

Independents: The Marginal Members of an Electoral Coalition

Currently, the party balance in the United States is nearly even, roughly one-third Democratic, one-third Republican, and one-third independent, taking turnout into account. This means that to win a majority a party normally must capture at least as large a share of independents as the other party. Thus, independents constitute the marginal members of an electoral majority. We do not know nearly as much about this critical group of voters as many pundits think. The electoral movements of this poorly understood category underlie the unstable majorities of our time.

MORRIS P. FIORINA

Series No. 6

“We will never have a time again, in my opinion, in this country when you are going to have a polarization of only Democrats versus Republicans . . . you are going to have the Independents controlling basically the balance of power.”—Richard M. Nixon

“There are more independents than ever before. That means nothing.”—Aaron Blake

In recent elections partisans have voted for the presidential candidates of their parties at rates exceeding 90 percent.¹ These figures lead many commentators to jump to the conclusion that the country is evenly divided into two deeply opposed partisan camps. But, as shown in the third essay in this series, party sorting in the general public remains far from perfect. Consider an analogy from the religious realm. Probably 90 percent of self-identified Catholics who attend church services attend Catholic services rather than those of other denominations, just as 90 percent of partisans who turn out cast their votes for the party with which they identify. But at the same time we know from various public opinion surveys that a large majority

Quotations are from former president Richard M. Nixon in an interview with Howard K. Smith of ABC News, March 22, 1971, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register), 460; and Aaron Blake, “There are more independents than ever before. That means nothing,” *The Fix* (blog), *Washington Post*, April 7, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2015/04/07/there-are-more-independents-than-ever-before-that-means-nothing/.

1 These rates are slight overestimates of partisan loyalty because a few people will change their partisanship to reflect their vote choice, artificially inflating the figures.



of self-identified Catholics disagree with their church’s position on contraception, and a substantial minority disagree with their church’s position on abortion.² If one were to infer the birth control views of church-attending Catholics based on the pronouncements of Catholic bishops, the inference would be wildly inaccurate. Analogously, as discussed in the third essay, the positions of substantial minorities of partisans on abortion are at odds with the positions taken by their party leaders. The vote is a binary choice, a blunt and often inaccurate way to express one’s preferences on the issues. A given voter might repeatedly make the same decision in the voting booth even while disagreeing substantially with the party for whom she votes—so long as she disagrees even more substantially with the other party.³ Many voters face just such a situation in 2016 when they must choose between the two most negatively viewed candidates in modern times. Recent research on “negative partisanship” is consistent with the notion that many voters choose between the lesser of two evils.⁴ Since the Reagan era partisans have not registered increased favorability toward the party with which they identify, but they register greater antipathy toward the other party.⁵ Such findings suggest that we should view the proportion of Americans who identify with the parties less as guaranteed levels of electoral support and more as upper limits on the proportion of the vote the parties can count on. Given turnout differentials, that amounts to roughly one-third of the electorate that either party can absolutely count on (figure 7 of the second essay and accompanying discussion).

In a two-party majoritarian system this means that the marginal voters in an electoral majority come from the ranks of the independents, with perhaps the addition of some weakly attached members of the opposing party. The proportion

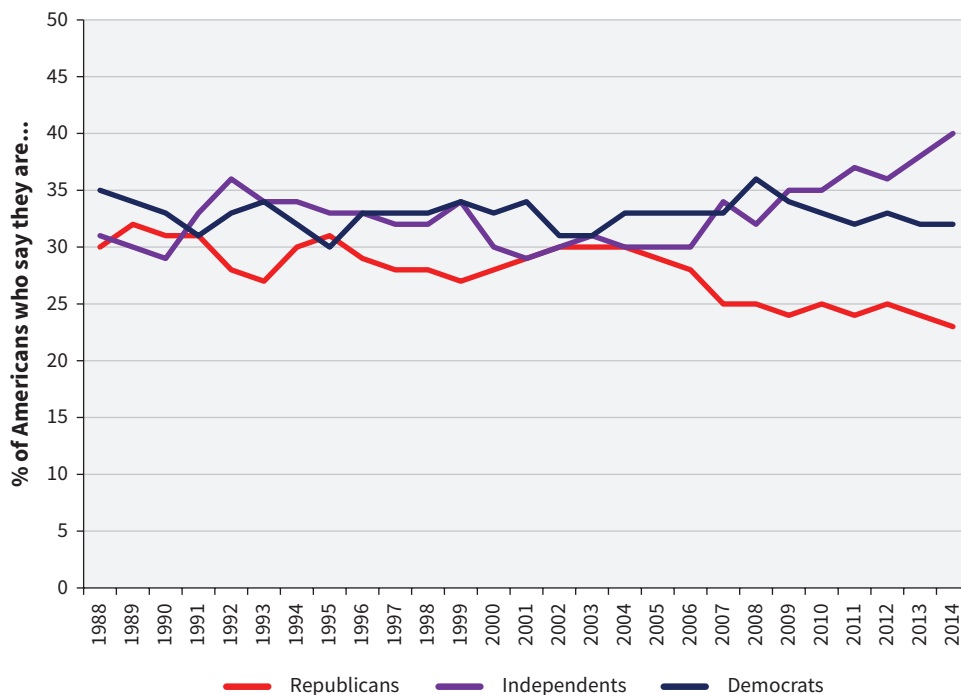
2 E.g., “Public Divided Over Birth Control Insurance Mandate,” Pew Research Center, February 14, 2012, www.people-press.org/2012/02/14/public-divided-over-birth-control-insurance-mandate/. In this 2012 survey, only 8 percent of Catholics thought contraception was morally wrong. Thirteen percent thought abortion was morally acceptable, and 25 percent thought it was not a moral issue.

