

The Party in the Electorate  
as a Basis for More Responsible Parties

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The party-in-the-electorate is an important facet of the political party, though it was barely appreciated when a special APSA committee wrote its the report "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System" (Committee on Political Parties 1950). The purpose of this paper is to examine how the party-in-the-electorate contributes to our understanding of the APSA Report's objective of creating more responsible parties.

The early work on political parties recognized parties foremost as organizations and secondly in terms of their operation in government. The recognition of their role in the electorate was tertiary, partly because appreciating that role required extensive attention to public opinion through sample surveys, which were not available until the 1950s.

The problem, of course, is that these different aspects of party cannot be seen as separate; each affects the other intimately. Dealing with the matter of how responsible a party system is or should be cannot skip over the party-in-the-electorate, since the party-as-an-organization and the party-in-government must both answer to the party-in-the-electorate. Indeed part of the problem with the APSA report is the minimal recognition of the role of the party-in-the-electorate.

Even today, most of the state-of-the-subfields summaries of research on political parties (Epstein 1975, 1983; Crotty 1991, 151-4; Janda 1993) give minimal attention to the party-in-the-electorate. The rationale of the authors may well be that summaries of research on voting behavior already discuss this topic (Crotty 1991, 151), but this makes the discussion of party incomplete and renders the discussion of responsible parties less realistic. Janda's (1993, 183) review of the subfield

goes further by arguing that a general theory of parties need not encompass voting behavior, accepting Schlesinger's (1991) argument that this flows from defining parties as organizations. However, it is impossible to discuss party responsibility in a realistic manner without dealing with the role of the party-in-the-electorate.

### The Historical Development of the Party-in-the-Electorate Concept

The awareness of the party-in-the-electorate was very limited in 1950; how the party-in-the-electorate was relevant to the achievement of responsible parties was not well understood. It is appropriate to begin, therefore, by placing the APSA Report back into its historical context, summarizing how the view of the party-in-the-electorate developed before the Report, how the Report treated it, and how the concept was further developed subsequently.

#### Pre-1950 Views of the Party-in-the-Electorate

Looking back at the pre-1950 scholarly literature reveals a highly mixed view of the party-in-the-electorate. The idea of party loyalties was certainly present. In particular, it was recognized that many citizens were loyal to one party or the other because of the Civil War, supporting the party of the Union or opposing the party of the Reconstruction.

Some early discussions of party loyalty virtually foreshadowed the party identification concept that was developed in the 1950s. For example, Walter Weyl (1912, 60-1) wrote that "a man had to cling to something, and in America, where traditions were weak and where men, following their social instincts, became 'joiners,' the temptation to cling to party became resistless... This party loyalty found expression in a traditional voting, which obscured contemporaneous issues..." Similarly, Graham

Wallas (1921, 103-4) described a party as "something which can be loved and trusted, and which can be recognized at successive elections as being the same thing that was loved and trusted before; and a party is such a thing." Likewise, Pendleton Herring (1940, 102) wrote that some "citizens align themselves with one party or another because they are attracted by the 'game of politics.' Party loyalties are frequently fixed at a very early age..."

While the notion of party loyalty was thus clear by 1950, there was not consensus that this meant that parties should be seen as having a definitional base in the electorate (Ranney 1968, 153-54). There was conflict among parties researchers as to whether primary voters, supporters (including financial contributors), and identifiers should be included as part of the notion of party. Ranney cites several authors of this pre-1950 period on each side of this debate. Bryce (1889, 10ff), Merriam (1923, chap. 2), and McKean (1949) accepted the party-in-the-electorate as part of the concept of party, while Brooks (1923, 14), Robinson (1924, 3-4) and Schattschneider (1942) rejected that view. In particular, Schattschneider (1942, 53) argued that "whatever else the parties may be, they are not associations of the voters who support the party candidates." Before chairing the APSA Committee on Political Parties, he was on record asserting (p. 54) that "the concept of the parties as a mass association of partisans has no historical basis."

