

Partisan Voting Behavior in the American Electorate

A Research Study on the Trends of Independent
Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election

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May 2009

A Senior Honors Thesis
Presented to the UNM Department of Political Science Undergraduate Honors Program

ABSTRACT

On November 4, 2008 the trend that had been repeated in the last two presidential elections was over. There was no recount needed or postponed concession speeches, Barack Obama and the Democratic Party had handily won the election over Republican candidate John McCain. How did the Democrats win by such a large margin when the previous two elections were so nerve-rackingly close?

This study will focus on the pattern of partisan affiliation, the feelings of polarization in the United States, changes in feelings in the American electorate, and the breakdown of partisan voting results from the 2008 election. The subsequent research will follow the data accumulated through the American National Election Studies since 1952, updating portions of information presented by various scholars in an attempt to investigate and explain what factors lead up to and helped to influence the election of 2008.

The primary question lies in whether Barack Obama was able to sway a high percentage of Democrats to maintain their vote choice along party lines, pull a higher percentage of Republican voters to vote across the aisle, or if there has been a partisan shift that has given the Democrats a solidified and commanding base in the 2008 electorate.

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

The American political system has been studied for centuries in ever continuous attempts to follow and predict the trends of partisan identification and voter behavior in the American electorate, with the ultimate purpose being to use this information in attempt to pull voters to vote for one party candidate or the other. The American political party system and its ideologies are elastic in their abilities to adjust and adapt to societal conflict and change. This has been seen in significant party transformations, such as the introduction of the Republican Party during middle of the 19th century, as well as smaller ideological shifts like the Republican shift of the mid 20th century that drew more Republican votes away from the Northeast and more from the South and West (Gerring 2001).

Recently there has been debate amongst many political science scholars on the topic of political polarization¹. The concept of political polarization revolves around the idea that at a certain level of society, groups are becoming more and more ideologically separated and dissimilar. Some theorists affirm examples of polarization within the electorate (Abramowitz, Saunders 2005), while others conclude that there is a myth of polarization within the United States (Fiorina 2005) and that the tone of polarization is something only applicable at the hierarchal elite level of party politics.

¹ See Abramowitz, Alan, and Saunders, Kyle L. 2005. Why Can't We All Just Get Along? The Reality of a Polarized America. The Forum; Bibby, John F., Maisel, Sandy L., 2003. *Two Parties –Or More? The American Party System*. Westview Press; Cohen, Jeffrey E., Fleisher, Richard, Kantor, Paul. 2001. American Political Parties, Decline or Resurgence? Congressional Quarterly. Washington D.C.; Coleman, John J. 1996. *Party Decline in America*. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey.; Craig, Stephen C. The decline of partisanship in the United States: A reexamination of the neutrality hypothesis. Political Behavior. Volume 7, Number 1. March, 1985. pp. 57-78.; Stonecash, Jeffrey M. 2006. *Political Parties Matter: Realignment and the Return of Partisan Voting*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Boulder, Colorado.; Wattenberg, Martin P. 1994. *The Decline of American Political Parties 1952-1992*. Harvard University Press.

These theories of polarization are one of many factors in a framework of arguments presented by Martin P. Wattenberg in his book, entitled *The Decline of American Political Parties*, which discusses the shift in the American electorate towards independent voting and away from political party identification. Wattenberg is not alone in expressing theories on party decline. John Coleman (1996) also contributes to the rising independent voter theory, with a hypothesis that suggests possible changes of the American political system without giving much insight into what may actually happen. He does this while also claiming that both party decline and adaptation are not the only possibilities, but merely options to the oscillation in partisan behavior at the individual state level of politics. This continued debate over the future of political parties has engaged many theorists, often with different opinions and assumptions on the future of our party system. Although much time and research has been spent on formulating theories, there is still not a consensus on exactly what is happening to our political parties and their systematic strength in the United States. However, one of the underlying questions of political party strength in America is the fluctuation of independent voters and their magnitude and significance in relation to determining a victor in presidential elections.

Examining theories presented by Wattenberg and others, this research focuses specifically on the pattern of independent voters through the 2008 election and their overall significance specifically in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. It is clear that within the last decade, there has been special attention given to independent voters and their ability to influence decisively close and competitive elections².

² Avlon, John P. "What Independent Voters Want." The Wall Street Journal. October 20, 2008. Mesrobian, Shant. "Covering the Bases." Campaigns & Elections. Pp. 18. February, 2004; Nagourney, Adam. "Independents Could Help Swing More Than One Primary Toward the Unexpected." The New York Times. October 2, 2007; Zeleny, Jeff. "In This Race, Independents Are the Prize." The New York Times. January 6, 2008; Zogby, John. "These Voters Will

Examining the trends in independent and independent-leaning voters is not a new phenomenon by any means. Focus on independent voting behavior has taken place in the United States not only now, at the turn of the 21st century, but at the time of, and even before, the turn of the 20th century as well (Ginner 1900 & “The Independent Voters”, 1884). The philosophy of a demographic of the electorate that is unpredictable and non-committed makes not only good news, but also an opportunity to pull votes for a candidate. These demographics of voters have the ability to make or break elections (Zeleny 2008, Zogby 2008, “The 1992 Campaign; A Worry for Bush” 1992), and that means understanding and being able to predict their voting behavior can be extremely important in presidential elections.

Examining a small number of minor contributing factors in the overall theory of party decline, a focus of this paper will be on party identification in the United States electorate in hopes to determine the overall level of significance of independent voters and their strength in the American electorate. The trends in party identification on a 7-point scale, a 3-point scale, as well as the trends of non-partisan groups will be provided as data to help give insight into trends that were examined within Wattenberg’s text, but not recently updated. This thesis will look at election year data starting with 1952 and proceeding through the 2008 American National Election Studies (ANES) preliminary data set and provide updates to the data that Wattenberg examined in his text.