3 See Jeremy C. Pope, “Voting vs. Thinking: Unified Partisan Voting Does Not Imply Unified Partisan Beliefs,” *The Forum: A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 10, no. 3 (October 2012).

4 Alan Abramowitz, “The New American Electorate: Partisan, Sorted, and Polarized,” in *American Gridlock: The Sources, Character, and Impact of Political Polarization*, ed. James A. Thurber and Antoine Yoshinaka (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19–44.

5 Lori D. Bougher, “The Origins of Out-Party Dislike: Identity and Ideological Consistency in Polarized America,” paper presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.

Figure 1. Self-Classified Independents Are at a Record High



Source:
Pew Research Center

of the eligible electorate responding “independent” to survey questions has hovered around 40 percent in recent years, the highest levels recorded since the advent of modern survey research (figure 1). Independents clearly hold the balance of electoral power in the contemporary United States.

Some analysts dismiss numbers like these, contending that most independents are “closet,” “hidden,” or “covert” partisans.⁶ According to Ruy Teixeira, “Numerous studies have shown that treating leaners as independents is ‘the greatest myth in American politics’ . . . Call them IINOs, or Independents in Name Only. IINOs who say they lean toward the Republicans think and vote just like regular Republicans.

6 The seminal article is John Petrocik, “An Analysis of Intransitivities in the Index of Party Identification,” *Political Methodology* 1, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 31–47. Also see Bruce Keith, David Magleby, Candice Nelson, Elizabeth Orr, Mark Westlye, and Raymond Wolfinger, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 4, 23.



IINOs who say they lean toward the Democrats think and vote just like regular Democrats.”⁷

Teixeira’s claim rests on the fact that when self-identified independents are asked whether they are closer to one party or the other, many will say yes. Like John Petrocik and Alan Abramowitz, he contends that these “leaners” actually are partisans who like the independent label.⁸ If this claim is true, the actual proportion of independents—so-called “pure independents”—is no more than 10 percent of the eligible electorate, a far cry from the 40 percent registered in the polls. From the standpoint of the larger argument about overreach, it does not really matter whether the party balance is about 33/33/33 or 45/10/45; the marginal members of an electoral majority still must come from the ranks of the independents. But since I believe that much of the conventional wisdom about independents is wrong, or at least significantly overstated, the first part of this essay makes a slight digression and examines them more closely.

How Do We Count Independents?

The American National Election Studies (ANES) which provide much of the data discussed in these essays measure party identification with this survey question: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?” If the answer is Republican or Democrat, the respondent then is asked, “Would you call yourself a strong [Republican, Democrat] or a not-very-strong [Republican, Democrat]?” The resulting four categories are referred to in the political science literature as strong Democrats, strong Republicans, weak Democrats, and weak Republicans.

Respondents who answer the first question as independent or something else, then are asked, “Do you think of yourself as *closer* to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?” Those respondents who answer that they are closer to one party or the other are classified as Independent Democrats or Independent Republicans. These are the leaning independents or “leaners” whom analysts often combine with weak partisans.

7 Ruy Teixeira, “The Great Illusion,” *New Republic*, March 6, 2012, www.tnr.com/book/review/swing-vote-untapped-power-independents-linda-killian.

