

The One Thing You Need to Know about Voting in American Presidential Elections

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The one thing you need to know about voting in American presidential elections is the importance of party identification. Simply put, most Americans consider themselves Republican or Democrat, and they generally vote accordingly. What makes elections interesting, however, is that many people don't follow their partisanship. Some partisans don't vote, others defect to the other major party or even to a third party, and some change their partisan loyalties altogether, while political Independents swing in their votes. Thus, party identification constitutes an important baseline in looking at parties' standings going into an election and is an excellent predictor of how people will vote, but, paradoxically, election results depend on the exceptions to partisan voting.

There are innumerable factors that affect how an individual will vote. Some are long-term, existing well before the election year, and the person's party identification is one of these long-term matters. Social demographics – such as a person's race, religion, age, class, education level, region of the country, gender, and marital status – are generally considered long-term, as they are determined well before the election year. A

person's ideology and values would also be classified as long-term, though not as long-term as most social demographics. There are also several factors affecting the vote that are short-term, specific to the election, such as the candidates running that year and the issue positions they take. Media coverage of the campaign, presidential debates, and conversations that people have about the election with their family and friends would be considered short-term vote determinants of the vote.

Given all of these factors affecting how individuals decide to vote, why is party identification generally viewed as having a key status? For one thing, the voter's social-demographic and other long-term factors affect the person's partisanship rather than affecting the vote directly. African-Americans are more likely to consider themselves Democrats, Evangelicals are more likely to consider themselves Republicans, and so on. Social demographics occasionally affect voting more directly, as in 1960 when many Catholic Republicans voted Democrat because John Kennedy was running, but more often these social demographics have only indirect effects through the person's party identification.

Another reason that party identification is generally regarded as having a special status in affecting voting is because it affects how people view the candidates and the issues. Think of party identification as a screening device that citizens use in deciding what to make of campaign information. For example, Republicans who hear nasty information about a prominent Republican politician are less likely to believe it than if the same information were said about a prominent Democratic politician. Similarly

Republicans are more likely to have issue views consistent with the issue stands of Republican candidates than Democratic candidates. Republicans are also more likely to think that the Republican candidate won a presidential debate. Republicans are more likely to absorb information from Republican ads on television while mentally tuning out on Democratic ads. And, of course, Democrats behave the same way, but favoring the Democrats in each instance rather than the Republicans.

This is not to say that party identification determines the vote all by itself. But it is saying that Republicans are more likely to vote for the Republican candidate, while Democrats are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate, with Independents somewhere in the middle. But this can best be illustrated by turning to results from survey research.

Survey Data on Party Identification

There are many ways in which a person's party identification can be measured. The gold standard in political science is a set of questions used by the National Election Studies (NES) since 1952. Survey respondents are first asked, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, and Independent, or what?" Note that the question wording tries to push respondents to think in the long-term by using the phrases "generally speaking" and "usually," rather than focusing them on an upcoming election. The NES surveys then ask Republicans if they would call themselves

strong Republicans or not very strong Republicans; Democrats are similarly asked if they would call themselves strong Democrats or not very strong Democrats.

Of course some people answer the first party identification question by saying they are Independents. They are next asked “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or the Democratic Party?” Some people respond to this follow-up question by insisting they are closer to neither major party. The number of people in this “pure Independent” category has gone up and down a little over the years, but it is generally in the area of only 10% of survey respondents. That is, around nine of every ten respondents either think of themselves as Republicans or Democrats or at least as closer to one or the other of these two major parties. This is another reason why party identification is viewed as so important in understanding voting – it is a political consideration that nearly all citizens have.¹

These several questions are often put together in a party identification scale, with strong Republicans at one end, followed by weak Republicans and independents who “lean” toward the Republican party, with pure Independents in the middle, and then independents who lean toward the Democratic party and weak Democrats, and strong Democrats at the other end of the scale. There is typically a strong relationship between this scale and voting, with the amount of Republican voting being greatest at the strong

¹ Incidentally, there are also a few people who do not answer the party identification question because they pay no attention to politics. These “apoliticals” are generally about 1-3% of the survey respondents. Additionally, Niemi, Reed, and Weisberg (1991) alert us to the fact that many Americans are not very committed to their partisanship, as many as a third giving different answers to variants of the party identification question when asked repeatedly in the same survey.

