For instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger reacted to the changing nature of the California electorate by advocating the development of “postpartisanship” politics at his 2007 inauguration as governor of California, declaring that “All of our most deeply held dreams and aspirations require us to build on our common bonds rather than keep resorting to the tired battle cries of partisan politics that divides and demoralizes us.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Barack Obama has repeatedly called for deemphasizing partisanship as a means to improve political processes and outcomes. In articulating his political philosophy in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama stated, “Perhaps more than any other time in our recent history, we need a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans.”<sup>23</sup> Obama’s inability to actually develop postpartisan politics and the bitterness of political discourse has stimulated other attempts to echo concerns about the mischief of excessive partisanship, including New York mayor Michael Bloomberg’s “No Labels” rejection of partisanship and Jon Stewart’s “Restore Sanity” rally.<sup>24</sup>

I believe the contemporary electorate is different in many important ways from the electorate of the 1950s that provided the basis for the classic *The American Voter*. Many of the basic relationships between partisan attitudes and behaviors persist, but the characteristics of the electorate have changed in ways that affect the outcomes of these relationships. However, I also recognize that electoral researchers disagree on whether basic partisan identities are changing and on the implications if they indeed are.

Thus, this book seeks to systematically consider these contrasting images of partisan stability and change in order to better understand the political identities of the American electorate. And if these partisan identities *have* changed significantly over the past several decades, what are the implications for democracy?