

ARE LEANING INDEPENDENTS DELUDED OR DISHONEST WEAK PARTISANS?

Samuel J. Abrams

Sarah Lawrence College

Morris P. Fiorina

Stanford University

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Samuel J. Abrams, Sarah Lawrence College

Morris P. Fiorina, Stanford University

Probably no concept appears more frequently than party identification in studies of American voting behavior and elections.¹ Indeed, Richard Johnson (2006, 347) comments that “Party identification is probably the most highly leveraged measure in all of political science.” Despite more than a half century of research, however, important questions remain unsettled. The most basic concerns the very nature of party ID. Is it an affective identification akin to a religious identification, as originally conceptualized by Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960)? Or does it have a cognitive basis that reflects party performance and the issues of the day, as argued by revisionists like Jackson (1975), Fiorina (1977), and Page and Jones (1979)? This paper does not directly address that controversy, although the question will arise here and there in what follows.

This paper focuses on a second, more specific, but potentially important question for American politics—the status of leaning independents—those who respond “independent” to the core party ID question but admit that they lean toward one of the two parties when probed. We do not dispute the findings that leaning independents differ from pure independents in significant ways—principally political engagement and political knowledge (Keith et. al.1992). But we believe that many scholars have uncritically adopted the view that leaning independents are

¹ The status of party ID in other countries, especially European democracies, has been more controversial. See, for example, Budge (1976), LeDuc (1981) and Brynin and Sanders (1997) for reservations about the cross-national applicability of party ID. For more positive views of the offshore relevance of party ID, see Richardson (1991) and Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002: ch. 7). Johnston (2006) reviews this ongoing debate.

“closet partisans”--essentially identical to weak party identifiers--when there is no conclusive evidence for that position.² The substantive importance of properly characterizing independent leaners is apparent. If they are closet partisans, then only ten percent or so of the eligible electorate is truly uncommitted, so stable partisan commitments are more widespread than often assumed in popular commentary about the importance of campaigns. In contrast, if leaners are independents, then more than a third of the eligible electorate is uncommitted, and the electorate is less partisan, arguably more centrist, and potentially more volatile.³ No doubt political reality falls somewhere between these extremes, but evidence presented below leads us to conclude that coding independent leaners as partisans exaggerates the importance of partisanship as traditionally conceptualized.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first major section we review the concept of party identification with particular attention to the classification of independents. Next we consider the survey evidence for the “leaners are partisans” (henceforth “LAP”) point of view, arguing that it is not at all conclusive-- the obvious endogeneity objection rarely has been acknowledged, let alone addressed in any serious way. Then, in a brief digression, we report aggregate relationships between party registration and presidential voting in the states that mirror the causal ambiguity in the survey relationships. In the second major section we present some older evidence which suggests that leaning independents and weak identifiers are not “virtually identical,” as frequently

² Unequivocal claims like that of Abramowitz (2011) are typical: “Research by political scientists on the American electorate has consistently found that the large majority of self-identified independents are “closet partisans” who think and vote much like other partisans.” Although that is a common conclusion, we argue that it actually has little basis in data.

³ Consider that if leaners are classified as partisans, the distribution (Democratic/Independent/Republican) of American party ID in 1952 was 59/5/36 compared to 51/11/38 in 2008--somewhat fewer Democrats and a few more independents. Alternatively, if leaners are classified as independents, the distribution in 1952 was 49/23/28 compared to 34/40/26 in 2008--a significant decline in Democrats and a comparable increase in independents. http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab2a_1.htm.

claimed. Then we report a number of policy-related ways in which leaners differ from weak identifiers. Finally, we present the findings from a survey experiment... (*unfinished—this part is in the planning stages*).

I. CRITIQUE OF COMMON PRACTICE

A. THE CONCEPT OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (hereafter CCMS) write that “We use the concept here to characterize the individual’s affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment” (1960: 121). As Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002: 5-6) note, other than some brief mentions of “reference group theory and small-group studies” CCMS say little more about the theoretical concept. Nevertheless, the survey item they constructed to capture what they had in mind has become a classic: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” If the response is Democrat or Republican, the respondent is classified as a partisan and the interviewer proceeds to a strength probe: “Would you call yourself a strong Republican [Democrat] or a not very strong Republican [Democrat]? If the answer to the stem question is Independent, however, the interviewer next asks “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?” Those independents who reply that they are closer to one of the parties are the leaning independents.

Both follow-up probes have been the subject of controversy. Brody (1978, 1991), Brody and Rothenberg (1988), Miller (1991) and others have argued that responses to the probes are seriously polluted by short-term electoral forces operating in the campaign—the candidates, the issues, and the so-called fundamentals.⁴ Another obvious question arises immediately. The stem question is intended to elicit an identity—do you belong to a specified category? And “strong” or

⁴ Less formally, on a number of occasions (usually over a good bottle of wine) Miller told one of us that he wished CCMS had never asked the follow-up probes. In his view “revisionist mischief” about the nature of party ID would have been much less persuasive in the absence of the probes.

“not very strong” in the follow-up question for partisans arguably measures the degree of affect felt toward the category—even if it varies with the electoral context, as critics charge. But “closer to” in the follow-up question for independents is ambiguous. It could elicit an affective response as in “I am closer to my younger brother than my older brother.” But it could also elicit a cognitive response as in “I am closer to the Republicans on economic issues, but closer to the Democrats on foreign policy and social issues, hence, on balance I am closer to the Democrats.”

Based on evidence to be evaluated below—principally their presidential vote reports-- numerous scholars have concluded that leaning independents are in fact “closet Democrats and Republicans,” “hidden partisans,” and “covert partisans” (Keith, et. al. 1992: 4, 23). Most unequivocally, (Petrocik 2009: 562) writes flatly that “Leaners are partisans.” In consequence it has become common practice to classify leaning independents as partisans, leaving only pure independents in the middle party ID category. This is a rather remarkable practice which should require thoroughly compelling evidence to justify. An independent leaner has explicitly said “no” to the stem question about partisan identity (do you think of yourself ...?). We can think of no other case in political science where analysts change a respondent’s explicit response to a survey item on the basis of information from other items--*especially one generally used as the dependent variable*. Consider that people who place themselves in general ideological categories (especially self-classified conservatives) often do not report specific policy positions associated with those categories (Ellis and Stimson 2011). Knowing this, a researcher might construct an alternative measure of ideology based on policy positions and use this new measure in place of or in addition to self-classification. But we have never encountered an analysis that recodes a respondent’s ideological self-classification on the basis of their policy positions, which would be somewhat analogous to recoding partisanship on the basis of voting behavior.