Republican end of the scale and falling as one goes across to the strong Democrat end of the scale.²

We usually assume the party identification obtained by this question series is at the national level. Niemi, Wright, and Powell (1987) usefully remind us that multiple party identifications are possible across the different levels of government, with people being Democrat, say, at the state level but Republican at the national level. Lacking recent questions that disentangle party identification at the different levels, we will simply assume that most people are answering about the state level.

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents in the 2004 National Election Studies survey on the party identification scale. Note that there is a slight tilt toward the Democrats among the full sample. For example, 50% of those interviewed were either strong or weak Democrats or Independents leaning toward the Democrat Party, while only 40% of those interviewed were either strong or weak Republicans or Independents leaning toward the Republican Party. And only 10% of the sample were pure Independents who did not consider themselves closer to either major party.

² There are other ways to ask questions about people's party identification. For example, the Gallup Poll asks "In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" By focusing in on the person's politics "today," the question is more short-term in its focus than the NES wording (Borelli, Lockerbie, and Niemi 1987). It therefore is a little more volatile than results from the NES question, and it is related more to the vote than the NES wording since it invites respondents to think about contemporary politics rather than their usual political views. In fact, though, these differences are minor and most of the results shown in the text of this paper would be fairly similar if the Gallup question were used instead.

Table 1. The Distribution of Party Identification in 2004

Party Identification	% of Sample
Strong Democrat	17
Weak Democrat	16
Leaning Democrat	17
Pure Independent	10
Leaning Republican	12
Weak Republican	12
Strong Republican	16
Total	100

Source: 2004 American National Election Study.

If party identification is so important in understanding voting and if Democrats had a 10-percentage point lead in party identification in 2004, then how could George W. Bush win the 2004 presidential election? To answer this, we need to examine how people voted in 2004 according to their party identification. As to be expected, Table 2 shows a very strong relationship between party identification measured before the election and how the person reported voting for President after the election. Nearly all strong partisans voted for their party's candidate: 97% of strong Republicans voted for George W. Bush while 97% of strong Democrats voted for John Kerry. Weak Republicans were slightly more loyal to their party than were weak Democrats: 90% of weak Republicans voting for Bush versus 85% of weak Democrats voting for Kerry. Independents actually broke in favor of Kerry: 58% to 42%. However, note that the distribution of party identification is different among actual voters as shown in Table 2 than it was for the sample as a whole in Table 1. Pure independents are less likely to vote than partisans, so only 5% of actual voters were pure Independents even though 10% of the respondents were pure Independents, which makes Kerry's lead among pure Independents less important than it would otherwise be. Also, while the Democrats had a 10% advantage in partisanship according to Table 1, that advantage disappeared among

actual voters: 48% of voters were on the Democratic side of the party identification scale, compared to 47% of voters on the Republican side. Finally, there were more strong Republicans among actual voters than strong Democrats, which gave the Republicans a slight advantage.

Table 2. Vote by Party Identification, 2004

Party Identification	Kerry % of Two-party Vote	% of Voters
Strong Democrat	97.5	18.0
Weak Democrat	85.2	14.3
Leaning Democrat	87.8	15.3
Pure Independent	58.5	5.4
Leaning Republican	15.3	10.5
Weak Republican	10.5	14.8
Strong Republican	2.9	21.8
Total		100.0

Source: 2004 American National Election Study.

How then did George W. Bush win the election? First, the social groups then tend to be most Democratic in their party identification happen to be the social groups with lower voting rates, so that Democrats are always disadvantaged by the lower voting rates of people with less income and less education. Beyond that, party identification provides a long-term baseline for elections, but short-term factors can predominate. Apparently short-term forces favored the Republicans in 2004, and Democrats were apparently less motivated to vote than were Republicans. More detailed analysis (Weisberg 2006) shows that the public was favorable to George W. Bush, especially due to his leadership in the War on Terrorism, and that the public was unfavorable to John Kerry. Thus, although there were more Democrats than Republicans in 2004, that advantage was not large enough to lead to a Democratic victory in a year with pro-

Republican short-term forces, especially when the lower turnout rate of Democrats is taken into account.