Thus, the pre-1950 view of the party-in-the-electorate included recognition of party loyalties, nearly moving to the idea of identification with parties, but without agreement as to whether the party-in-the-electorate should be seen as part of the political party concept. That is where the parties field stood when the APSA committee met to write its Report.

## The Party-in-the Electorate in the 1950 APSA Report

The APSA Report seems to have been aware of the general party-in-the-electorate notion, albeit not by that name, but the Report was not comfortable with that view of political parties. Indeed, this is not surprising given Schattschneider's opposition to that perspective and his leading role in drafting the Report.

The APSA Report makes references to the party-in-the-electorate, but these are brief mentions. First, in its discussion "toward a new concept of party membership" as part of its treatment of "Intraparty Democracy," it refers explicitly to "those who identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats" (p. 69). Yet this discussion is really more about the role of party members in framing the party's program than about people who might identify with a party without expecting a greater role in determining party programs.

Later, the Report differentiates three parts of the electorate (pp. 90-91), which could be described as non-voters, partisans, and floating voters. In their words (p. 90) these are: "(1) those who seldom or never vote; (2) those who vote regularly for the party of their traditional affiliation; and (3) those who base their electoral choice upon the political performance of the two parties, as indicated by the programs they support and the candidates they succeed in putting forth." The second group, which is of most direct relevance to the party-in-the-electorate, is discussed in the following paragraph (p. 90):

"The second group contributes to some extent to the inertia of the body politic, but it does include substantial numbers of citizens who take a continuing interest in the decisions of their party. In each major party, many members can be expected to favor change in the direction of a more responsible conduct of party affairs. Moreover, the rank and file in each party want their party so organized that the views of the party majority will be respected and carried out. Only thus can the parties remain confident of continuing support from their following."

Part of the party-in-the-electorate was critical to the APSA Report's recommendations: party members. After all, an important part of the Report was devoted to developing intraparty democracy, which required that party members be able to participate in intraparty business. As Ranney (1951, 489-92) emphasized, the Report not only did not indicate how the members would control the party leaders, but it did not define party membership. It is clear that the Report viewed party members as the rank and file, but it is not clear whether they are synonymous with the party-in-the-electorate, or if they were seen as a more activist rung.

All in all, the authors of the APSA Report recognized the existence of partisans in the electorate. Yet their treatment of the party-in-the-electorate was truly minimal, and it did not recognize the interplay between the party-in-the-electorate and the party more generally that we would recognize today. Ironically, within just a few years the parties field would gain a richer understanding of the party-in-the-electorate.

#### The Party-in-the-Electorate Concept in the 1951-1960 Literature

The decade from 1951 through 1960 was the period in which the political science discipline became more comfortable with the concept of the party-in-the-electorate. If the status of the electorate with respect to parties seemed uncertain before this decade, by the end of this period the notion of the party-in-the-electorate became firmly entrenched in the literature because of the influence of three books.

The first of these three books was V. O. Key, Jr.'s influential parties textbook, which brought the term "the party-in-the-electorate" to the attention of the discipline. The first two editions (1942, 1947) had not focused on the party-in-the-electorate, but the last three editions (1952, 1958, 1964) did. The term itself had been coined by Ralph Goldman (1951, chap. 17) in his doctoral dissertation, as

Key (1958, 181, fn. 1) meticulously acknowledged, but it was Key's *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* that popularized the term. Key included the party-in-the-electorate as part of his definition of parties and described the party-in-the-electorate by stating (Key 1958, 181) that "within the body of voters as a whole, groups are formed of persons who regard themselves as party members." He calls this an "amorphous group," but at the same time a "social reality." More generally, his inclusion of a discussion of the electorate and realignment of the electorate in a political parties text stood as evidence of the importance of the party-in-the-electorate.<sup>1</sup>