8 Petrocik, “An Analysis of Intransitivities”; Alan Abramowitz, “Setting the Record Straight: Correcting Myths About Independent Voters,” *Sabato’s Crystal Ball*, July 7, 2011, www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/aia2011070702/.

In justifying this common practice Abramowitz asserts, “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.”⁹ And doubling down on his seminal 1974 contribution, Petrocik writes, “Leaners are partisans. . . . [A]s 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.”¹⁰

In my view the preceding claims go well beyond anything the data justify. Rather than a large body of research that “consistently finds” that leaners are partisans, researchers cite the same handful of studies, all of which fail to deal with a serious methodological objection.¹¹ The basic problem with the claims made in such studies is their failure to deal with reverse causation or, in contemporary social science argot, endogeneity.¹²

Causal Confusion

More than three decades ago, W. Phillips Shively suggested that rather than covert partisanship causing their vote, independents may say how they lean based on how they plan to vote—the reverse of the standard causal assumption.¹³ Consider a simple illustration. In a given election four independent leaners vote as follows:

Voter	Party Identification	Presidential Vote Report
1	Independent Democrat	Democratic
2	Independent Democrat	Democratic
3	Independent Republican	Republican
4	Independent Republican	Republican

9 Abramowitz, “Setting the Record Straight.”

10 John Petrocik, “Measuring Party Support: Leaners Are Not Independents,” *Electoral Studies* 28 (2009): 562.

11 Two studies receive the lion’s share of the citations. The seminal article is Petrocik, “An Analysis of Intransitivities.” The other standard citation is Keith et al., *The Myth of the Independent Voter*, which devotes far more emphasis to the distinction between pure and leaning independents than to the similarity between leaning independents and partisans.

12 Given a system with two variables, x and y , if x causes y , x is exogenous and y is endogenous. If they cause each other, both are endogenous.

13 W. Phillips Shively, “The Nature of Party Identification: A Review of Recent Developments,” in *The Electorate Reconsidered*, ed. John C. Pierce and John L. Sullivan (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980), 219–236.



So, independent leaning Democrats vote Democratic, and independent leaning Republicans vote Republican, consistent with the covert partisanship view. But suppose in the next election the same four voters report the following patterns:

Voter	Party Identification	Presidential Vote Report
1	Independent Democrat	Democratic
2	Independent Republican	Republican
3	Independent Republican	Republican
4	Independent Democrat	Democratic

We still have a perfect relationship: voters vote the way they lean, but voters two and four changed their votes *and* changed their response to the “closer to” question to match the change in their votes. Rather than covert partisans, they are actually swing voters.

How can we determine whether real-world voting patterns reflect the first or second examples? One way would be to follow independent leaners over several elections to see if they consistently lean and vote in the same direction. Such an analysis has been done, and the reader interested in the details should digest Samuel J. Abrams and Morris P. Fiorina, “Are Leaning Independents Deluded or Dishonest Weak Partisans?” For the more casual reader a brief summary follows.