Table 3 expands the purview by showing the net Democratic advantage in party identification among actual voters starting when it was first measured in surveys in 1952. While Republican presidents held office through most of this period (Eisenhower in 1953-60, Nixon and Ford in 1969-76, Reagan in 1981-88, George H. W. Bush in 1989-92, and George W. Bush in 2001-08), the Democrats are seen to have had an advantage in party identification throughout. Yet there is an important drop in the Democratic advantage in the middle of this period, which makes it harder for Democratic candidates to win the presidency nowadays unless the short-term forces are aligned in their favor. Table 3 reinforces one of the major points of this paper: having a lead in party identification does not guarantee that a party will win the presidency. The Democrats led throughout this period in party identification, but the Democratic candidate won the popular vote over the Republican candidate in only 6 of these 14 elections (Kennedy in 1960, Johnson in 1964, Carter in 1976, Clinton in 1992 and 1996, and Gore very narrowly in 2000).

Table 3. Democratic Lead in Party Identification, 1952-2004*

1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
17%	10%	14%	27%	18%	12%	12%	14%	4%	2%	11%	9%	7%	2%

Source: 1952-2004 American National Election Studies.

*Cell entries show the percentage of Democratic identifiers minus the percentage of Republican identifiers, with leaners included with partisans.

Table 4 shows the full party identification distribution among the whole sample (not just voters) from 1952 through 2004. There are several important take-away points

from this table. One is the tremendous stability in party identification over the years. There certainly has been some change, but it is not substantial even though there was tremendous population turnover during this period since only people at least 73 years old in 2004 could have voted in 1952 when you had to be 21 years old to vote. There is certainly fluctuation between years in the exact percentages shown in the table, but there is not a radical shift across this half century of presidential elections.

Table 4. Changes in Party Identification, 1952-2004 (in percentages)

	'52	'56	'60	'64	'68	'72	'76	'80	'84	'88	'92	'96	'00	'04
Strong Democrat	22	21	20	27	20	15	15	18	17	17	18	18	19	17
Weak Democrat	25	23	25	25	25	26	25	23	20	18	18	19	15	16
Independent Dem.	10	6	6	9	10	11	12	11	11	12	14	14	15	17
Pure Independent	6	9	10	8	11	13	15	13	11	11	12	9	12	10
Independent Rep.	7	8	7	6	9	10	10	10	12	13	12	12	13	12
Weak Republican	14	14	14	14	15	13	14	14	15	14	14	15	12	12
Strong Republican	14	15	16	11	10	10	9	9	12	14	11	12	12	16
Apolitical	3	4	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	0
Total	101	100	100	101	101	99	101	100	100	101	100	100	99	100
N	1784	1757	1911	1550	1553	2694	2850	1612	2236	2032	2474	1710	1797	1197

Source: 1952-2004 American National Election Studies.

While the distribution in Table 4 did not change radically over this period, some social groups did change their party loyalties. Blacks moved strongly into the Democratic coalition, while native white Southerners shifted away from the Democrats. A gender gap in party identification developed to mirror the more familiar gender gap in voting. Catholics became less Democrat, and fundamentalist Protestants became Republican. Stanley and Niemi (2006) nicely trace these changing social group correlates of party identification, demonstrating that the relative stability at the aggregate level in Table 4 masks some compensating changes of different social groups.

The largest change in party identification that occurred over this period was a movement away from both parties and toward political independence, with less than a quarter of the sample calling themselves Independent in the 1950s compared to about two-fifths in 2000 and 2004. The increase in independence was primarily in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s. The Civil Rights Revolution of the 1960s led to some white southerners dropping their traditional Democratic loyalties and becoming independents. The Vietnam War led to many young people becoming disillusioned with both parties and not identifying with either party. The Watergate scandal led to some Republicans becoming independents. All together, the proportion of independents (including leaners) jumped from 23% in 1964 to 40% in 1976. It went back down a little in the next several presidential election years, but came back up to the 40% in 2000 and 2004. The growth in independents could lead to much more volatile elections. However, in practice, independent Democrats usually vote as Democrat (and sometimes even more Democratic) than weak Democrats, and independent Republicans usually vote as Republican (and sometimes even more Republican) than weak Republicans,³ and pure Independents vote at low rates, all of which means that the growth in independents has destabilized the electorate less than might otherwise be expected.