Those in the LAP camp contend that leaners are lying or engaging in self-delusion, but on what basis have they reached that conclusion? What evidence is so compelling that we should

reject the explicit statement of a respondent that she is not a partisan, peek at the dependent variable, retort “oh yes you are!” and reverse her answer?

B. THE EVIDENCE FOR TREATING LEANERS AS PARTISANS

CCMS combine leaners with pure independents, a practice that resulted in monotonic relationships between party identification and partisan behavior and attitudes in the 1952 and 1956 elections (1960: ch. 6). But Petrocik (1974) pointed out that if leaners are kept as separate categories, they often vote more heavily for the party toward which they lean than do weak partisans, violating monotonicity.⁵ A thorough search of the literature suggests that a pattern of partisan voting behavior is the LAP camp’s main justification for classifying independent leaners as partisans. For example, Petrocik writes that “In brief, the almost indistinguishable voting choices of leaners and weak identifiers of the same party is datum number one for the proposition that leaners are partisans, even if their first inclination is to respond to the party identification question by calling themselves independents” (2009: 566-7).

But what is the conclusive evidence for rejecting Shively’s (1980: 232-35) suggestion that when respondents answer the probe about how they lean, they consult their voting decision? Why not, “Well, I’m going to vote for Obama, so I must be closer to the Democrats?” Or, why not the slightly more complicated possibility that some respondents consult their ideological leanings: “I lean conservative and the Republicans are the more conservative party, so I must be closer to the Republicans?” Or, why not the still more complicated possibility that some respondents might consult their issue positions: “I agree with the Democrats on abortion and the war in Afghanistan, so I must be closer to the Democrats?”⁶ LAP scholars have pointed out that

⁵ Contrary to the title of Petrocik’s article, the voting patterns violate monotonicity, not transitivity.

⁶ Petrocik (2009: 571-2) reports that the policy preferences of weak Democrats and leaning Democrats are very similar, and the same holds for weak Republicans and independent Republicans. But rather than proof that leaners are disguised partisans, this finding may only indicate that leaners use their policy preference to

leaners are at least as informed and engaged as weak partisans, so on what basis do LAP scholars rule out the possibility that causality runs in the opposite direction, from vote choice to responses to the “closer to” probe, or that both survey responses and vote reflect other factors like ideology or policy views? In and of itself the finding that independent leaners vote in the direction they lean proves nothing about the causal direction of the relationship.⁷ And to the extent that the strong relationship is a reflection of vote intention or third factors affecting both survey response and the vote, the correspondence between leaning direction and vote will be inflated.⁸

As far as we can ascertain the principal response of LAP scholars to the preceding objection--if they recognize it--is to point out that the vote choices of independent leaners do not flip back and forth between the parties; rather, they show a significant amount of temporal consistency (Keith et. al. 1992: 65-75). But flip-flopping voting behavior across election years is an implausible null model. We would expect to observe it only if there is parallel flip-flopping in the policy preferences of independent leaners and/or flip-flopping in the positions of the parties and candidates between which they are choosing. The former possibility seems inconsistent with LAP scholars' contention that leaners actually are stable partisans in disguise. As for the second possibility, we do not observe Republicans nominating a conservative in one election and the

identify the direction in which they lean. Abramowitz (2011) make an argument similar to Petrocik's. We show below that the differences between independent leaners and weak partisans are larger than Petrocik and Abramowitz claim.

⁷ Contrast today's common practice with the explicit rejection of that practice in CCMS (1960: 123-124): “We do not think that the problem of measurement presented by the concealed partisan is large. Rather it seems to us much less troublesome than the problems that follow if psychological ties to party are measured in terms of the vote.”

⁸ The typical question ordering adds credence to this possibility. Generally the party ID battery is asked after a number of political items—in 2008 it followed the party and candidate likes/dislikes batteries, presidential performance, candidate affect, and feeling thermometers. After a voter has been thoroughly probed about his or her partisan attitudes, it would not be surprising if a leaner reasoned “given all that I've just said, I guess I must lean toward the Democrats (Republicans).”

Democrats a liberal, then each party doing the opposite in the next election. On the contrary, even when parties change positions, party images lag.⁹ Given that party images show a considerable degree of continuity, it should not be terribly surprising that someone who leans toward the Democrats in one election also leans toward them in the next election.

Petrocik's demonstration (2009: 567) that leaners and weak identifiers have similar levels of split-ticket voting (President-House) suffers from the same ambiguity. Voting consistency across multiple offices at a single point in time is no more unexpected than voting consistency for a single office over multiple time points. If an independent respondent is closer to Obama than to McCain, she also is probably closer to the Democratic House candidate than to the Republican. In fact, the partisan voting consistency of leaners should have increased as the parties sorted and became more homogeneous—leaners would be more likely to find themselves closer to a party's candidates up and down the ballot. Also note that if independent leaners are using their vote choices to answer the directional probe, they might well be *more* consistent than weak identifiers: some of the latter will have issue preferences which conflict with their party ID. We will say more about the status of weak identifiers below.

In sum, while the observed tendency of leaning independents to vote in the direction they lean is consistent with the assumption that they are closet partisans, it is equally consistent with other possibilities--in particular, the possibility that the causal arrow runs in the reverse direction, from vote choice to leaning independent, or from policy preferences and ideology which affect both vote and the direction independents lean. As far as we are aware there is no conclusive

⁹ As in the familiar perception that the Democrats are the party of prosperity which persisted uninterrupted from the Depression until the Reagan era, and the perception that Republicans are the party of peace, which persisted until the wars of the Bush Administration. Comparing survey data from 1953 to that in 1997 Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002: 9) comment that "The partisan stereotypes of the New Deal are alive and well."

evidence in support of the former assumption which largely underlies the practice of classifying leaning independents as partisans.