Additionally, the ANES 2000, 2004, and 2008 preliminary data sets will be utilized to examine the 2000, 2004, and 2008 post-election surveys and certain variables, such as thermometer scales of the current president and prosperity ratings, that are focused more on

Pick the President.” Campaigns & Elections. pg. 52. February, 2008; “1992 Campaign, The; A Worry for Bush: Independent Voters.” The New York Times. March 5, 1992: A-22.

voters' emotions and feelings, rather than their personal ideological foundations. This helps to illustrate variables that may be influencing the partisan affiliations in the United States and provide background as to why there may be a strong reason for shifts in voting behavior besides a general change in ideology.

The fundamental goal of this paper is to determine whether or not independent voters still maintain a unique strength in the American political arena in regards to electoral influence. This study will expand from just independent voters to include research on partisan affiliation and whether or not the strength of partisanship is consistent from year to year, or if weak partisans are likely to break partisan lines in their presidential vote choice. The premise is that independent voters are ultimately a significant factor in presidential candidate success and will maintain a majority vote in favor of the successful candidate.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH & INFORMATION

There have been many political theorists that have provoked the supposition that there has recently been a strong sense of polarization in the United States political system³. Whether this polarization is present across the entire population or just confined to the upper echelons of partisan politics has been a part of much debate⁴. Polarization can be defined as “a process in which differences between groups or ideas become ever more clear-cut and extreme and the

³ Bryson, Bethany; DiMaggio, Paul; Evans, John. Have American's Social Attitudes Become More Polarized? *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 102, No. 3. (Nov., 1996), pp. 690-755; Carsey, Thomas M.; Layman, Geoffrey C. Party Polarization and "Conflict Extension" in the American Electorate. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46, No. 4. (Oct., 2002), pp. 786-802; Poole, Keith T., Rosenthal, Howard. The Polarization of American Politics. *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 4. (Nov., 1984), pp. 1061-1079.

⁴ See footnote 1.

opposition between them hardens” (Agnes 2002). Although the general idea of polarization within American politics is accepted throughout much of the field, there are disagreements between political scientists as to where the polarization is occurring. The primary difference is that some believe polarization is occurring across the board of the American population (Abramowitz & Saunders 2005), while others affirm that the polarization is localized primarily at the level of party elites (Fiorina 2005 Poole & Rosenthal 1984).

The polarization of the electorate is the first theory of political polarization. The theory focuses on the mass polarization at the level of the general public. One explanation behind this theory is that the electorate has become polarized because of the polarization at the elite level of partisan politics between liberal and conservative leaders (Cohen 2001). This concept follows the notion that the elite polarized themselves first to act in a more partisan fashion and saw that it would not affect their chances of getting re-elected. In addition, Cohen states that the electorate is fully accepting of this elite polarization by also polarizing themselves. While this theory suggests that there is a mass polarization in the American electorate, there is another belief that claims the electorate polarization is fictional, and only a theory generalized by the actual polarization occurring at the elite level in politics (Fiorina 2005). This concept of elite polarization is multifaceted, with differing theories that all point towards the same assumption that the elite in the political system are dividing their ideologies from the individual voters.

This is supplemented by American National Election Studies (ANES) data that illustrates an ever-increasing sense of difference between the parties in the United States from the electorate (Figure 1). The set of data is comprised of polling on the perception of differences in what the two parties stand for and has three response variables: “important difference”, “no difference”, and “don’t know”. This data is presented to help to understand the public opinion

on the ideologies of the parties. This data serves as one perspective of polarization at the elite level in American politics by illustrating the feelings that the electorate holds towards a lack of unity, and ultimately polarizing views of the political parties in the United States.

The message behind the polarization of the elite level is that candidates themselves and party bosses have become polarized (Craig 1985). Even if the ideological polarization is limited to the elites, this has caused the public to appear more polarized because they vote, or side with one candidate or the other, on the sole basis that there is no other representative close to their own ideology (Fiorina 2005). This ideology has had a large impact on the trends on the increase in independent and split-ticket voting (Wattenberg 1994), which has been used as a determinant of polarization. The information from Poole et al. (1984) continues with the elite polarization concept and asserts that elected officials are moving farther and farther away from the moderates in the electorate, while representing the extremists on each side of the coalition. This scheme was expressed in Poole's (1984) data through the voting habits of United States senators, and the same polarization idea revisited when looking at elite polarization in respect to fiscal inequality among the electorate (McCarthy et. al. 2008).

There is another theory claiming that the polarization within the United States political system has led to an increase in independent and no-preference voters. The explanation is that voters, once distanced in ideologies from their party elites, will begin to separate from their respective political party affiliation (Wattenberg 1994). According to Wattenberg, independent voters are defined as those who would weigh the appeal of both parties and make a judgment after considering all the information about each one and deciding to not associated with either. However, no-preference voters are nearly identical to independents in nearly all aspects except that their overall political involvement and interest is lower than that of an independent voter

(Wattenberg 1994). The measured increase between the mid 1960's up through the 1990's in independent voters (Figure 2) has alarmed some and produced speculation that these increases may change the country's political system by leading to an increase in non-partisanship (Coleman 1996).

The first considerable amount of data examined is the political party identification from 1952-2004. This set of data includes the percents of the electorate in the two major political parties as well as independents. The independents in this data set are self-designated independents from their response to the poll. Apolitical responders are those who did not express any preference in the original question of "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" Apolitical respondents were utilized in the original research, but later removed for clarity so that the data could focus primarily at those respondents who are more engaging in the American political system. Originally, apolitical respondents were also included in hopes of finding a possible trend in apathy towards politics, but the number of apolitical respondents has been so small and inconclusive no accurate assumptions could be inferred.

Data gathered in previous research in 2007 from the 2000 and 2004 ANES data did illustrate a continued pattern in this trend of increasing independents, but not of pure independents (Figure 3). Pure independents differ from leaning independents in their voting behavior. Leaning independents typically vote along the party that they lean towards at a very high rate and could, for the most part, be classified into the same voting category as the party that they lean towards (Keith 1992, Wattenberg 1996). Therefore, when graphing the data partisan leaners were included with the two major parties (See Figure 4).