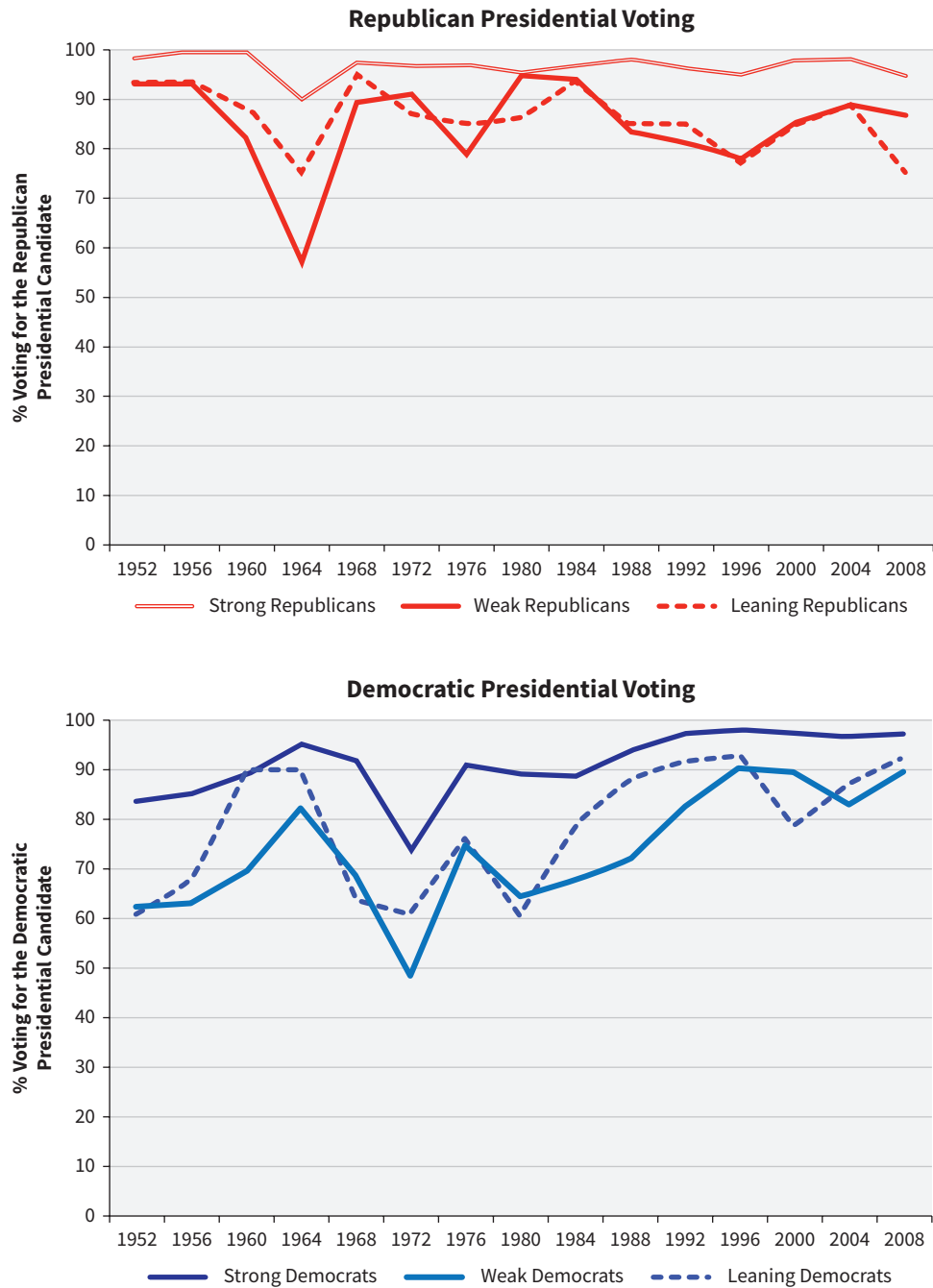
Leaning Independents Change their Self-Identification More than Weak Partisans Do

Presidential vote choice is the primary evidence cited by those who equate leaning independents and weak partisans.¹⁴ Petrocik writes, “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.”¹⁵ As figure 2 shows, independent leaners indeed are similar to weak partisans in their presidential voting choices. In fact, they often are *more* loyal than weak partisans as in the 1964 Goldwater and 1972 McGovern electoral debacles. But these facts should immediately raise warning signs. According to the American National Election Studies, in 1964 weak Republicans abandoned Barry Goldwater in droves, but independent leaning Republicans registered support almost 20 percentage

¹⁴ They are less similar in their congressional voting behavior, particularly in midterm elections.

¹⁵ Petrocik, “Measuring Party Support,” 566–567.

Figure 2. Leaning Independents Vote Like Partisans



Source:
ANES

points higher. Similarly, in 1972 George McGovern did not win even a majority of weak Democrats, but 60 percent of independent leaning Democrats supported him. What might explain these puzzling contrasts? Well, perhaps independent Republicans voted more heavily for Goldwater not because they were closet



Republicans; rather, they were independents who felt closer to the Republicans *in that election* because they had decided to vote for Goldwater. Analogously, the high level of independent Democratic support for McGovern may have been because they were independents who liked McGovern and consequently said they leaned Democratic.

In fifty-six of sixty comparisons of one-, two-, and four-year panel waves in the ANES database, leaners are less stable than weak partisans, often by significant margins—20 percentage points or more.¹⁶ In the four major presidential election panel studies conducted by ANES (1956–60, 1972–76, 1992–96, and 2000–2004), nearly 70 percent of strong partisans give the same response when queried about their partisan identities during two presidential election campaigns four years apart. A bit less than 50 percent of weak partisans give the same response, and one-third of pure independents give the same response. But only 31 percent of independent Democrats and 38 percent of independent Republicans give the same response. Their partisan stability is closer to pure independents than to weak partisans.¹⁷

Such findings suggest that the causal arrow runs not only from partisanship to vote, but also from vote back to partisanship, particularly among citizens who choose the independent label. Some (unknown) proportion of leaners vote the way they lean because they tell us how they lean based on how they intend to vote. This endogeneity in the survey responses artificially exaggerates the apparent strength of party loyalty as an influence on the vote. And it misleads pundits and some political scientists to conclude that partisanship has become nearly universal.