While the Democratic lead in party identification in Tables 3 and 4 did not translate to many presidential victories, it does correspond to their success in congressional elections. Of course many other factors influence congressional elections factors as well, particularly the force of incumbency. Incumbent members have a built-in

³ Keith (1992) emphasizes that independent leaners are about as likely to vote for their party as are weak partisans, and Petrocik (1974) points out the “intransitivity” that they sometimes are even more likely to vote for their party’s candidate than are weak partisans.

advantage in running for election, both in terms of name recognition and fund-raising ability. Furthermore, gerrymandering of districts in the House of Representatives often favors incumbents. Still the Democratic advantage in party identification was an important factor helping them maintain a majority in both houses of Congress from 1955-80. Once the Democratic lead fell in the 1980s, it was easier for the Republicans to win, taking the Senate in 1981-86 and both chambers in 1995-2001 and 2003-06.

The Meaning and Effects of Party Identification

But what is party identification and how does it function? So far, this essay has described it only as a long-term orientation toward politics, a predisposition that leads to people favoring their party when other things are equal in an election. V. O. Key, Jr. (1959) wrote of people's "standing decisions" to support a particular party, and this is the basis of party identification. The concept of party identification was originally developed most fully in *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes 1960). That work based the concept of party identification on "reference group theory" – the social psychological theory at the time that people identify with particular groups such as their religious denomination. Indeed, many political scientists at that time viewed party identification as virtually a secular equivalent of religious identification, strong enough to be maintained over the long-term.

The American Voter also viewed party identification as a source of cues for interpreting politics. Politics can be seem very complicated to citizens, so people like to have an easy way to sort through political candidates and issues. If you know you are a Republican, you assume that Republican politicians are generally pretty good, certainly more than most Democratic politicians. If you know you are a Democrat, you assume that the issue positions of Democratic politicians are generally good ideas, or at least better than those of Republican politicians.

This leads to “selective perception” in absorbing political information. As stated at the beginning of this essay, people generally accept the messages of television ads from their party while tuning out campaign ads from other party. They tend to assume that their party’s candidate won the political debates. Of course, selective perception does not mean that all contrary messages are ignored. If a politician is shown to be corrupt, even identifiers with his or her party will desert them – though it may take more evidence of corruption to convince identifiers with that politician’s party. When candidates perform poorly in debates, many of their party’s identifiers will desert them though some will just view that poor performance as an aberration and will stick with their party’s candidates.

Taking the cue idea a step further, party identification can be seen as a short-cut that helps in making political decisions. This short-cut is particularly useful for races that are far down the ballot, such as deciding how to vote for county treasurer or auditor. Most citizens have little first-hand knowledge of how well the candidates for such offices

would perform if elected, so many people simply follow their party identification in their voting, especially if there is no incumbent in the race.

Social psychologists today often refer to this type of short-cut as a “heuristic.” They see people as “cognitive misers,” trying to make decisions without expending more effort to acquire information than is required. For instance, citizens could go to the trouble of reading the two parties’ campaign platforms, but they rarely do so. Similarly, voters could carefully analyze each candidate’s stands on all the issues, but they rarely do this either. Instead many voters feel that they can make a reasonable decision by just voting for the candidate of their party.

Party identification has been explained so far as if it were a long-term emotional factor. Fiorina (1981) has provided a more rational explanation. He describes it as a “running tally” of a person’s reactions towards the parties. A young adult may identify with the party of his or her parents, but may move toward stronger or weaker attachment to that party as political events unfold. One person may start off as a weak Republican and then find economic conditions good under Republican presidents and become a strong Republican. Another person may start off as a weak Democrat but then drift toward independence and perhaps even Republican partisanship when the Democratic Party takes positions on abortion and other social issues that the person finds morally unacceptable. The person’s party identification builds each time they vote in an election, reinforcing their partisanship if they like their party’s candidates enough to vote for them in successive elections or weakening their partisanship if they find themselves repeatedly

voting for the opposite party's candidate. Usually events are interpreted to reinforce the people's partisanship rather than weakening it, which is one reason why there is a tendency for older people to have stronger partisan loyalties than younger people (Converse 1976; cf. Abramson 1976).

More recently, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) have suggested "social identity theory" as a basis for understanding party identification. Social psychologists (e.g. Tajfel 1982) have shown that people can identify with a group under very minimal conditions, so that the mere act of categorizing people leads to in-group attachments and discrimination against out-groups. For example, when children learn from their parents that "we're Republicans" or "we're Democrats," that can be enough to get them to form an initial identification with that party.