The data illustrates that since beginning in the 1970's, and up until 2000, there has been a steady decline of a group of voters categorized as "independent neither" respondents, which are the most independent voters by virtue of party identification and partisan voting. While these results show that the independent groups are not steadily increasing, they also show that Wattenberg's theory of an increasing percentage of no-preference electorate still grew until 2000, but with the 2004 and 2008 data, there has since been a decline in no-preference respondents. While this downward trend has taken place over a relatively short period of time, it should not be overlooked. However, with the percentage of total no-preference voters only accounting for 11.1% of the electorate in 2000, when no-preference voters hit the highest point in fifty years, it is difficult to defend the significance of a voting demographic that is so small. In comparison, independent voters are, and have always been, a significant portion of the voting electorate, accounting for 23.4% in 2000 and 30.2% in 2008. However, the 9% increase between 2000 and 2008 in independent leaner response is the most prominent trend that can be exhumed from this data set. This is significant because of independent leaners' similarities with the two parties in relationship to vote choice and basic ideology, as discussed previously. While these trends show partisanship, the voting behavior of these groups will be discussed more in the data and results sections of this text.

Additionally, the ANES 2008 preliminary data has continued to provide evidence that while there has been a slight increase in the general category of independents over the last fifty years, the percentage of "pure" independents has remained relatively stable, and therefore helped to reject claims of an increasing base of actual voters who are truly independent from the political party system (Figure 3).

With the differentiation of partisan identification, the most obvious trend was the increase in independent-leaners. The increase in independent-leaners over the past forty-four years has been 12.9%, and an increase of 5.8% since 2000. This is important because of the fact that independent-leaners do not possess the characteristics of a stereotypical independent voter who is blind to partisan identification and partisan voting, but instead these leaners behave similar to voters who claim partisanship to one of the two major parties. In the data set, “leaners” are identified as those who originally answer independent to the first question but then say that they feel closer to one party or the other on the follow-up question.

There are those (Stonecash 2006) who look at the polarization in American politics as a natural cycle that is inevitable and that will eventually iron itself back into the two-party system with strong bases of support that our country has seen for nearly the past 200 years. Although neither of these theories can be established without further evidence, the short-term effects such as the increasing distaste with political parties and their officials (Wattenberg 1994) concern the elites of the political parties today (Schnur 2008). This is obviously due to the anxiety over the possibility of losing electorate support, elected officials, and political power within the current political system.

The mid 1990’s was a period in which the theory of party polarization was prevalent (Cohen 2001). The 1992 and 1996 presidential elections showed an unprecedented support for Ross Perot as a third-party candidate and there was speculation about a major realignment or even change in the political system (Rapoport & Stone 2005). These elections are used to show further evidence in the waning of partisanship and support for the major political parties in the United States. But, information presented by Bryson et al. (1996) dismissed the concept of an electorate polarization, except for isolated and heated examples such as abortion and gay rights.

The dissatisfaction with political parties has also been associated with indifference and the increasing numbers of non-partisans have also shown that many of the newer “independents” see the parties as irrelevant (DeSart 1995, Wattenburg 1994). This concept sheds light on the increase in citizens who are distanced from partisanship, not by a lack of satisfaction or support in politics, but more by a lack of party and political involvement. The theory behind the increase in third parties in the early 90’s (Bibby et al. 2003) links to the dissatisfaction with the two-party system and the rise in independent and non-partisan voting. The polarization of elites has recently been associated by certain political scholars with the habits of independent voting which, in turn, parallels trends in voter identification and the claimed decrease in partisanship (Wattenberg 1994).

The changes in the American electorates’ feelings from 2000 and 2004 to 2008 are dramatic. There is substantial evidence that shows a shift in presidential feeling thermometer ratings as well as respondents’ personal conditions in relation to the polling question of whether or not the respondent and their family was better or worse off than one year before. These data sets were used to help introduce the public opinion concerns for the current president on a more personal level for voters in an attempt to elucidate possible changes and trends in partisan voting patterns that would be discussed throughout the course of this paper.

The thermometer ratings used to help illustrate emotional connections with voters’ candidate choice were a current presidential thermometer rating that ranged from 0-100, zero being least favorable, and one hundred being most favorable, and a question on whether the voter felt that their family was better or worse off than one year before. The better or worse off question is based on a five-point scale, with the middle being a neutral, or that they felt that their

status was the same as one year before, and the other responses as being somewhat or much better or worse off.

Results from the thermometer rating of the current president are utilized specifically to provide insight into showing a possible pattern between a negative (or positive) opinion with the current president and the consequential voting behavior in the election towards each partisan candidate. First, observing the general opinion of the current president with the thermometer ratings since 2000, the graphs are all very unique (Figure 6). The 2000 data shows that (excluding general outliers) the current president has a bell-shaped curve distribution that is slightly skewed to the left. Opposite, is the 2004 data, showing a reverse bell curve of thermometer ratings. Finally, the 2008 thermometer data is a strong skew to the right, with much fewer respondents rating the current president high on their thermometer rating.

The final set of data examined as background research is a poll of whether or not voters believe that their families are better or worse off than one year before. While this is a five-point scale, it has been combined into three simple variables for the first observable distribution (Figure 7). It simply shows whether the respondent felt that they were better off, worse off, or the same as the year before. The data shows that a 49.8% of voters felt that they were worse off in November 2008 than one year before, a striking difference from the same response from 2004 and 2000, which totaled 31.2% and 11.7% respectively.

Voters who claimed to be either somewhat worse off or much worse off than the year before both showed trends of voting for the opposite party's candidate rather than the current president (See Figure 8). The results from those who claimed to be much better off, somewhat better off, and the same as the previous year, all showed that these respondents were more likely

to vote for the opposite party (Democrat) than the party of the current president in office. This is insightful, but determining what type of partisan affiliation these voters were before they voted will be determined in the research section of this paper.

While the 2008 election clearly showed that there was not a near-stalemate between the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, as the previous two elections, there is still much to be determined in regards to where Democrats were able to pull their votes from. The question would be whether or not independent voters voted in an overwhelmingly strong majority for Barack Obama, or if the Democrats were able to pull partisan voters from the other side of the aisle at a rate that was much more significant than the previous election.

The hypothesis for this research is that the Democrats in 2008 were able to do all of the above, taking a strong majority of independent voters as well as pulling away traditionally Republican voting members of the electorate.