C. PARTY REGISTRATION AND PRESIDENTIAL VOTING IN THE STATES

Recently representative samples of political attitudes in the American states have become available. After the 2008 election the Gallup organization combined its state tracking polls into a database of 350,000 U.S. adults.¹⁰ We naturally wondered how closely the Gallup party ID figures track party registration figures in the 29 states (and the District of Columbia) that provide for partisan registration. Responses to the party ID question are attitudinal measures of affiliation, whereas registration is a behavioral measure of affiliation. Shortly after the Gallup data became available the state-based Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) was released, providing a second, independent, listing of state party ID in the autumn of 2008.¹¹

We regressed state registration data on the Gallup and CCES state party ID responses with the results shown in Table 1. Evidently, in the aggregate, the correspondence between attitudinal and behavioral party affiliation is much closer when independent leaners are coded as Independent or Decline to state (DtS). With the Gallup data the R-squareds for Democratic and Independent registration are 50 percent higher when leaners are classified as independents (LAI) than when leaners are classified as partisans (LAP). In the CCES data the R-Squared for DtS citizens is 75% higher. Interestingly, the coding makes less difference when predicting Republican registration than Democratic registration, although Republican registration is still better predicted by classifying leaning Republicans as independents. Thus, recognizing all the

¹⁰ Jeffrey M. Jones, “State of the States: Political Party Affiliation.” Although Gallup defined leaners as partisans, we were able to procure the data with leaning independents broken out separately.

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/114016/State-States-Political-Party-Affiliation.aspx>

¹¹ <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/home>

usual caveats about inferences from aggregate data, independent leaners appear to register as DtS, even though in some states this entails a penalty in terms of primary participation.

{Table 1 about here}

The next step is obvious. What is the correspondence between state attitudinal party ID and state presidential vote? Table 2 shows the regressions for both the 30 state subsample from Table 3 and for the 50 states plus DC. Here the pattern is the reverse of Table 1: the state's vote for president is much better predicted by classifying leaners as partisans.

{Table 2 about here}

Combining these two sets of findings, in the aggregate people register as they self-identify—where the latter is measured by the stem—categorical--measure of party ID. But their presidential vote is better predicted by differentiating independents according to the “closer to” probe. This is the pattern one would expect if the short-term forces pushing an independent to vote for one party or the other also lead her to “lean” toward that same party when surveyed. In a word, how she leans is partly endogeneous, which would inflate the observed correspondence with the vote.

II. ARE LEANING INDEPENDENTS AND WEAK PARTISANS THE SAME?

A. STABILITY OF IDENTIFICATION

The LAP camp views leaners as weak identifiers in disguise:

“We will see that leaners do not always match or exceed weak identifiers on all measures of partisan affect, but *they are never neutral and the extent of their affect almost invariably resembles that of weak partisans*” (emphasis in original, Keith, et. al. 1992, 70).

“...as an empirical matter, Americans who admit to feeling closer to one of the parties in the follow-up probe—the leaners—are virtually identical to those who are classified as “weak” partisans ... across a wide variety of perceptions, preferences, and behaviors” (Petrocik 2009, 563).

If independent leaners are simply deluded or dishonest weak identifiers, one might suppose that the stability of party identification among independent leaners is about the same as that among weak identifiers. After examining party ID change in three panel studies Keith et. al. (1992: 87-9) conclude that is the case. But they define stability very loosely as staying on the same side of pure Independent on the Democratic-Republican continuum; that is, an independent leaning Democrat who moves to Strong Democrat or vice-versa is considered “stable.”¹² A finer-grained analysis reveals a different picture. Table 3 compares the stability of weak partisan and independent leaners in all waves (we think) of the NES panels on the full seven-point scale. If weak

¹² In a later article, however, Brody (1991: 186) noted that leaning independents showed the “least stable response pattern.”

identifiers and leaners are the same, we should expect insignificant differences in partisan stability between them, with leaners being about as likely to be more stable as less stable than weak identifiers. The empirical reality is quite different.

{Table 3 about here}

An examination of 20 waves of ANES surveys shows that weak identifiers are more stable than leaners in 38 of 40 comparisons, often by substantively large margins. To be sure, there is considerable variation over time. In particular, weak identifiers are far more stable than leaning independents in the 1956-60 panel waves, but the difference drops considerably in the more recent panels, somewhat more for Democrats than for Republicans.¹³ A plausible hypothesis is that this rough trend is related to the increased homogenization of the parties, particularly for the Democrats as they shed the party's southern wing (Miller 1991), but further examination of such questions is beyond the scope of this paper.

At the very least Table 3 makes one point clear. Independent leaners are less stable in their partisan self-classification than weak identifiers. This is consistent with the notion that their responses to the directional probe reflect their appraisals of the candidates and issues of the time, which show more variation than a deep-seated psychological identification should.¹⁴

B. SOME FORGOTTEN EVIDENCE

¹³ Keith et. al. 1992: 88) do not include the 1956-60 panel in their analysis of partisan stability.

¹⁴ Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) might suggest the alternative hypothesis that there is more measurement error among respondents classified as independent leaners, but if that is the case, it is another indication that leaners are not identical to weak identifiers.

Another bit of evidence against the equation of leaning independents and weak partisans can be found in an older line of research that dead-ended in the 1980s. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002: 32-35) show that question wording makes little difference for responses to the party ID item, but they focus on the three-category measure of party ID (with independent leaners classified as partisans) rather than the distribution of the differing types of independents. In fact, alternative ways of asking about partisanship produce significant differences in the distribution of responses.

In response to violations of monotonicity in the seven-point measure of party ID, Valentine and Van Wingen (1980) suggested that the standard measure was conflating two dimensions of identification: identification with parties, and identification with independence. They pointed out that then existing data showed weak identifiers to be more partisan than leaners in partisan activities, less partisan in spectator activities, and no different in election-specific measures, concluding that “Partisan independents are more independent, not more partisan, than are weak partisans” (1980: 179).