A related way to think of party identification is as a form of brand loyalty (Tomz and Sniderman 2004). Just as consumers often decide they like one brand of soap or cars and stay with it, so people develop a loyalty to their political party. A bad experience with their favorite brand can certainly sour consumers on it and lead to their looking for alternatives, and the same is true in the political marketplace. But the fact is that brand loyalty generally wins out, and companies as well as political parties try to manage their brand image so that people retain their loyalty.

The Stability of Party Identification

All of this sounds like party identification is very stable, and it is quite stable. But that does not mean that it never changes. People can change from identifying with one party to independence or even to identifying with the opposite party. These shifts definitely occur, though stability is the norm.

The extent of stability and change in party identification can best be measured by “panel surveys” in which the same people are reinterviewed over time. Table 5 (based on Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg 2008, tables 7-4 and 7-5) shows the results of the Jennings and Niemi panel survey in which high school seniors and their parents were interviewed in 1965 and again in 1982. The columns of the table show for each 1982 partisan category, whether people were of the same party in 1965, if they had switched parties, or if they were no longer independents. Considerable stability in party identification is evident, though there certainly is some change as well. For example, 89% of the parents generation who were strong Democrats in 1982 had also been Democrats in 1965, whereas only 3% had been Republicans previously, and the remaining 8% had been independent. Somewhat more of the strong Republicans in the parents generation in 1982 had moved into that category since 1965, perhaps reflecting some “Reagan Democrats” becoming Republican. The same patterns are evident among those who were high school seniors in 1965, but with more change evident, which is consistent with the usual finding that young people are more changeable in their partisanship than older people (see also Niemi and Jennings 1991).

Table 5. Partisanship Change from 1965 to 1982 (in percentages)

	Party Identification in 1982						
	Strong Dem.	Weak Dem.	Ind. Dem.	Pure Ind.	Ind. Rep.	Weak Rep.	Strong Rep.
<u>Parents in 1965</u>							
Same as 1965	89	79	54	63	56	74	80
Left party*	3	4	46	37	44	9	10
Had been independent	8	17	--	--	--	17	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<u>Students in 1965</u>							
Same as 1965	70	55	40	63	44	35	36
Left party	10	12	60	37	56	32	34
Had been independent	21	33	--	--	--	34	30
Total	101	100	100	100	100	101	100

Source: Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Survey, 1965-1982.

*This row combines people who changed from Republican to Democrat, or vice versa, and people who changed from either party into political independence.

There has been a lively debate as to whether party identification changes with varying conditions. For example, to what extent does it swing with the economy, moving toward the incumbent party when the economy is doing well and away from it when the economy is doing poorly? MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) provide evidence at the aggregate level that partisanship does vary systematically as economic conditions change. However, that change is relatively small, and Green, Palmquist and Schickler's (1998) over-time analysis finds party identification relatively stable and fairly immune to day-to-day politics. Thus even if partisanship varies some with the economy and other external conditions, those effects seem generally to be fairly small. Allsop and Weisberg (1988) found that aggregate party identification move within the 1984 presidential election campaign, but that seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

More generally, the argument is whether party identification is an “unmoved mover” – a force that affects other political attitudes and behaviors but is not moved by them. Some studies have found evidence that issue positions and previous votes can lead to changes in a person’s partisanship (e.g. Jackson 1975; Page and Jones 1979; Fiorina 1981). But again the main view is that these changes are generally small and that party identification is close to being an unmoved mover (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002).

This does not mean that party identification is unresponsive to cataclysmic events. For example, the economic Panic of 1893 is generally seen as an important factor leading to Republican dominance in national elections starting in 1896. Similarly, the Great Depression that started in 1929 is generally seen as an important factor leading to the New Deal Realignment and Democratic dominance in national elections starting in 1932. Actually both of these stories are oversimplified, and it is difficult to assess the amount of individual level change in party identification at those times since they were before the era of extensive public opinion polling. Andersen’s (1979) analysis actually suggests that people may not have changed their party identification even during the New Deal Realignment – the realignment may be explained by mobilizing people who hadn’t been voting (immigrants, women who had newly received the vote, etc.) rather than conversion from Republican to Democratic partisanship. Yet even if the realignment is due to mobilization of new voters, it still is an instance of the distribution of party ties in the electorate changing because of a cataclysmic event.