DATA & METHODS

The data used in this study was all collected and compiled from the American National Election Studies (ANES) website. While some data sets were collected from the ANES public opinion sections, other statistics could only be found by downloading data sets and subsequently running them through SPSS, Stata, and ultimately graphing the data through Microsoft Excel. It is important to note that while some of the information was already presented in a graphical manner, a majority of the data was compiled and manipulated with the data editing and

computation program, Stata 10. Furthermore, it is even more important to state that the 2008 ANES data is denoted as being a preliminary “Advance Release,” and is subject to revision by the American National Election Studies staff. Therefore, all data sets, additional manipulation, presentation, results, as well as conclusions that utilize the ANES 2008 advance release data set are also preliminary, only tentative, and subject to possible change.

The first data set examines the trends in the proportions of nonpartisan groups. This was not a data set available as a formulated table or graph on the ANES website and was produced with calculations set by Wattenberg (1994) and reinstated using the more recent ANES data sets through 2008. This data set divided the respondents who did not affiliate themselves with either of the two major political parties into four (excluding apolitical) different nonpartisan sub-groups. These groups are titled: “no-preference neither”, “no-preference leaner”, “independent neither”, and “independent leaner.” The first set is no-preference respondents. No preference are not apolitical, for they hold some interest in politics, but when asked the leading question, “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”, the respondent will not associate themselves with any of political groups, including Independents. Then, when asked a follow-up question of whether or not the respondent is closer to one party or another the respondents are either marked as a Democrat or Republican leaner, or if they do not respond feeling closer to either party, they are placed into the no-preference neither group. This classification of no-preference neither is different than the apoliticals, who will not claim any partisanship or closeness to one party over the other. The independents are categorized similarly as the no-preference respondents, but initially do respond to the initial question of Democrat, Republican, or Independent and align themselves with other Independents.

The concluding sets of data specifically focus on the 2000, 2004, and 2008 ANES election data sets in an attempt to investigate possible explanations as to factors that led to a more decisive 2008 presidential election than the previous two elections that were both hotly contested and controversial due to the narrow margin of victory in the Electoral College. While the 2008 ANES data is still preliminary, a number of variables were examined alongside their counterparts from the 2004 and 2000 data sets. The opinion polls of gun control, abortion placement, and allowing homosexuals to adopt are utilized as three core variables that represented ideological stances that can often be associated with party affiliation and vote choice (Abramowitz & Saunders 2005).

These hot-button issues, along with general characteristic variables of voters and partisan affiliation are all gathered with the purpose of running a multivariable model using logistical regression, prchange, and prvalue value tests. This is necessary to check for any unseen correlations, the changes in probabilities for presidential vote choice with each variable, and to determine the predictions of presidential vote choice when controlling one demographic of partisan affiliation while keeping other variables at their statistical mean.

RESULTS

The first set of results updated from Martin Wattenberg's data sets are the trends in party identification within the electorate. The graph produced is replicated by categorizing the three major affiliations (Democrat, Republican, and Independent) with and without independent leaners (Figures 2 & 4). Initially, this data shows that there has been an increase in independent

voters since the 1960's, however with the introduction of the 2004 and 2008 data sets growth in independent respondents has stagnated. The classifications of voters can be examined more by closely looking at the trends in the independent leaners. These "leaners" have been studied extensively in the past (Wattenberg 1994) and are often categorized within the party they lean towards. This is because they tend to relate with one of the parties and still vote very much along that party's lines in terms of ideological position and candidate preference (Keith 1992 & Wattenberg 1994). The most recent update with the 2008 preliminary data shows a striking continuation of the decrease in Republican affiliation and increase in Democrat affiliation since the 2004 election, when partisan identification was relatively close between Republican and Democrat respondents.

Since the late 1970's there has been a continual separation in the perception of differences in what the parties stand for, but between 2000 and 2008 there has been a substantial separation that has not been seen since the inception of the ANES data. The most significant and recent trend was between the election years of 2000 and 2004, but the preliminary data from 2008 has also shown a continuation in this trend of separation.

The trends in partisan voting are examined more closely in comparing the data from the 2004 and 2008 election cycles. Again utilizing respondents' presidential vote choices as the independent variable, a logit and prchange test was run on a set of twenty-three variables (Figures 9 & 10). While multiple variables were included in the tests, the focus was primarily on the results from six party identification variables of strong and weak Democrat, Democrat-leaning Independent and Republican-leaning Independent, and weak and strong Republican. These variables were studied in order to shed light upon the presidential vote choice of the different classifications of partisan ID's. In order to illustrate the voting trends of these voters, a

prvalue test was executed (Figure 11). This test was done with the manipulation of the six party identification variables stated above, showing the likelihood of presidential vote choice (Democrat or Republican) for each of the partisan groups, while holding all other variables at their statistical mean.

The results from the 2008 preliminary data set were, by themselves, very revealing. While strong and weak Democratic voters showed a 96.8% and 91.8% likelihood, respectively, of voting for their party's candidate, their counterparts, strong and weak Republicans only had a 74.5% and 69.4% likelihood, respectively, of voting for the Republican candidate. Additionally, Democrat-leaning Independent voters were calculating at voting 94.8% for the Democratic candidate, while Republican-leaning Independents were only 60.9% likely to vote for the Republican candidate in the 2008 election. While all three of the Democrat or Democrat-leaning variable groups showed a powerful majority in voting for the Democrat party candidate, what is more surprising is the discrepancy of cross party voting that took place in the 2008 election. The results clearly show that while the three Democrat demographic groups (strong and weak Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents) voted, on average, nearly 95% along the lines of the party, there were approximately 32% of the Republican demographic (strong and weak Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents) respondents who crossed lines and voted for the Democratic candidate.

The same variables were examined from the 2004 data and show a more evenly distributed relationship between partisan affiliation and the corresponding vote choice in the presidential election. Strong Democrat and strong Republican respondents showed an 83.1% and 87.8% likelihood, respectively, of voting for their individual party's candidate. Weak partisan voters had a slight separation with 79.8% and 67.1% likelihood, respectively, of voting for the

Democrat and Republican candidate. Finally, Democrat-leaning Independents expressed an 81.1% correlation with voting for the Democratic candidate, while Republican-leaning Independents had a slightly lower rate of 71.6% in relation to voting in line with the party for the Republican candidate.