Additional Evidence

Analysts simply have not looked hard enough for data that contradict the practice of treating leaning independents as hidden partisans. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems module on the ANES included the following item in 2004 and 2008: “Do any of the parties represent your views reasonably well?” YouGov/Polimetrix asked a similar

16 Samuel J. Abrams and Morris P. Fiorina, “Are Leaning Independents Deluded or Dishonest Weak Partisans?” <http://cise.luiss.it/cise/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Are-Leaners-Partisans.pdf>. In panel studies, the same individuals are surveyed two or more times, permitting analysts to track individual change rather than just net change.

17 Abrams and Fiorina, “Leaning Independents.”

Table 1. Do Any of the Parties Represent your Views?

	2004 CSES	2008 CSES	2015 Polimetrix
Strong Democrats	80	81	87
Weak Democrats	72	69	46
Independent Democrats	58	53	40
Independent Independents	47	36	11
Independent Republicans	66	49	50
Weak Republicans	83	60	63
Strong Republicans	93	85	93

Source:

Comparative Study of Electoral Systems; Polimetrix

Table 2. Leaning Independents Vote for Third Parties at Higher Rates Than Weak Partisans Do

	<i>Strong Democrats</i>	<i>Weak Democrats</i>	<i>Leaning Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Leaning Republicans</i>	<i>Weak Republicans</i>	<i>Strong Republicans</i>
1968	8	15	19	21	14	8	2
1980	4	8	26	14	13	10	4
1992	4	17	24	36	26	25	11
1996	3	10	19	28	12	11	1
2000	1	1	8	16	8	1	1

Source:

ANES

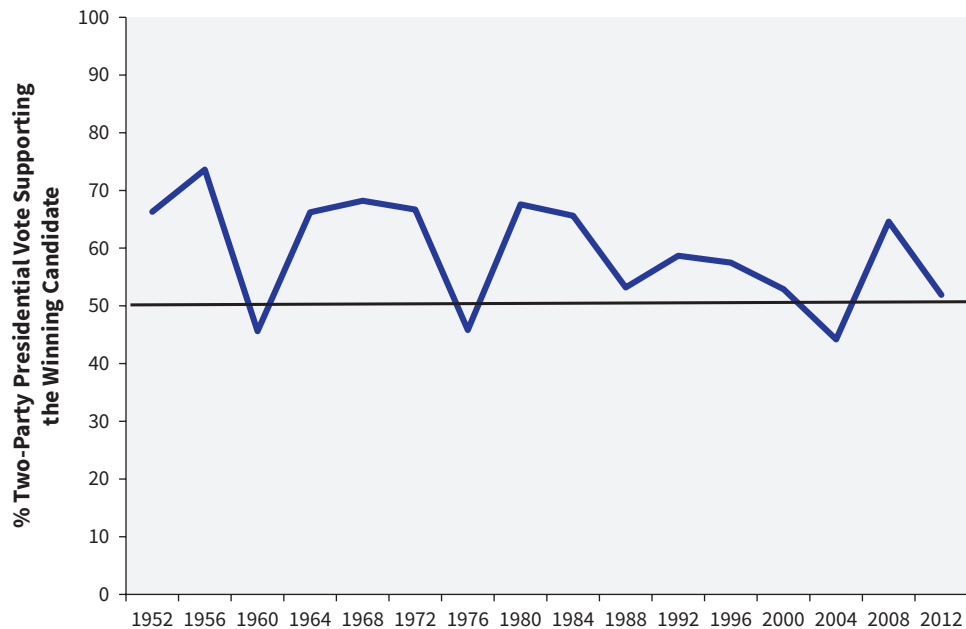
question in 2015. The responses in table 1 clearly indicate that leaning independents are less satisfied with the party toward which they lean than are weak partisans.

When third-party candidates appear on the scene, leaning independents also differentiate themselves from weak partisans. George Wallace in 1968, John Anderson in 1980, Ross Perot in 1992 and 1996, and Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan in 2000 all received higher support among independent leaners than among weak partisans. When given the opportunity, independent leaners are more likely than weak partisans to opt for candidates outside the two-party duopoly.