We often hear people saying they are tired of both parties and ready for change. Yet it is amazing how durable the American two-party system has been. We've had a two-party system ever since state legislators stopped choosing their states' electors for the Electoral College and the public started voting for electors around 1824, and the Democrats and Republicans have been the main contenders in presidential elections since the 1860 election. There have been occasional third-party movements and some independent candidacies for the presidency, but they have been relatively short-lived and they have had minimal affect on party identification during the period that it has been measured. One typically sees a slight increase in the percentage of the public who are political independents during the years of strong third-party or independent candidacies, but these changes are small and quickly recede. For example, in 1992 H. Ross Perot received 19% of the popular vote, one of the largest vote totals of any candidate outside of our major parties, but this did not result in any enduring change in party identification.

The lack of staying power of third parties actually points to one of the important functions of party identification: party identification adds to the stability of our two-party system. People may deviate from their party, even to the extent of voting occasionally for a third party, but people tend to go back to their party, which adds to the durability of the two-party system. The relative strength of the two parties does ebb and swing over time, but within a confined range and returning to an equilibrium over time (Stokes and Iversen 1966).

The Relevance of Party Identification

When one hears that as much as 40% of the American public are political independents, it sounds like party identification must not be all that important. In fact, however, as we've already seen, most of these independents consider themselves closer to one or the other of the major parties. And these partisan leaners actually vote about as partisan as weak partisans do, and sometimes even more so. As a result, many analysts (e.g. Keith et al. 1992) argue that these leaners should be combined with the weak partisans, and that only the 10% of the public who are pure independents should be regarded as independents.

At times it has looked like the importance of party identification has declined. This was especially the case in the 1960s and 1970s when the relationship between party identification and the vote declined. Many Republicans voted for Lyndon Johnson in 1964 because they were not willing to support their party's nomination of Barry Goldwater. Similarly, many Democrats voted for Richard Nixon in 1972 because they were not willing to support their party's nomination of George McGovern. Not surprisingly, analysis of voting of that period seemed to show a decline in the importance of party identification in voting (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979). However, decline turned out to be temporary, clearly an aberration due to partisans defecting when their party chose an extreme candidate. Bartels (2000) shows that party identification has returned to being a strong predictor of the vote, in fact stronger in the 1990s than in the 1950s.

Fiorina makes an interesting argument as regards the shifting importance of party identification, tying it to the type of candidates nominated by the papers (e.g. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005, p. 91). When we compare voting in different elections, we usually treat all Republican candidates as equivalent to one another, and likewise all Democratic candidates as equivalent to one another. However, that is not the case. Some party nominees are more ideologically extreme than other party nominees. The choices offered the electorate change from election to election, and that affects voting. Fiorina points out that voting will seem less partisan when one candidate is more extreme ideologically than the other, as when Goldwater seemed more extreme ideologically than Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 race so that moderate Republicans were more likely to defect in their voting, and similarly when McGovern seemed more extreme ideologically than Richard Nixon in the 1972 election so that moderate Democrats were more likely to defect in their voting. Also, the Democrats have been more successful when they have minimized defections from their ranks by nominating moderate presidential candidates, such as Carter in 1976 and Clinton in 1992, though how moderate a candidate appears to be is partly a reflection of how successful the other party is in painting the candidate as an extremist. In any case, this argument not only can be used to explain why defection was more prevalent in some elections than others, but it can also be interpreted to suggest that the explanatory power of party identification may actually be due to its correlation with ideology. If the public is voting ideologically for candidates who have different ideological positions, that will seem like partisan voting when Democratic candidates and voters are more liberal than Republican candidates and voters. The resurgence of

partisan voting in recent years that Bartels (2000) demonstrated is, according to this interpretation, a reflection of the ideological sorting that occurred when southern conservatives left the Democratic Party and became Republicans and when the liberal northeastern wing of the Republican Party was extinguished.

U.S. presidential elections have been emphasized in this paper, but party identification is also relevant in other countries. It is less clear in some countries that party identification precedes the vote; in some, it appears more that party identification is more changeable than the vote (Thomassen 1976; Holmberg 1981; LeDuc 1981). But voting analysts in many countries find party identification to be important in understanding their country's elections.