In comparison of the 2004 election data to the 2008 preliminary election data, there is an obvious shift of voting preference over the four years. When examining the six different partisan groups, the preference of voting for the Democratic candidate increased in every partisan demographic, save one, which was a modest decrease of 2.3% with weak Republican respondents. While the Democrat categories of respondents all increased in the likelihood of voting for the Democratic candidate between 2004 and 2008, what was most notable was the strong shift within the Republican respondent categories (Republican-leaning Independents and strong Republicans) that had shifts towards voting for the 2008 Democrat candidate of 10.6% and 13.4% respectively.

Altogether, this illustrates that not only did the 2008 Democratic presidential candidate do better in their own party at maintaining and keeping Democrat and Democrat-leaning voters to vote for them, but in comparison, was able to pull a much larger percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters to vote across the partisan divide at a rate that was clearly greater than seen from the results in the previous election.

DISCUSSION

Updating the data from Wattenberg's text through the 2008 presidential election with the American National Election Studies preliminary data was very enlightening. While much of the data continued the trends established from the research in 2007, there was a rebuttal of non-preference voter trends. The additions to the 2007 research did prove conclusive in showing the continuation, and even an exaggeration, of some trends that began after the 2000 election including a separation of a competitive balance of partisanship as well as public opinion on the perceived differences in the standpoints of the major political parties. Moreover, the results of partisan voting and the recognition of the high percentage of votes that the Democratic candidate acquired from across the partisan spectrum are both striking and significant.

Party identification has shifted significantly since the 2000 election when the separation in the population between self described Democrats and Republicans was only 10%. The 2008 preliminary data shows that this split has grown to 24%. The tremendous increase in Democrat affiliation over the past eight years could easily be related to the ratings of the current president in 2004 and 2008 as examined in the background section of this study. In 2004 the thermometer rating for the current president was a reverse bell shape, which illustrates a clear polarization of voters who either had a relatively high rating or a relatively low thermometer rating for the president. Additionally, by 2008 the thermometer rating was strongly skewed to the right, thus illustrating an average rating that is significantly low for the current president George W. Bush. By comparison this is much different from the 2000 thermometer rating, for the then current president Clinton at the end of his second term, that was roughly bell shaped when graphed and

the extremes on both ends were removed. Since the polarizing observation from the 2004 data and the generally negative observation of the 2008 data are both evaluating a Republican president, it could be assumed that the prominent increase in Democrat partisanship is partly in response to the polarizing and ultimately negative thermometer ratings of the current president in 2004 and 2008.

Additionally, the background data on independent and non-preference voters supported and dispelled some of the 2007 assumptions of an increasing demographic of no-preference voters. The preliminary data from 2008 continued to show the relatively neutral pattern of independent voters, showing that their population continues to remain fairly constant. Also, the pattern of independents versus pure independents has remained fairly consistent with the introduction of the 2008 ANES data, with a long term pattern of an increasing base of independent (also known as independent-leaners) voters and a relatively unchanging proportion of true independents.

The 2007 data and conclusion showing that no-preference voters were the most apparent trend of growth in non-partisan voting is dispelled with the introduction of the 2008 data. The 2008 data shows that the most prominent trend in non-partisan voters are instead independent-leaners, with an overall increase of nearly 10% and a 5% increase since 2000. This is ironic, however, because as described by Wattenberg (1994) and Keith (1992), independent-leaners put on more of a façade of partisan independence, and in reality vote just as much along partisan lines as a voter who sets claim to a party affiliation. Therefore, these independent-leaners are not truly independent. So, although by title, there may be an increasing trend in independents but, as previous studies have shown, these voters tend to have the voting characteristics of partisans and should not necessarily be used to make assumptions relating to independent voters.

This data helps to supplement and reinforce the concept that the political party system has seen some decisive separation between the Democrats and Republicans and furthermore, that there was a significant shift in party affiliation in the American electorate. Some of this may be explained by the feeling thermometers that are presented in the background portion of this study, showing that there is a possible relationship with the introduction of a polarizing president and a drop of partisanship in the electorate of the same party.

In addition the data on the variable that examines voters' opinion on whether their family is better or worse off than the year before is telling and should be considered a factor with the outcome of the Democrat victory in 2008. The 2008 data illustrates an exponential increase in voters who responded negatively in regards to their status from the year before. Furthermore, this polling information gives additional insight into why weak partisans might break from voting along party lines in the 2008 presidential election.

The primary data from the 2008 election was utilized to focus specifically on the different demographics of party affiliation and produced impressive and extremely insight results. The testing of the data showed a large discrepancy between the percentage of votes that Barack Obama was able to garner from Republican and Republican-leaning demographics in the electorate versus the percent that John McCain was able pull from those who were Democrat or Democrat-leaning partisans. These results show that not only was Obama able to gain more voters from across the aisle than McCain, he was also able to do it at a rate that was immensely higher than the same groups Bush was able to pull from in 2004 when he won reelection.

Limitations

While the data from 2000, 2004, and 2008 was extremely enlightening, there may be an obvious fault in using a preliminary data set before the official release of the finalized data set. While on the surface of the data set there appeared not to be any problems, when looking at the presidential vote variable in the 2008 data set the results showed that the Democrat candidate had more votes than the Republican at a rate of roughly two to one. While the election of 2008 was fairly decisive, it was not a landslide victory of such a mighty proportion. It is a mystery as to why this was the case, but should be reviewed with the final release of the 2008 ANES data that is expected later in 2009. While this likely skewed the data, it should be assumed that it most likely only exaggerated the results of the tests and should not preclude the data or results of the study.

Conclusion

Results of this research are conclusive in illustrating that there is not a decline in partisanship, as presented by Wattenberg. But instead, a shift towards Democratic partisanship. However, it is clear that there have been significant factors such as negative feelings towards the president or one's own situation that are present in American politics that have contributed towards the dramatic separation of partisan affiliation between the Democrats and Republicans. The concept of a swelling independent base is artificial. The truth is that although an increasing percentage of voters may claim independence, they continue to associate with one party or the other, and coincidentally vote along the lines of that party. While there is not conclusive evidence that can measure or assure that there is a polarization effect at the elite level of American

politics, the data on an ever increasing rate of perceived differences in the major parties is telling, and should be taken as a sign of an ideological rift that has been growing and recently separated at an even greater rate since 2000. This rift should also be considered a telltale sign of elite polarization, even though other factors, such as elected officials voting habits, are not included.