Other scholars raised the ante. Weisberg (1980) proposed a four-dimensional party ID concept that included attitudes toward the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, Independence, and the party system itself. Dennis (1988b) postulated four dimensions of independence in addition to the partisan dimensions. This dimensional arms race probably contributed to the demise of the research program, as did the belief that the discussion was getting somewhat far from the original notion of party identification.¹⁵ But before it did the Board of Overseers of the National Election Study experimented with an alternative measure of partisanship. A committee consisting of Richard Brody, Jack Dennis and Herbert Weisberg constructed a measure called the

¹⁵ Alvarez (1990) broke the dimensional inflation trend with his suggestion that a measure based on three thermometer scales (toward Republicans, Democrats, and Independents) would be a better measure of partisanship than the traditional measure.

Partisan Supporter Typology (PST) which was included in the 1980 NES Panel, along with the traditional PID measure. The most extensive analysis of this data was reported in a series of articles by Dennis (1988a, 1988b, 1992).

The new “partisan supporter typology” (PST) items differed from the traditional party ID battery in two major ways. First, respondents were asked “In your own mind, do you think of yourself as a supporter of one of the political parties or not?”¹⁶ Those who answered “yes” were then asked how strongly they supported that party on a seven-point scale. Those who answered “no” were then asked if they ever thought of themselves as closer to a party, with responses coded on a seven-point scale running from “very close to the Republican Party” to “very close to the Democratic Party.” (Dennis 1988a: 82).

Second, *all* respondents were then asked “do you ever think of yourself as a political independent or not?” Responses were coded on a seven-point scale running from “not very strongly” to “very strongly.” Thus, some respondents could claim both to be party supporters and independents, and about a sixth of the sample did so. Dennis (1988a: 84) suggested that the traditional party ID measure might hide not only closet partisans, but closet non-partisans as well, a possibility that the new measure could uncover.

Collapsing the seven-point “how strongly” and “closer to” continua produces a six category classification: Partisan Democratic (Republican) Supporters, Independent Democratic (Republican) Supporters, Ordinary Independents, Unattached, where “ordinary independents” were independent but not party supporters, and “unattached” were respondents who claimed to be

¹⁶ Clearly, “think of yourself as a supporter” is different from simply “think of yourself” in the traditional measure. Although Dennis viewed support as a stronger concept than identification, it is unclear why that would be the case if party ID is akin to a religious identification. On the one hand “support” may connote giving money, working and so forth, activities in which few voters—even partisans—engage. On the other hand Jon Krosnick pointed out to us that the phrase “in your own mind” suggests a weaker, more psychological notion of support.

neither supporters nor independents.¹⁷ Table 4 is Dennis' cross-tabulation of the party ID and PST responses where PST is collapsed as just explained (Dennis 1988a: 89).

{Table 4 about here}

Strong partisans on the traditional party ID measure were very likely to be partisan supporters on the PST, although about a sixth of them also adopted the independent label now that it was possible—suggesting to Dennis that they were closet non-partisans. Both pure independents and leaners fell overwhelmingly into the independent and unattached categories of the PSI—they answered negatively to the supporter item. Only about an eighth of the Democratic leaners and a fifth of the Republican leaners admitted to being a party supporter while pure independents were almost certain to deny being a supporter. The truly surprising categories were the weak partisans, half of whom *denied* being partisan supporters.¹⁸ Perhaps scholars should give some thought to defining weak partisans downward toward independence, rather than defining leaning independents upward toward partisanship.¹⁹

In sum, whatever one's evaluation of the multidimensional party ID research program, it demonstrates that those classified as weak partisans and leaning independents by the traditional

¹⁷ Dennis (1988a) labeled partisan Democrats and Republicans as “ordinary” Democrats and Republicans. We believe our terminology is clearer, albeit redundant.

¹⁸ Weisberg (1980: 51) noted that “the weak partisan category is unusually diverse in the nature of its partisanship” but most of the subsequent attention focused on independents. Interestingly, in another test of alternative question wording Blais et. al. (2001) report that in the 1996 NES 43 percent of weak identifiers deny being “closer to” either party when asked an alternative question. The drop-offs are even greater in 1997 British and Canadian surveys.

¹⁹ The same thought is stimulated by some of Petrocik's data (eg. 2009: Figure 5, 369). Similarly, Blais et. al. (2001: 14) ask “...whether those who first indicate that they are partisan but then add that they are not very strongly partisan truly identify with a party.”

measure respond very differently to an alternative measure of partisanship that serious scholars considered plausible. And the difference between independent leaners and weak partisans did not arise because leaners became more partisan, but because weak identifiers became less so.

C. ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INDEPENDENT LEANERS AND WEAK PARTISANS

Our impression is that scholars have been more assiduous in seeking out evidence consistent with the conclusion that leaners are partisans than with seeking out evidence inconsistent with that conclusion—even to the extent of ignoring the voter’s denial that she is a partisan, as noted above. In fact there is considerable survey evidence which calls into question the equivalence of independent leaners and weak partisans. For one thing, as Figure 1 shows, leaning independents are systematically less favorable to the party toward which they lean than weak partisans.²⁰ The differences are not large—an average of 4.6 degrees for Democrats and 3.4 degrees for Republicans—and in the context of any one survey would likely be dismissed as insignificant.²¹ But the consistency of the differences is striking: 12 of 12 comparisons for Democrats and 10 of 12 for Republicans (with 10 of 12 patterns showing perfect monotonicity from strong Democrats to strong Republicans.) If leaners and weak identifiers truly are identical, then NES has tossed a fair coin 24 times and gotten 22 heads. Given that unlikelihood it seems reasonable to conclude that not only are leaners less stable in expressing a party identification than weak identifiers, they like the party toward which they lean less than weak identifiers do.