Another major book of this decade was *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960), which turned the discipline's attention to party identification as the essence of the party-in-the-electorate. This book was itself the culmination of a decade of research. It was just as the APSA Report was being written that the voting behavior researchers began focusing in on party identification as their key concept in the understanding of mass voting. The first report by University of Michigan researchers that used the party identification concept was published in 1952 (Belknap and Campbell 1952) in a study that used just a vote intention question to measure partisanship, recognizing explicitly that it was a crude measure. The now famous question, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" was first used by Warren Miller in an Ann Arbor survey in 1951 (Kessel 1988, 301), with the two follow-up questions being first used in pretests for the Survey Research Center's 1952 national election survey. The full question series was used in their 1952 national survey, and the concept of party identification played an important part in their report on that election (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954). But it was *The American Voter* that turned the discipline's attention to party identification as the essence of the party-in-the-electorate.

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, by his 1961 public opinion textbook, Key (1961, chap. 17) focused directly on the party-in-the-electorate in his chapter on political parties, citing evidence from Gallup Polls and Survey Research Center samples about party identification.

That volume developed a rich theory of voting, with party identification playing a central role. Its position as a long-term determinant of the vote decision was firmly set in a subsequent article by Campbell (1964). Party identification became the crucial concept for our study of the party-in-the-electorate.

The third major book of this decade that should be crucial to our understanding of the relationship between the concepts of party responsibility and party-in-the-electorate was Anthony Downs's (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, though its importance for political science was not immediately recognized (Dahl 1959, 21-22). While the APSA Report may have anticipated the notion of party identification, even if it never used the term, it certainly did not anticipate Downs's work. Downs moved the argument to a different level, discussing party strategies for maximizing their vote share, given a series of assumptions about the electorate. The Downs model yields two main derivations: that in a two-party system the parties should converge in policies, and that this convergence should be to the position of the median voter in the distribution of voters. All of this depends on a series of assumptions that are thoroughly unrealistic (Stokes 1963), particularly a unidimensional policy space along with no abstention. Yet the Downs model is critical for dealing with the party-in-the-electorate in the APSA Report since it so explicitly contradicts the notion of party responsibility underlying that Report. Party convergence is just the opposite of what the APSA Report is calling for. Yet Downs is showing that under some assumptions the optimal policy position for parties is to converge. Even recognizing that the Downs results may not hold under different assumptions, minimally Downs showed that party responsibility is not necessarily an equilibrium position for the parties. The authors of the Report did not notice the tension between ideological parties and party divergence that Downs was to point out -- according to Downs, there is something in the party-in-the-electorate that goes against party responsibility. We shall see later how the Downs model has been modified over the years to obtain a

variety of additional results, but Downs makes clear that any call for party responsibility must be explicit as to how it views the nature of ideological competition.

Together these three books -- *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups*, *The American Voter*, and *An Economic Theory of Democracy* -- have made the political parties field recognize the importance of the party-in-the-electorate. Key made it relevant to our substantive theories, the Michigan authors made it central to our empirical theories, and Downs made it part of our formal theories. The APSA Report had initially been challenged on a number of grounds (Ranney 1951, Turner 1951, Pennock 1952), but, by enriching our theories of parties, these three works had the further effect of weakening its theoretical basis.

### Summary

Looking back to the period in which the APSA Report was written, it is clear the party-in-the-electorate did not play a large role in its view of parties. It was recognized by that time that party loyalties existed, but there was not general acceptance of the relevance of the electorate to the definition of parties. The Report therefore did not grapple fully with the role of the party-in-the-electorate in the achievement of responsible parties. Two years after the Report had been published, Key had called attention to the central role of the party-in-the-electorate. By 1960, *The American Voter* had shown how the party-in-the-electorate should be studied. Meanwhile, Downs pointed out logical issues involving the relationship between the party-in-the-electorate and responsible parties. We next examine how the party-in-the-electorate has affected the responsibility of our parties.