Finally, the rate of cross-aisle voting in the 2008 presidential election is impressive. The data proves the introduction's theory and hypothesis correct that Obama and the Democrats were able to not only win by maintaining a solidified base of votes within the party, but were also able to attract voters who had affiliations with the Republican party.

While the background portion of this study only provided insight into several factors that may have contributed to the change in partisan affiliation and the possible reasoning behind why the electorate may vote across party lines at an unprecedented rate, it is suggested that further research should be conducted on other variables of similar nature. However, it is obvious that there are many factors that are responsible for the shift in the 2008 election which lead to a significant Democratic victory.

The shift in partisanship and cross partisan voting all spelled victory for the Democratic Party in 2008. Even with the decrease in Republican Party affiliation over the past eight years the Democrats were able to transform the pattern of dead heat battles in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections into a clear and decisive victory in 2008 because of their ability to take in a powerful percentage of votes from multiple demographics of partisan affiliation.

FIGURE 1.

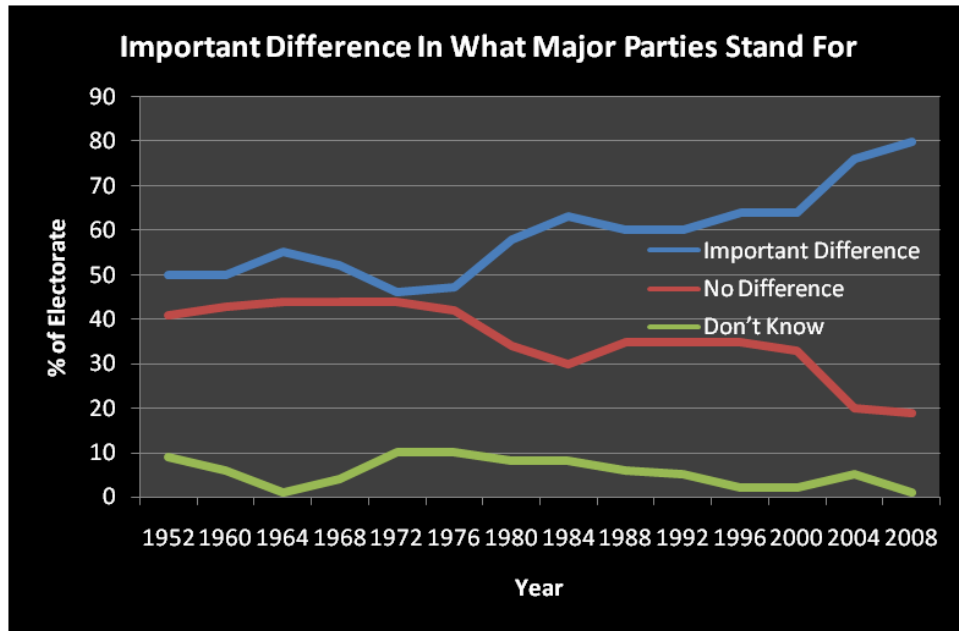


FIGURE 2.

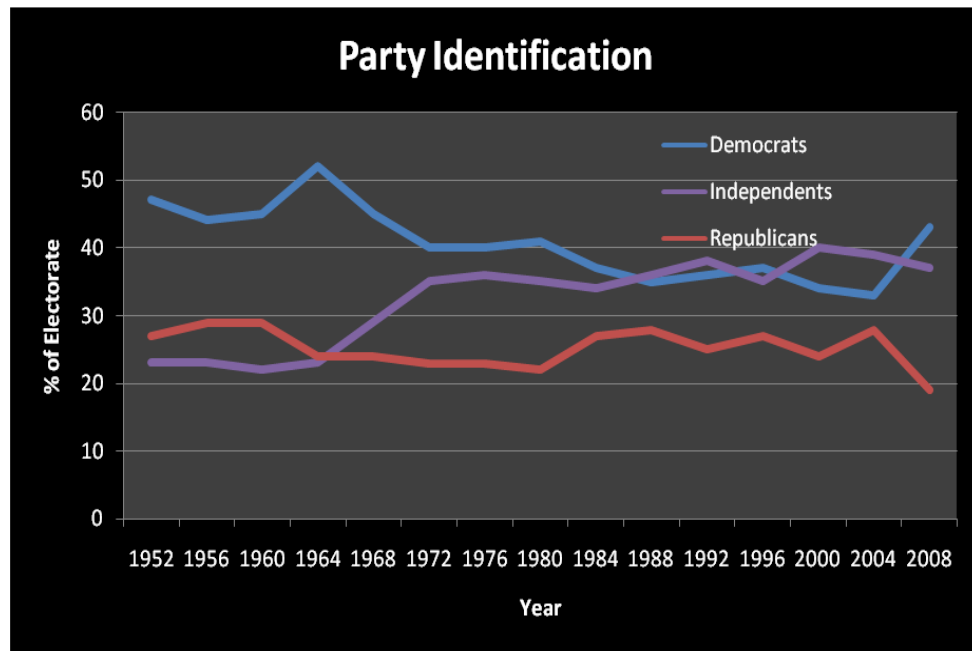


FIGURE 3.