All in all, there is little basis for blanket claims that leaning independents are merely closet partisans. I hasten to emphasize that I am not endorsing the opposite blanket



Figure 3. Presidential Winners Usually Are Those Who Carry the Independents



Source:
ANES

claim that they are all genuine independents either. Where the proportion of true independents lies between the low estimate of 10 percent and the high estimate of 40 percent of the eligible electorate is a question to which political science currently has no precise answer. Recent research suggests that independents and partisans differ psychologically.¹⁸ Clearly independents are a heterogeneous category. Some are closet partisans. Some are ideological centrists. Some are cross-pressured, preferring one party on some issues but a different party on other issues. Some are unhappy with both parties but one more than the other, and some are, quite simply, clueless. But whatever they are, they are an important component of the electoral instability that characterizes the contemporary era. Their critical contribution to contemporary elections lies in their volatility.

Independents and Electoral Instability

Figure 3 is a graph of the independent vote in presidential elections. Above the 50 percent line independents voted for the popular vote winner; below the line

¹⁸ This is an area that needs much more research. An important recent contribution is Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov, *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

they voted for the loser. Evidently in most elections the party that carries the independent vote wins the election. The only exceptions are 1960 and 1976—both extremely close elections at a time when the Democrats could theoretically win the election with only Democratic votes—and 2004, when the Bush campaign de-emphasized swing voters, went all out to maximize turnout of the base, and managed to win narrowly.

The picture in House elections is even more striking. As figure 4 shows, big swings in the independent vote are associated with big electoral changes. A 20 percentage point shift in the Republican direction contributed to the “Reagan Revolution” in 1980. A similar shift was associated with the Republican takeover of the House in 1994. Then the independents thumped the Republicans in 2006 and turned around and shellacked the Democrats four years later—a massive 35 percentage point shift in support over a four-year period. These movements illustrate my point about alienating the marginal members of your electoral coalition. Each of the overreaches discussed in the fifth essay is followed by a significant loss of independent support in the next election.

What About the Rising American Electorate?

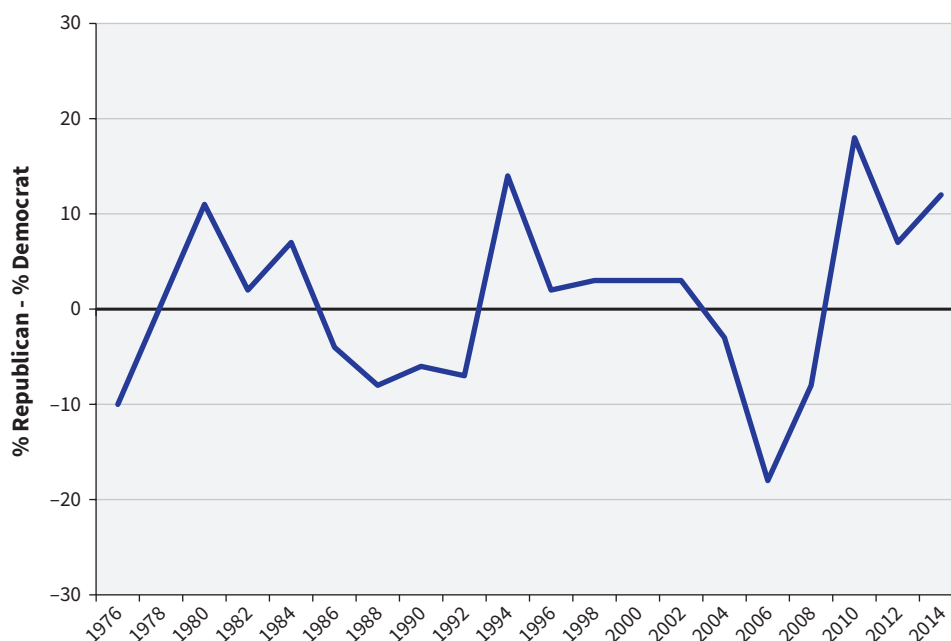
Although I emphasize the critical role of independents as the marginal members of electoral majorities, others place greater emphasis on specific demographic categories as the marginal voters who contribute to our shifting majorities. Often called the Rising American Electorate, RAE for short, the argument is that pro-Democratic demographics are increasing while pro-Republican demographics are declining, and that pro-Democratic demographic groups are more likely to turn out in presidential elections than in congressional elections. John Judis and Ruy Teixeira generally are credited with first advancing the argument.¹⁹ The RAE includes ethnic minorities, especially Latinos, unmarried women, college-educated professionals, and young people. By implication the declining electorate consists of whites, married people, the less well educated, and older people (perhaps not coincidentally the Trump coalition). The demographic trends are undeniable, and there is no question that *other things being equal*, they have tended to work in a pro-Democratic direction—so far. But recent elections have not been kind to the thesis, as Judis himself noted in a 2015 article.²⁰ Gains in the RAE have been offset by losses in the white working and middle