²⁰ The NES thermometer battery asked about “Democrats” and “Republicans” from 1964 to 1980, and “the Democratic Party” and “the Republican Party” from 1980 to 2008 (the items were not included in 2004). In 1980 when both items were included, leaners were about 3 percentage points less positive about the Democratic and Republican parties than about Democrats and Republicans generally, suggesting that the differences in the earlier years would have been larger if the later question wording had been used.

²¹ Except in 2004. We believe there is some problem with the coding of party ID in the 2004 survey, since in numerous cross-tabulations the 2004 figure seems far out of line. For that reason we do not include the 2004 data point in any calculations included in the text.

{Figure 1 here}

An interesting pattern emerges when we consider ideological self-placements. Figure 2 shows that independent Democrats are consistently *more* liberal than weak Democrats, whereas independent Republicans were *more* conservative than weak Republicans until 1996 when the pattern sharply reversed. Again there are suggestions in the data that weak Democrats are the more puzzling category, frequently disrupting the expected monotonic pattern—at least until 1996.

{Figure 2 about here}

In eleven of twelve surveys that included “big business” (1964-2008) in the thermometer battery, Democratic leaners are less favorable than weak Democrats by an average of 3.3 degrees (1996 is the exception by .1 of a percentage point). And in all seven surveys (1980, 1988-2008) that included “the federal government,” Democratic leaners are less favorable than weak Democrats by an average of 4.6 degrees. Part of the reason independent Democrats are less enamored of the federal government may be that they think big business dominates big government: in nine of twelve surveys (and one tie) independent Democrats agree that “The federal government is run by a few big interests” by an average margin of 9.5 percentage points to weak Democrats. In ten of the same twelve surveys independent Republicans agree that big interests dominate the federal government by an average margin of 4.9 percentage points compared to weak Republicans.

There is some indication in the NES that Democratic leaners are more liberal on social and life-style issues than weak Democrats. They are more supportive of abortion rights than weak Democrats in seven of eight presidential surveys (1980-2008). Seven presidential surveys (1984-

2008) included “gays and lesbians” and “Christian Fundamentalists” in the thermometer battery. In all seven surveys leaning Democrats give higher ratings to gays and lesbians and lower ratings to Christian Fundamentalists than did weak Democrats--by exactly the same average of 5.4 degrees. On the question of whether “We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own,” Democrat leaners respond “strongly agree” by an average of 7.6 percentage points in four of the five surveys that included the item.²² And on the question of gay adoption, independent leaning Democrats are on average 10.1 percentage points more favorable on the three surveys that contained the item (1992, 2000, 2008). Leaning Democrats rate “environmentalists” more highly than weak Democrats in six of the seven surveys that include the item, albeit by only an average of 2.0 degrees. Differences between independent leaning and weak Republicans are smaller and less consistent, possibly reflecting a change in the category as suggested by Figure 2

A number of the standard seven-point scales also show consistent differences between weak partisans and leaning independents. For example, independent leaning Republicans are more racially conservative than weak Republicans in eight of ten presidential election surveys (Figure 3), while independent leaning Democrats are more supportive of a government health insurance plan than weak Democrats in nine of ten surveys (Figure 4). Republican leaners are more supportive of higher defense spending in seven of eight surveys that included the item (Figure 5). From 1972 to 1992 leaning Democrats were more supportive of an equal role for women, although the gap has closed up as the notion approaches universal acceptance (Figure 6).

{ Figures 3-5 } about here

²² 1988-1992-1996, 2008. They are .6 of a percentage point less tolerant in 2000.

We are still in the process of investigating differences between leaning independents and weak partisans, but our examination of various partisan and policy attitudes to date suggests that while the differences between independent leaners and weak partisans are generally not large, they do exist and, as shown above, are quite consistent. One possibility is that leaners are out of step with the party on some issue important to them.²³ But whatever the precise micro-explanations, the data are consistent with the hypothesis that leaners are people who refuse to claim identification with a party at least in part because they differ in some way from those who do.²⁴ And to complicate the picture, independent Democrats [Republicans] may often vote more Democratic [Republican] than weak identifiers because they are more in tune with the Democratic [Republican] platform than are weak identifiers, another indication that weak identifiers might merit more of our attention.

D. A SURVEY EXPERIMENT (TO BE CARRIED OUT DURING 2012 CAMPAIGN)

In the NES surveys the party identification battery always {need to check this} follows the party and candidate likes/dislikes batteries and various other partisan attitude items. Thus, a self-professed independent is asked in which direction they lean after they have been primed to think about the two parties and the two presidential candidates. Could this priming cause respondents not indifferent between the two candidates and the two parties to “lean” in the direction of their party and candidate evaluations, in which case their “leaning” reflects not covert partisanship but rather the policies and performances of the parties and the persons of their candidates?

²³ Despite the significant party sorting that has occurred during the past generation, the issue consistency of partisans in the mass public tends to be exaggerated. Hillygus and Shields (2008) show that in the 2004 campaign two-thirds of party identifiers disagreed with their parties on at least one issue, with 40% disagreeing on more than one.

²⁴ Possibly demographic differences between weak partisans and leaning independents underlie observed differences in issue positions. We have not yet investigated that possibility.

{Thoughts and Suggestions Welcome}

CONCLUSION

Petrocik concludes that “Regarding leaners as independents mis-characterizes the partisanship of Americans, underestimates the rate of party voting, and may mislead both (sic) scholars, public commentators, and the public about what to expect at elections and how one should formulate analyses of issues and political behavior” (2009: 572). We believe such strong conclusions are premature. Citizens who classify themselves as independent leaners in one election are less likely to classify themselves the same way in the next election than are weak identifiers. And at least part of the reason why the self-classifications of leaners change more than those of weak identifiers may be that the former are responding to the issues and candidates in each campaign. Thus, their self-classification is a result of the factors that determine their vote as well as a cause of it. Classifying all leaners as weak partisans mis-characterizes the partisanship of Americans and overestimates the rate of party voting.