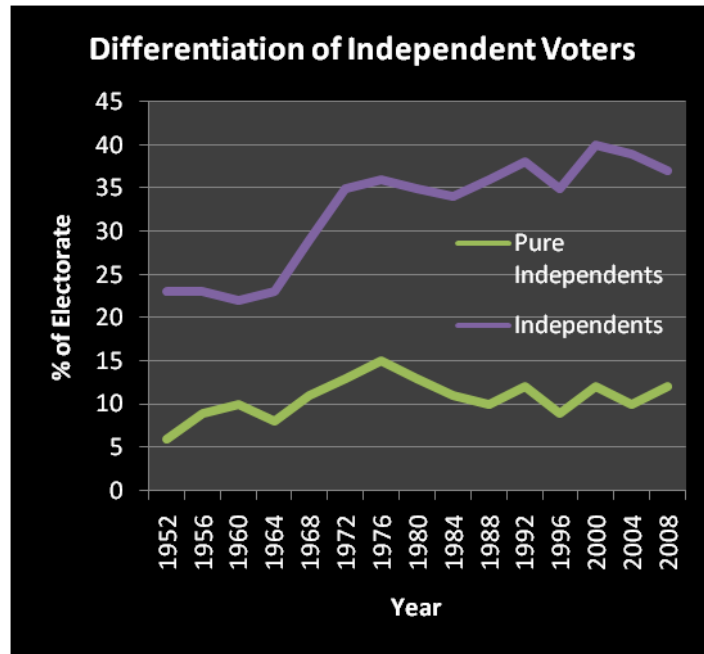


FIGURE 4.

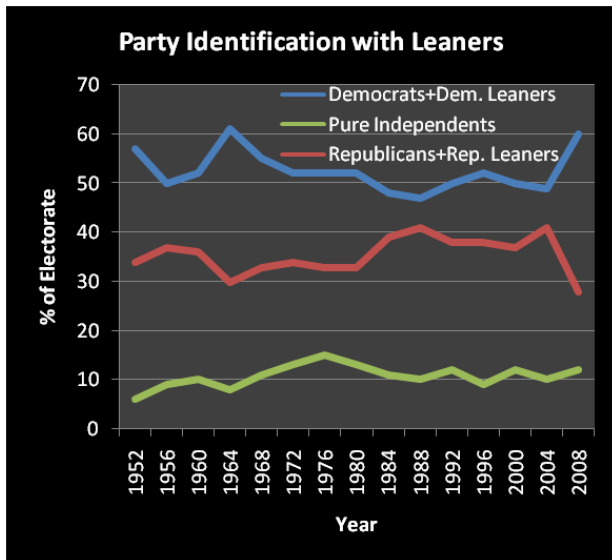


FIGURE 5.

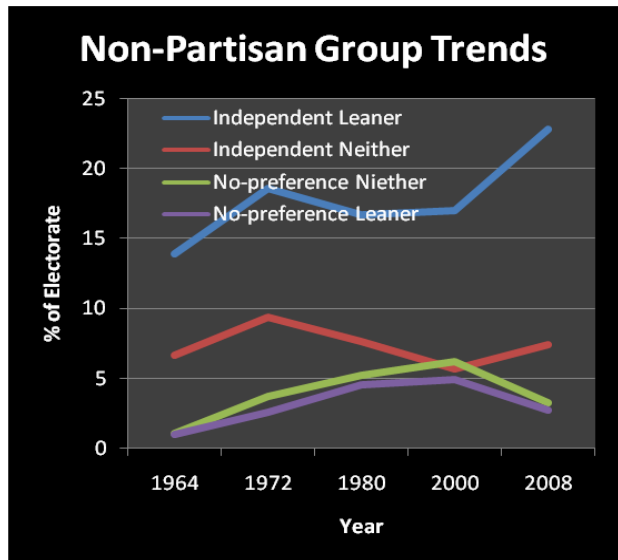


FIGURE 6.

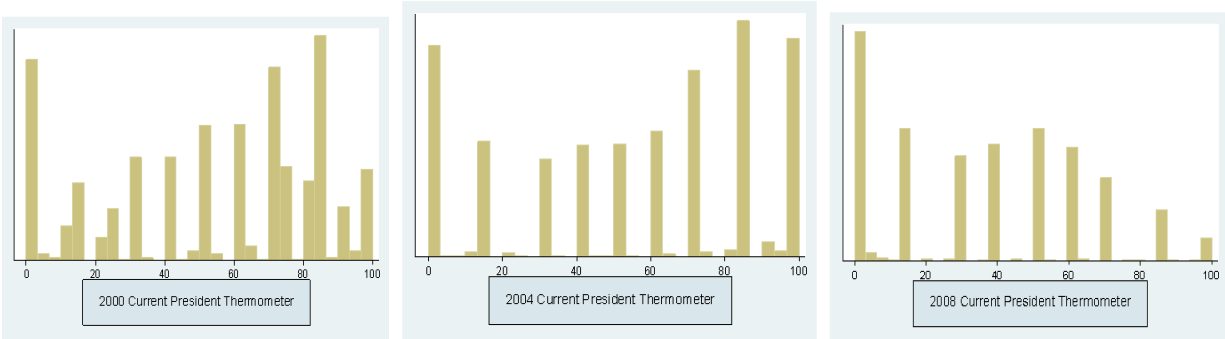


FIGURE 7.

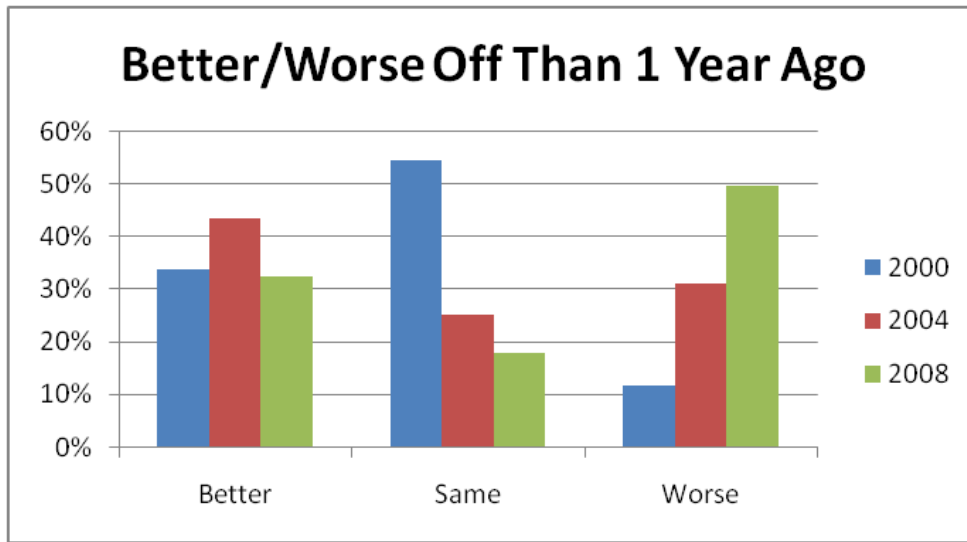


FIGURE 8.