¹⁹ See John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

²⁰ John Judis, “The Emerging Republican Advantage,” *National Journal*, January 30, 2015, www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/the-emerging-republican-advantage-20150130.



Figure 4. Independents Register Big Swings in House Elections



Source:
ANES

classes. It should come as no surprise that after hearing Democratic leaders repeatedly trumpet that their coalition of ethnic minorities, unmarried women, and young people will soon overwhelm the party of married, middle-aged, middle-class whites, increasing numbers of the latter decide that they have no future in a society governed by the new Democratic majority.²¹ It may not be much of an exaggeration to say that enthusiastic proponents of the RAE thesis contributed to the success of Donald Trump's appeal.

Demography is important, but—contrary to the old proverb—it is not destiny, at least not in politics. Political parties are composed of goal-oriented individuals who recognize demographic changes and react to them. Thus far, the emphasis has been

²¹ Particularly white men. As Rosenthal comments about the 2016 Democratic platform, “The platform has many economic references to women and people of color—such as equal pay, expanding Social Security for widows and women who exited the workforce to care for children or family, of housing foreclosures, of access to housing. The platform seeks to ‘nurture the next generation of scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs, especially women and people of color.’ The platform mentions whites only in the context of their greater wealth, lower arrest rates and lower job losses.” Howard Rosenthal, “Why do white men love Donald Trump so much?” *Washington Post*, September 8, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/08/why-do-white-men-love-donald-trump-so-much/.

on Democrats who clearly tailor the party's appeal to take advantage of favorable demographic trends. But political parties do not stay stupid forever, although they may be stupid for a long time. It is safe to assume that Republicans (eventually) will act to offset unfavorable demographic trends. Thus, the italicized *other things being equal* clause generally will not hold over the long run.

The British Labour Party lost four consecutive elections in the eighteen years between 1979 and 1997, an impressive record roughly comparable to the Democrats, who lost five out of six presidential elections in the twenty-four years between 1968 and 1992. But Tony Blair and his allies and Bill Clinton and his eventually managed to re-orient their parties.²² At some point those who espouse platforms that are demonstrated electoral losers will be succeeded or pushed aside by a new cohort that espouses policies that are more electorally salable.²³ Given the history of the Democrats in the 1970s and 1980s, the Republicans could be in for several more presidential election thumpin's before they wise up, but there is no reason why Latinos, young people, professionals, and unmarried women should be lost to them for decades.

What about the two-electorate variant of the Rising American Electorate thesis? This is the argument that the presidential electorate has, and will continue to have, a pro-Democratic cast but that the midterm electorate is more Republican because of the lower turnout of groups that make up the RAE. While it is true that the presidential electorate is more Democratic-leaning than the midterm electorate *given the present alignment of the parties*, we do not think that this is the major factor in the electoral instability of recent decades. The argument cannot explain when the Republicans win the presidential election but lose the midterm badly as in 2004–06. Moreover, consider that a midterm electorate that was 79 percent white thumped the Republicans in 2006, while a midterm electorate that was only 75 percent white shellacked the Democrats in 2010.²⁴ Other things being equal, demographics

22 As noted in the first essay, the only Democratic presidential victory in that stretch was Jimmy Carter's one-point win over the unelected incumbent who succeeded a president who resigned in disgrace.

23 The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the British Labour Party reminds us that the process can work in reverse as well. Labour appears to have become stupid again. Alex Massie, "The Labour Party's Two Word Suicide Note," *The Daily Beast*, September 12, 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/12/labour-s-two-word-suicide-note.html.