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Table 1a. 2008 State Party Registration and Gallup Party ID

n=30 (29 states plus DC)

	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>t-stat</u>	<u>adj R²</u>
<i>Democratic registration</i>			
LAP	1.05	6.13	.56
LAI	1.32	13.3	.86
<i>Republican registration</i>			
LAP	1.02	7.85	.68
LAI	1.31	11.9	.83
<i>Independent/DtS</i>			
LAP	5.33	4.68	.42
LAI	1.50	7.08	.63

LAP: Leaners are Partisans

LAI: Leaners are Independents

Table 1b. 2008 State Party Registration and CCES Party ID**(n=30)***Democratic registration*

LAP	.93	5.41	.49
LAI	1.06	7.33	.65

Republican registration

LAP	.91	6.01	.55
LAI	1.06	6.67	.60

Independent/DtS

LAP	2.29	3.13	.23
LAI	1.23	4.60	.41

LAP: Leaners are Partisans

LAI: Leaners are In

Table 2a. 2008 Presidential Vote and Gallup Party ID**(n=30)***Obama Vote*

LAP	1.17	11.2	.81
LAI	.92	5.03	.46

McCain Vote

LAP	1.16	9.91	.77
LAI	1.22	7.11	.63

(n=51)*Obama Vote*

LAP	1.19	13.6	.79
LAI	.98	6.57	.46

McCain Vote

LAP	1.24	13.28	.78
LAI	1.34	9.03	.62

LAP: Leaners are Partisans

LAI: Leaners are Independents

Table 2b. 2008 State Presidential Vote and CCES Party ID**(n=30)***Obama Vote*

LAP	1.10	11.5	.82
LAI	.93	6.34	.57

McCain Vote

LAP	1.04	7.45	.65
LAI	1.09	6.22	.56

(n=51)*Obama Vote*

LAP	1.07	9.40	.63
LAI	1.15	7.77	.54

McCain Vote

LAP	1.04	7.45	.65
LAI	1.10	6.22	.56

LAP: Leaners are Partisans

LAI: Leaners are Independents

Table 3a. Democrats: Weak Democrats are More Stable than Leaning Democrats

	Weak Democrats Are More Stable Than Leaning Democrats	Leaning Democrats Are More Stable Than Weak Democrats
<i>ANES</i>	% points	
1956-58	21.0	
58-60	27.1	
56-60	28.4	
1972-74	4.4	
74-76	19.0	
72-76	13.9	
1980 P1-P3	20.8	
1990-91	9.2	
91-92	3.3	
90-92	6.9	
2000-02	8.0	--
02-04	--	5.2
00-04	--	0.6
2008-09	10.2	
<i>Jennings-Niemi</i>		
1965-73	21.7	
65-82	16.0	
65-97	7.3	
73-82	9.6	
73-97	3.7	
82-97	5.1	

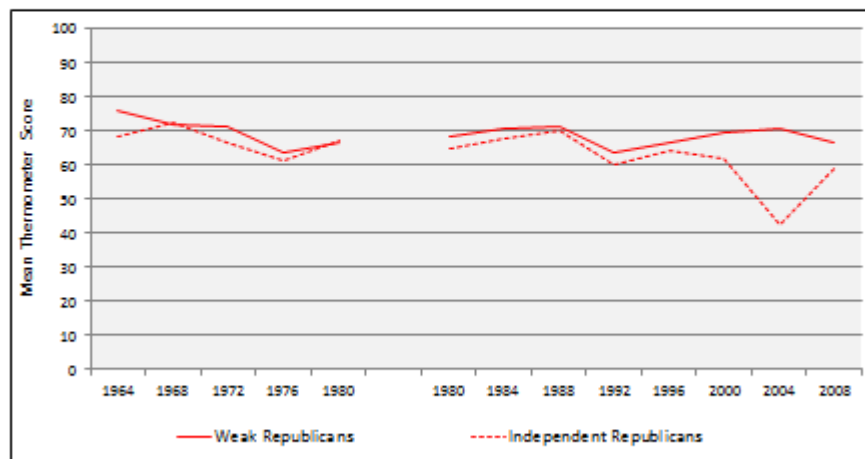
Table 3b. Republicans: Weak Republicans are More Stable than Leaning Republicans

	Weak Republicans Are More Stable Than Leaning Republicans	Leaning Republicans Are More Stable Than Weak Republicans
<i>ANES</i>		
1956-58	32.0	
58-60	21.0	
56-60	14.9	
1972-74	15.6	
74-76	18.1	
72-76	8.7	
1980 P1-P3	11.8	
1990-91	12.0	
91-92	17.4	
90-92	16.1	
2000-02	26.6	
02-04	1.0	
00-04	6.4	
2008-09	10.3	
<i>Jennings-Niemi</i>		
1965-73	2.9	
65-82	8.0	
65-97	6.6	
73-82	8.2	
73-97	7.1	
82-97	2.9	

Table 4. Party ID v. Partisan Supporter Typology (from Dennis, 1988a)

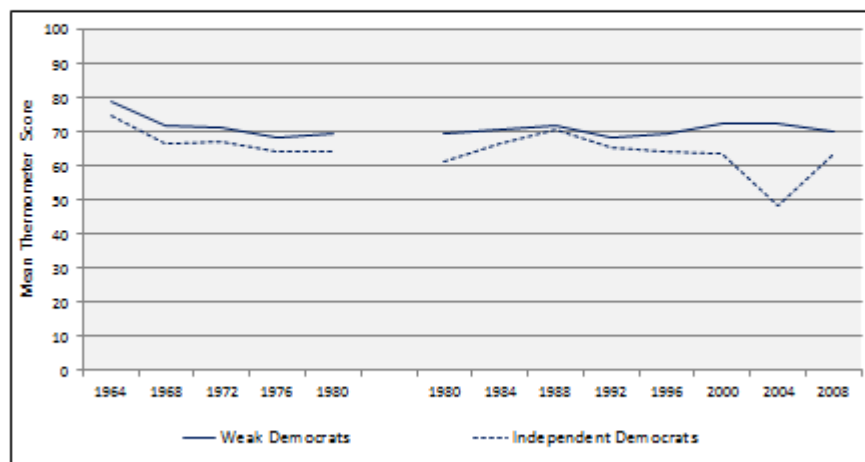
/	Partisan Democratic Supporter	Independ Democratic Supporter	Ordinary Independ	Unattached	Independ Republican Supporter	Partisan Republican Supporter
Strong Democrat	70	15	3	11	1	0
Weak Democrat	27	23	17	31	0	1
Leaning Democrat	2	10	52	33	1	0
Independent	1	1	50	47	1	0
Leaning Republican	0	0	63	20	18	0
Weak Republican	1	0	18	32	18	31
Strong Republican	0	0	3	11	26	61