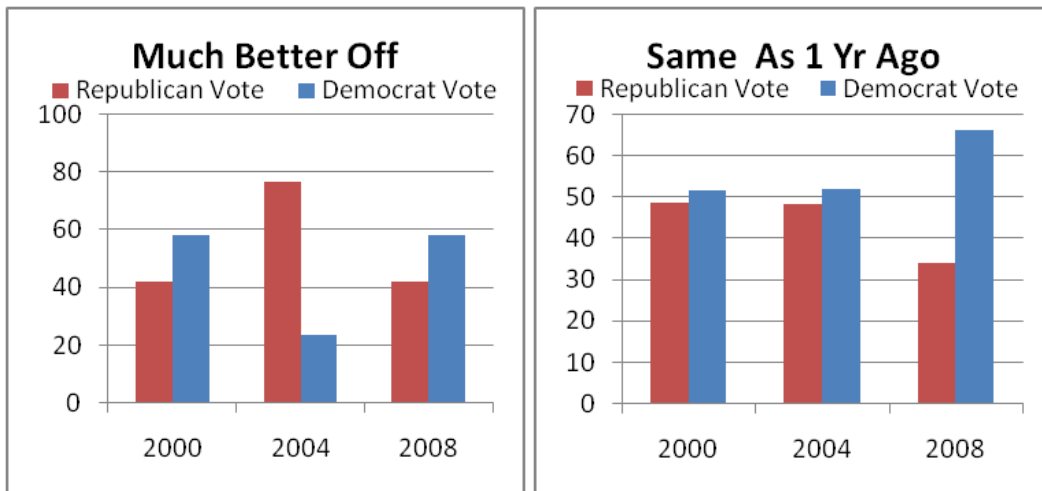


FIGURE 9.

2008		2004	
Strong Democrat	0.339 [.000]**	Strong Democrat	0.729 [.004]**
Weak Democrat	0.295 [.000]**	Weak Democrat	0.536 [.000]**
Independent Democrat	0.364 [.000]**	Independent Democrat	0.573 [.001]**
Independent Republican	0.341 [.000]**	Independent Republican	0.641 [.504]
Weak Republican	0.336 [.000]**	Weak Republican	0.561 [.700]
Strong Republican	0.359 [.000]**	Strong Republican	0.865 [.088]
Gender	0.204 [.413]	Gender	0.354 [.906]
Hispanic	0.243 [.019]*	Hispanic	0.699 [.206]
Black	0.547 [.000]**	Black	0.506 [.000]**
Other Race	0.463 [.191]	Other Race	1.359 [.777]
Married	0.294 [.204]	Married	0.488 [.026]*
Divorced	0.326 [.137]	Divorced	0.584 [.695]
Other Marital Status	0.346 [.092]	Other Marital Status	0.717 [.035]*
Below Poverty	0.259 [.808]	Below Poverty	0.487 [.848]
Upper Class	0.365 [.190]	Upper Class	0.648 [.095]
Bush Thermometer	0.003 [.002]**	Bush Thermometer	0.009 [.000]**
Worse Off	0.263 [.265]	Worse Off	0.458 [.222]
Better Off	0.285 [.741]	Better Off	0.425 [.815]
Pro-Life	0.447 [.152]	Pro-Life	0.556 [.571]
Pro-Choice	0.246 [.181]	Pro-Choice	0.382 [.007]**
Stricter Gun Laws	0.201 [.106]	Stricter Gun Laws	0.342 [.115]
Less Strict Gun Laws	0.526 [.652]	Less Strict Gun Laws	1.268 [.730]
Allow Gay Adoption	0.204 [.000]**	Allow Gay Adoption	0.379 [.564]

FIGURE 10.

	2008		2004
Strong Democrat	0.2414	Strong Democrat	0.4371
Weak Democrat	0.1372	Weak Democrat	0.3925
Independent Democrat	0.1561	Independent Democrat	0.4051
Independent Republican	-0.2806	Independent Republican	-0.1061
Weak Republican	-0.3658	Weak Republican	-0.0540
Strong Republican	-0.4176	Strong Republican	-0.3416
Gender	-0.0220	Gender	0.0105
Hispanic	0.0669	Hispanic	0.2078
Black	0.3207	Black	0.3988
Other Race	0.0665	Other Race	0.0949
Married	-0.0505	Married	0.2647
Divorced	-0.0724	Divorced	0.0569
Other Marital Status	-0.0888	Other Marital Status	0.3310
Below Poverty	-0.0084	Below Poverty	0.0233
Upper Class	-0.0728	Upper Class	-0.2552
Bush Thermometer	-0.1627	Bush Thermometer	-0.9676
Worse Off	0.0392	Worse Off	0.1383
Better Off	0.0124	Better Off	-0.0248
Pro-Life	-0.1026	Pro-Life	0.0781
Pro-Choice	0.0411	Pro-Choice	0.2500
Stricter Gun Laws	0.0437	Stricter Gun Laws	0.1337
Less Strict Gun Laws	-0.0341	Less Strict Gun Laws	-0.1082
Allow Gay Adoption	0.1343	Allow Gay Adoption	0.0546

FIGURE 11.

Partisan Demographics	2004		Partisan Demographics	2008	
	Dem Vote %	Rep Vote %		Dem Vote %	Rep Vote %
Strong Dem	83.09%	16.91%	Strong Dem	96.81%	3.19%
Weak Dem	79.79%	20.21%	Weak Dem	91.84%	8.16%
Independent Dem	81.10%	18.90%	Independent Dem	94.83%	5.17%
Independent Rep	28.44%	71.56%	Independent Rep	39.08%	60.92%
Weak Rep	32.94%	67.06%	Weak Rep	30.61%	69.39%
Strong Rep	12.19%	87.81%	Strong Rep	25.55%	74.45%

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