24 Similarly, Harry Enten points out that the 2014 midterm and 2008 presidential electorates were very similar demographically, but the Republican share of the popular vote was 13 percentage points *higher* in the midterm. Harry Enten, "Voters Were Just as Diverse in 2014 As They Were in 2008,"



alone would have predicted the opposite, but other things are rarely equal in politics. Seth Hill, Michael Herron, and Jeffrey Lewis calculate that 78 percent of the nation's counties registered a higher vote for Barack Obama in 2008 than for John Kerry in 2004, with most of the exceptions located in the South.²⁵ Any minor improvement in pro-Democratic demographics in those four years obviously pales in comparison to the negative impacts on the Republicans of the housing crisis and unpopular wars. Even more noteworthy, the slight improvement in pro-Democratic demographics between 2006 and 2010 was evidently overwhelmed by the vast differences in enthusiasm between Democratic and Republican voters in the two elections, a difference that favored the Democrats in 2006 and the Republicans in 2010.²⁶ So, rather than stake their parties' futures over differences of a few percentage points in demographic categories, party leaders would do better to do what they can to help an administration govern competently and restrain the temptation to overreach.²⁷

FiveThirtyEight, July 16, 2015 <http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/voters-were-just-as-diverse-in-2014-as-they-were-in-2008/>.

25 Seth J. Hill, Michael C. Herron, and Jeffrey B. Lewis, "Economic Crisis, Iraq, and Race: A Study of the 2008 Presidential Election," *Election Law Journal* 9, no. 1 (2010): 41–62.

26 Seth J. Hill, "A behavioral measure of the enthusiasm gap in American elections," *Electoral Studies* 36 (2014): 28–38.

27 Moreover, some recent analyses indicate that demographic differences between voters and nonvoters may be systematically exaggerated because people who over-report voting (i.e., say that they voted when they didn't) look more like actual voters than actual nonvoters. Stephen Ansolabehere and Eitan Hersh, "Who Really Votes?" in *Facing the Challenge of Democracy: Explorations in the Analysis of Public Opinion and Political Participation*, ed. Paul Sniderman and Benjamin Highton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 267–291.

Essay Series

An Era of Tenuous Majorities: A Historical Context

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The Political Parties Have Sorted

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Morris Fiorina is the Wendt Family Professor of Political Science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For more than four decades he has written on American politics with particular emphasis on elections and public opinion. Fiorina has written or edited twelve books and more than 100 articles, served as chairman of the Board of the American National Election Studies, and received the Warren E. Miller Career Achievement Award from the American Political Science Association Section on Elections, Public Opinion, and Voting Behavior. His widely noted book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (with Samuel Abrams and Jeremy Pope) is thought to have influenced then Illinois state senator Barack Obama's keynote speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention ("We coach Little League in the blue states, and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states").

Series Overview

In contrast to most of modern American political history, partisan control of our national elective institutions has been unusually tenuous during the past several decades. This essay series argues that the ideologically sorted parties that contest elections today face strong internal pressures to overreach, by which I mean emphasizing issues and advocating positions strongly supported by the party base but which cause the marginal members of their electoral coalitions to defect. Thus, electoral losses predictably follow electoral victories. Institutional control is fleeting.

The first group of essays describes the contemporary American electorate. Despite myriad claims to the contrary, the data show that the electorate is no more polarized now than it was in the later decades of the twentieth century. What has happened is that the parties have sorted so that each party is more homogeneous than in the twentieth century; liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have largely passed from the political scene. The muddled middle is as large as ever but has no home in either party. The growth in the proportion of self-identified independents may be a reflection of the limited appeal of today's sorted parties.

The second group of essays develops the overreach argument, discusses the role of independents as the marginal members of an electoral majority, and explains how party sorting produces less split-ticket voting. Rather than most voters being more set in their partisan allegiances than a generation ago, they may simply have less reason to split their tickets when almost all Democratic candidates are liberals and all Republican candidates are conservatives.

The third group of essays embeds contemporary American politics in two other contexts. First, in a comparative context, developments in the European democracies are the mirror image of those in the United States: the major European parties have depolarized or de-sorted or both, whereas their national electorates show little change. The rise of anti-immigrant parties may have some as yet not well-understood role in these developments. Second, in a historical context, the instability of American majorities today resembles that of the late nineteenth century, when similar significant social and economic changes were occurring.

A final postelection essay will wrap up the series.

These essays naturally draw on the work of many people who have contributed to a very active research program. I thank colleagues John Aldrich, Douglas Ahler, Paul Beck, Bruce Cain, James Campbell, Shanto Iyengar, Matthew Levendusky, Sandy Maisel, Paul Sniderman, and Guarav Sood, whose questions forced me to sharpen various arguments; and David Brady in particular for almost daily conversations about the matters covered in the posts that follow.