## The Party-in-the-Electorate in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

Empirical evidence about the party-in-the-electorate before 1952 is, unfortunately, fragmentary at best, but thanks to the National Election Studies series of surveys we have considerable information about the party-in-the-electorate since then. This evidence on party identification will be reviewed in this section since partisanship is at the core of the party-in-the-electorate. In particular, the focus will be on the extent to which the public identifies with the parties as well as on the partisan balance, after which the decade-by-decade changes in the party-in-the-electorate will be summarized.

### Levels of Identification and Party Dealignment

To what extent does the electorate identify with parties? Is the party-in-the-electorate a minor part of the total electorate or does it encompass most citizens? And, how has this changed over time -- is the public dealigning, with fewer people identifying with parties, or are party ties becoming more prevalent? These questions are basic to understanding the role of the party-in-the-electorate in contemporary politics.

Our starting point for looking at the development of the party-in-the-electorate is the 1950s, particularly the results obtained for party identification in *The American Voter*. When the Michigan researchers devised their party identification question series, they could not know whether partisanship would be widespread. They expressed surprise at their findings about the extent to which citizens identified with parties. As they wrote, "the fact that nearly everyone in our sample could be placed on a unitary dimension of party identification ... [is an] important finding ... about the nature of party support within the electorate. In view of the loose, federated structure of American parties it was not obvious in advance that people could respond to party in these undifferentiated terms" (p. 127).

The conclusion by the authors of *The American Voter* that nearly all citizens can self-locate on the party identification scale remains true, though with some variation over the years since then. In the 1950s, about 90% of the public considered themselves closer to one party or the other, with only the slightest amount of prodding. It happens (Figure 1) that the 1952 survey occurred at the high for this series, a high of 92% that was replicated only in 1964.<sup>2</sup> That value subsequently fell as low as 82% in 1974, but since 1988 it is back to the level of the 1950s and 1960s. That is, it is again the case that nearly 90% of the public considers themselves closer to one party or the other.

Three types of respondents do not consider themselves closer to one party or the other. The people who do not relate enough to politics to deal with terms like "Republican" or "Democrat" are considered to be "apoliticals." This turns out to be a small group, 3-4% up through the early 1960s when southern blacks were not permitted to vote, but just 1-2% in most surveys since that time. Second, some people consider themselves members of other parties and do not consider themselves closer to one major party rather than the other, but this also has been just a small residual category. The third type of respondents who do not consider themselves closer to one party are Independents and they have been the most interesting of these three types, particularly because of their relevance to debates as to whether politics have dealigned.

The proportion of the public who consider themselves Independents rather than Republicans or Democrats has varied over the second half of the twentieth century. As has been extensively studied, the proportion of Independents increased during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet whether the increase is real has been subject to dispute. If only the first party identification question is used (so we

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<sup>2</sup> The results reported in this paper are generally based on the tables in the cumulative National Election Studies dataset available at their Web site: <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/nesguide.htm>; the results using statistical controls involve direct analysis of that cumulative file. Linear trends can be detected by correlating each time series with a time variable; these correlations for all series in the figures in this paper are given in the appendix.

are including everyone who calls themselves Independents), then there was a substantial increase in Independents in this era. However, if leaners are instead included as partisans, then Keith et al. (1992) show that there was little change in the percentage of pure Independents over this time period. As Figure 1 shows, the 1950s were at a low point for political independence, whether defined narrowly (to include just pure independents) or broadly (to also include leaners). The high for these series was reached in the mid-1970s, the post-Watergate 1974-78 period. The total proportion of Independents remains on the high side, but the proportion of pure Independents has tapered off (Weisberg 1998, Bartels 2000, 36-37), although not as low as in the 1950s. This decrease begins to suggest that the increase in Independents is mainly of historical interest, though it will take a few more elections to see if this is a real trend or a temporary drop.