Figure 1a. Evaluations of Republican Party by Weak and Leaning Republicans



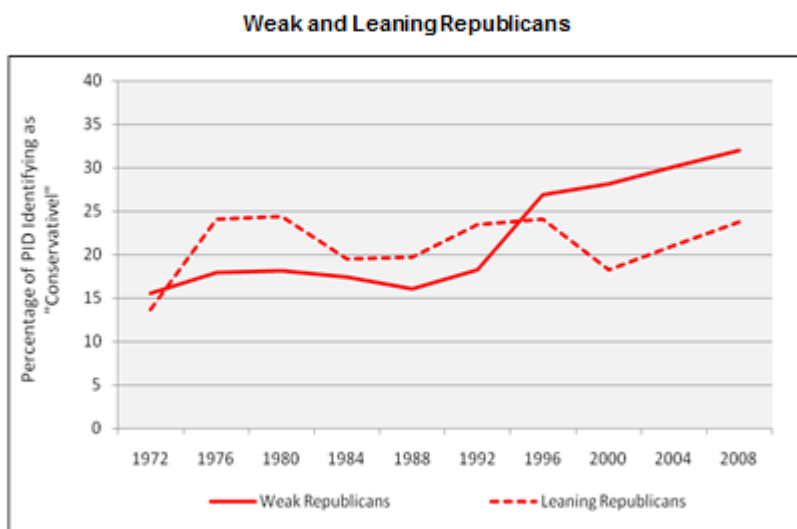
Source: ANES

Figure 1b. Evaluations of Democratic Party by Weak and Leaning Democrats



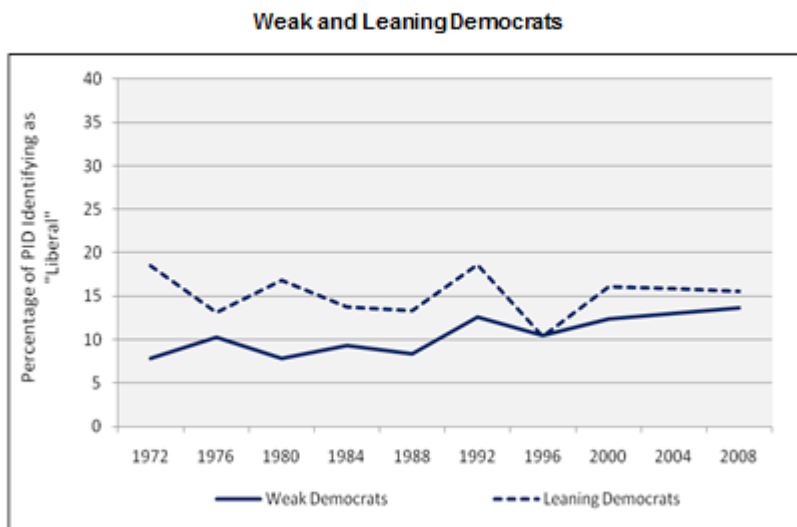
Source: ANES

Figure 2a. Ideological Self-Placement-Repubs



Source: INES
Note: Extremely Conservative and Conservative categories collapsed

Figure 2b. Ideological Self-Placement-Dems



Source: INES
Note: Extremely Liberal and Liberal categories collapsed

Figure 3. Oppose Aid to Blacks (positions 6,7)

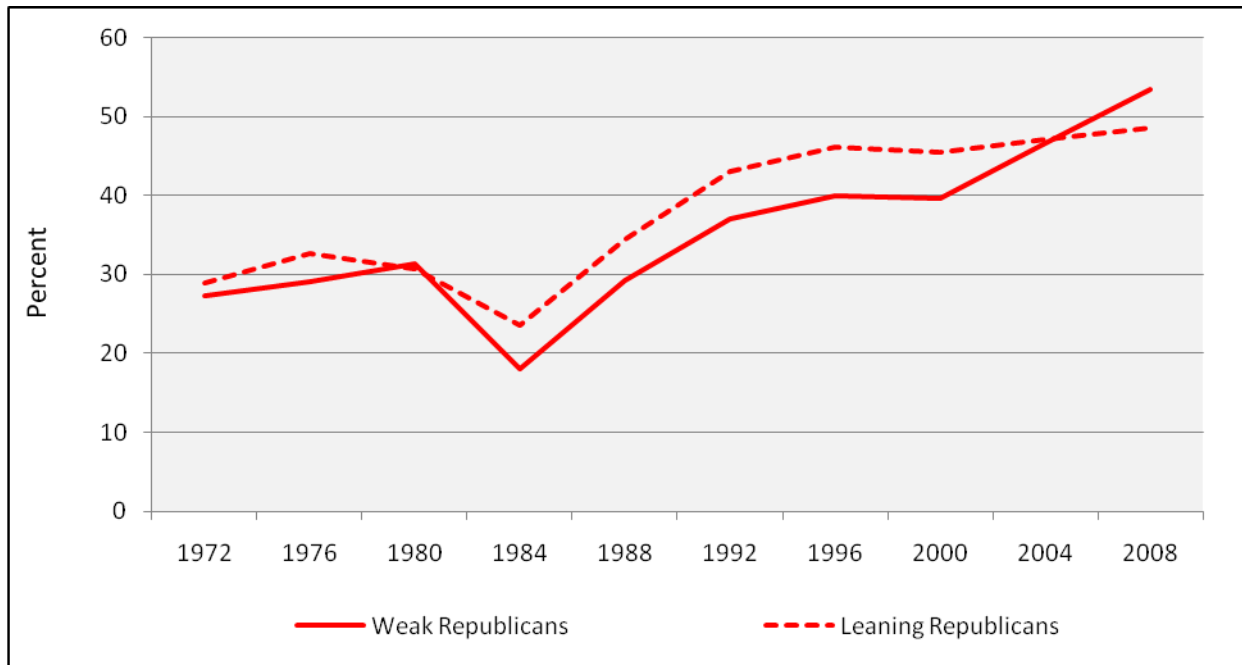


Figure 4. Support Government Health Plan (positions 1,2)