While the importance of party identification in explaining individual level voting has been stressed in this paper, it is equally important to realize that most eligible voters do not vote their party identification. For one thing, many eligible adults do not vote – 36%-48% of eligible citizens in the elections since 1952 have not voted. Second, some voters cast their votes for third parties, with a high of 11% of the eligible electorate when more than 19% of voters supported Perot in 1992. Third, political independents (and the few apoliticals who vote) cannot, by definition, vote for their political party since they don't have one, and, depending on the year, they constitute another 2%-6% of eligible voters. Finally, some partisans defect to vote for the other major party, ranging from 4%-14% of eligible voters. As Table 6 and Figure 1 show, a reasonable estimate is that leaves only 37%-52% of the eligible electorate who vote according to their party

identification. While at least two-thirds of actual voters in each presidential election between 1952 and 2004 voted for the major party they identified with (see column 6), at most half of eligible voters voted their major party loyalty (column 5).

Table 6. Party Loyalty in Presidential Elections, 1952-2004

Year	Non-Voting (1)	Third-Party Voting (2)	Pure Independents (3)	Party Defectors (4)	Major Party Loyalists (5)	% Voters Loyal (6)
1952	37.7%	.3%	3.3%	11.2%	47.4%	76.1%
1956	39.8%	.4%	5.6%	8.9%	45.2%	75.1%
1960	36.2%	.4%	5.1%	7.9%	50.3%	78.8%
1964	37.2%	.3%	3.4%	9.7%	49.3%	78.5%
1968	38.5%	8.5%	4.1%	7.7%	41.2%	66.9%
1972	43.8%	1.0%	4.7%	13.5%	37.0%	65.8%
1976	45.2%	1.0%	5.8%	8.2%	39.8%	72.6%
1980	45.8%	4.4%	4.4%	8.2%	37.2%	68.7%
1984	44.8%	3.9%	4.2%	6.4%	40.8%	73.8%
1988	47.2%	.5%	3.5%	6.2%	42.6%	80.6%
1992	41.9%	11.3%	3.2%	4.4%	39.2%	67.4%
1996	48.3%	5.2%	2.0%	4.6%	39.9%	77.2%
2000	45.8%	2.0%	3.8%	5.1%	43.3%	79.9%
2004	39.7%	.6%	3.2%	4.9%	51.7%	85.7%

Notes:

(1) Non-voting (NV%): Based on estimates of Voting-Eligible Population (VEP) from McDonald and Popkin (2001) for 1952-1976 and McDonald (2007) for 1980-2004.

(2) Third-party voting (3P%): Based on votes for third parties (and other candidates) given in Leip (2007), multiplied by VEP.

(3) Pure independents (PI%): Based on percentage of pure independent (and apolitical) major party voters (NES 1984-2006 cumulative data file, with post-stratification weights, multiplied by (VEP minus percentage of third-party voting).

(4) Party defectors (D%): Based on percentage of major party identifiers (and independent leaners) who vote for the opposite major party (NES 1984-2006 cumulative data file, with post-stratification weights), multiplied by (VEP minus percentage of third party voting minus percent of pure independents voting).

(5) Major-party loyalists (L%): $100\% - NV\% - 3P\% - PI\% - D\%$.

(6) % Voters loyal = $L\% / VEP$.

The results in Table 6 also shed interesting light on the popular discussion of increased polarization in the electorate. The rate of defection of major-party identifiers to the other major party hit a post-1950 low in 2004. The percentage of major party loyalists hit a post-1950 high in 2004 of 51.7% due to a combination of factors: the lowest rate of

non-voting since the 1960s, a return to negligible third-party voting, a low level of pure independents voting, and the low level of defection. Polarization had been when defection was higher in the 1952-1980 period; less when there was greater third-party voting in 1968, 1980 1984, 1992, and 1996; less when there were more pure independents voting in most presidential elections from 1956 to 1984; and less when more people were not voting in the 1972-2000 elections.

One implication to draw from Table 6 is that there is considerable room for candidates to appeal for votes, regardless of the great predictive power of party identification in its relationship to individual voting. Most major party identifiers vote their partisanship, but most eligible voters do not do so. Candidates can try to draw people who do not vote to the polls, they can try to attract independents, and they can try to encourage defections – and these strategies are available for third party candidates as well as for major party candidates.