The increase in Independents is one aspect of a dealignment from parties and growth of candidate-center politics that many observers feel has occurred since the 1950s (e.g., Wattenberg 1996, Aldrich and Niemi 1996). There has been a corresponding decline in strength of partisanship, but it follows a mixed pattern. There has been a decline in the proportion of strong identifiers since the 1950s, but careful analysis of Figure 2 shows that the low for strong identification was between 1972 and 1980. The proportion of strong identifiers since 1982 has been at the 1966-1970 level, above the 1972-1980 lows but below the 1952-1964 highs. The trends are clearer for weak identifiers and for leaners. The proportion of weak identifiers has fallen, being lower from 1988-1998 than earlier, while the proportion of leaners has been higher in those years than earlier. These changes for leaners and weak partisans are fairly linear, while the changes for strong identifiers are curvilinear.

Attitudes toward the parties have also changed during this period, though the size of the change is quite limited. Feeling thermometer ratings of the political parties are available only since 1978. The average rating given to a party fell during this period, from the 58-60 range through 1990 to the 55-56

range since then (Figure 3). This change may not be large, but it shows more dissatisfaction with the parties. The details differ by year, with the Republican rating being low in 1992, 1996, and especially 1998, while the Democratic rating was low in 1994. Yet the average rating for each party has at least been above 50 (except for the Republicans scoring an exact 50 in 1998). The ratings of the parties are a few degrees less favorable in the 1990s than previously, but overall these ratings are not as low as might be expected in an extensive party dealignment.

In summary, there has been ebb and flow over the years, but the basic conclusion seems to be that most people still identify with one party or the other. There may be evidence of party dealignment over the years, but the party-in-the-electorate remains strong.

#### The Party Balance and Party Realignment

Having described the extent of party identification in the electorate, the next question is to what extent one party has a majority over the other in partisanship. Along with that, there is the issue of whether there has been party realignment in recent years, with the partisan balance changing.

In looking at the balance between the two parties, it is again useful to begin with the first readings of party identification as reported by the University of Michigan researchers. They found that the majority of citizens identified with the Democratic Party in the 1950s, even as the country was electing a Republican as President. The Democratic Party has remained ahead of the Republican Party in polling since then, but the size of its lead has diminished. In particular, there was scaling down of the Democratic lead in the 1980s, during the Reagan years. The Democrat advantage was at its high point in 1964, at the time of the Johnson landslide over Goldwater (see Figure 4); its low was 1994, when the Republicans scored their surprise takeover of the House of Representatives. Regardless of how leaners

are handled, it is clear that the Democratic advantage has been lower since 1980 than it had been previously.

The partisan identification changes during this period were large enough in the South to speak of realignment there. The once solid Democratic South no longer has a large majority of Democratic identifiers. About 75 percent of southerners identified with the Democratic Party in the 1952 survey, versus only about 50 percent in the 1992-1996 surveys. Correspondingly, the proportion identifying with the Republican Party has risen from 14% to the high 30% range. There is still a Democratic plurality in the states of the confederate South (Figure 4), but not an overwhelming majority, and even that plurality would be transformed to virtual parity if only the partisanship of white Southerners were examined.

This diminished Democratic lead in partisanship is not as dramatic a realignment as the New Deal Realignment of the 1930s. Yet it is more dramatic than it may seem at first in that Democratic identifiers tend to turn out to vote at elections at lower rates than Republican identifiers, by an average of about 7 percent. Taking differential turnout rates into account, a slight Democratic lead among survey respondents can translate to a more even partisan balance among actual voters. Indeed, in the 1988 and 1994 elections, the difference between the proportions of Democrats and Republicans among actual voters was negligible (Figure 5). The Democrats cannot count on an automatic partisan advantage among voters anymore. The decrease in the Democratic identification advantage among actual voters was even more dramatic in the South, with one-party dominance being replaced by truly competitive politics.

More detailed analysis shows that several social groups modified their partisanship during this period (Stanley and Niemi 1999). Native southern whites became less Democratic and more Republican in their identification, while blacks became more Democratic. Catholics became less

Democratic, while white Protestant fundamentalists became more Republican. The changes in group support have been so substantial that Stanley and Niemi (1995) have written of the demise of the New Deal Coalition.