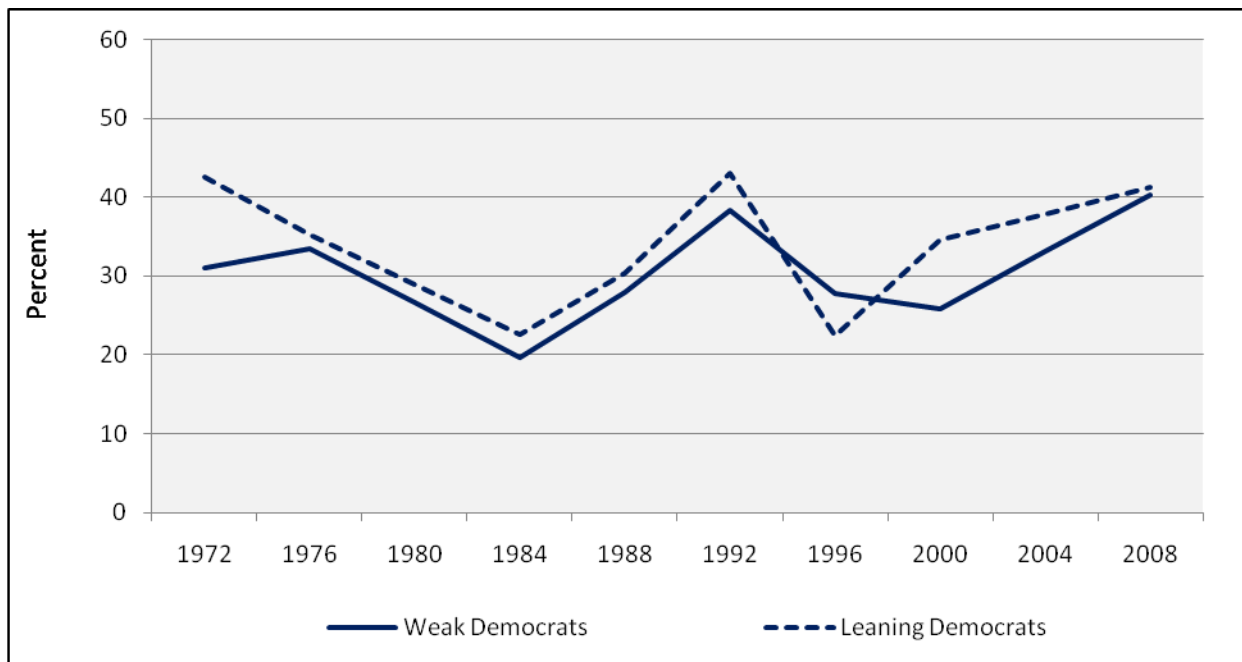


Figure 5. Support for Increased Military Spending (positions 6,7)

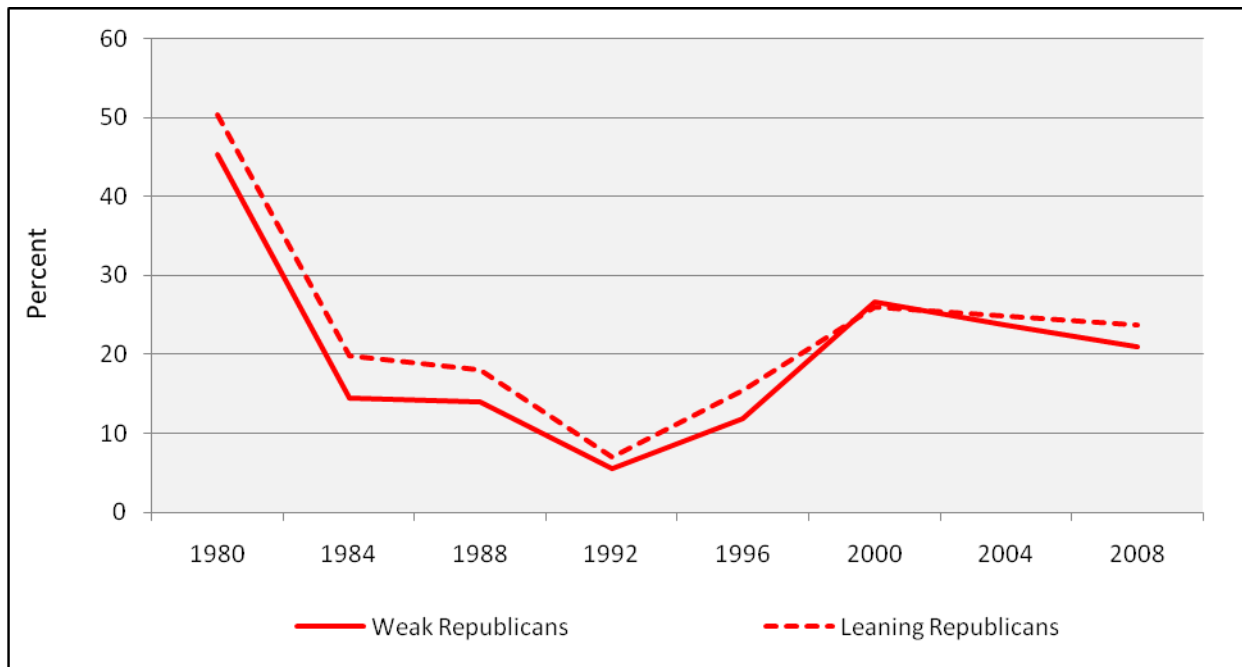


Figure 6. Support Equal Role for Women (positions 1,2)