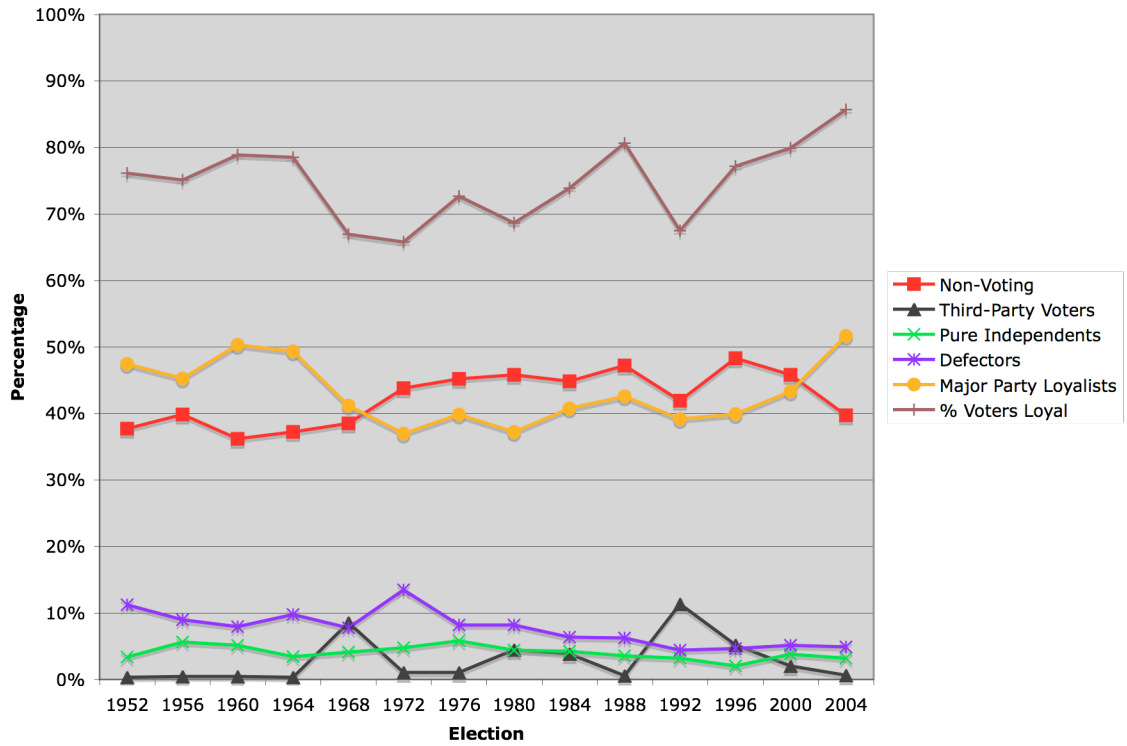
From this perspective, party identification can be seen as guaranteeing each major party a large base. The parties do not have to reinvent the wheel at each election – that is, they do not have to build their electoral coalitions from scratch. They can rely on the support of nearly all of their strong identifiers and most of their weak identifiers and independents who lean in their direction. They need only try to expand their coalition, while working to make sure they do not lose their base.

Party identification gives us a baseline for evaluating how well parties do in these regards. The Republicans found attractive candidates in the 1950s and 1980s who could

attract good numbers of Democratic defectors. They nominated a candidate in 1964 who could not hold the Republican base, and the Democrats made the same mistake in 1972. The Democrats won the popular vote in 1960, 1976, 1992, and 2000, but with a lower margin than would be expected given their lead in party identification, showing that even these Democratic wins were accompanied by some short-term advantages by the Republicans. Without the party identification concept, these real meaning of these elections would not stand out in as bold relief as it does when we see how they deviated from the party identification balance at the time.

Thus, party identification remains very important to understanding American presidential voting. How an election turns out then depends on the relative balance of Republican and Democratic identifiers among actual voters, how loyal each set of partisans is to their party in that particular election, and how political Independents swing in their votes. Political parties and candidates must try to turn out their loyalists, get the other party's supporters to defect, and seek the votes of independents. Not everyone votes their party identification, and that's what makes elections interesting.

Figure 1. Partisan Voting Loyalty, 1952-2004



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