There is dispute in the research literature as to whether to characterize partisan change since the 1950s as realignment, as dealignment, or as reinvigoration of partisanship (Niemi and Weisberg 2001, chap. xx) because there is evidence that can be interpreted in each of these ways. But as to realignment, it is clear that the Democratic advantage has been considerably eroded, even if it has not been reversed. Furthermore, the social group basis of the parties has changed in meaningful ways.

#### Partisan Loyalty and Partisan Resurgence

The level of identification and the party balance would matter little if partisanship were not related to the vote. Therefore, the remaining important question in describing the party-in-the-electorate is the extent to which party identification is related to vote choice. To what extent are partisans loyal to their party when they step into the voting booth? And, how is this changing over time -- are parties becoming irrelevant to voting or is there evidence of party resurgence?

Even if *The American Voter* was recounting the election of Republican Presidents during an era of a Democratic majority in mass partisanship, the usual account is that party identification was strongly related to the vote. Indeed, the common finding is that party identification has a higher relationship to the vote than any other attitudinal variable has. Yet the discipline began to think that party identification was less important when Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1979) found that the relationship between partisanship and vote had decreased. For several years now, researchers have been reporting that relationship has gone back up. This position has been argued most strongly by Bartels (2000) who shows that partisanship is again a very strong predictor of presidential voting.

Figure 6 breaks the two-party vote by partisanship, showing the proportion of each category voting Democratic (with leaners counted as partisans). Democrats were least likely to defect to the Republican candidate in the Clinton elections of the 1990s, while they defected most when George McGovern was the Democratic standard-bearer in 1972. Republicans were least likely to defect to the Democratic candidate in the Eisenhower elections of the 1950s, while they defected most when Barry Goldwater was the Republican standard-bearer in 1964. The net result is that the difference between Democrats and Republicans in their voting was at a low point in 1972 and was at a high point in the 1990s.

Bartels (2000) examines the importance of partisanship in voting more elegantly using a probit analysis of major party voting regressed on strength of partisan identification. He finds that the relationship between partisanship and the vote diminished in 1964 versus the first three presidential elections that the SRC surveyed, because of the widespread defections of Republicans from Barry Goldwater's candidacy. Party voting actually went back up in 1968, setting the Wallace vote aside. Then it plummeted in 1972, because of the flight of Democratic identifiers away from George McGovern's candidacy. Bartels shows that party voting for the presidency has climbed steadily since that 1972 low, returning by 1984 to the levels of the 1950s. Setting aside the Perot vote, the level of partisan voting for president in the 1990s was the highest in this half-century. A similar analysis for the congressional vote shows that partisan voting fell from the 1950s to a low in 1978 and 1980 but has climbed since, though it is still below the pre-1964 levels.

There have also, of course, been several important independent candidacies for the presidencies in the five decades since the APSA Report was written: George Wallace's 1968 effort, John Anderson's 1980 campaign, and H. Ross Perot's 1992 and 1996, as well as Ralph Nader's and Pat Buchanan's candidacies in 2000. Perot's Reform Party received enough votes in 1992 and 1996 to continue

qualifying for federal campaign funding, while Nader is running in 2000 in the hopes of obtaining enough votes that the Green Party could secure such funds for 2004. Taking voting for third-party and independent presidential candidates into account changes the above conclusions about partisan voting only slightly. The partisan loyalty rate in 1996 was still fairly high compared to the 1964-1984 period (Figure 7).

Regardless of third-party efforts, it is clear that the two party system remains very stable. Polls suggest that the public would be very open to a third-party, but that is a hypothetical question that bears little relationship to the choices that voters really face in deciding whether to support a specific new party. Faced with real third-party choices for president, the public overwhelmingly goes back to the two major parties. The two-party system remains alive, if not always well.

### Summary

The decades since the APSA Report was written have seen dealignment, some realignment, some resurgence of partisanship, and a few important independent candidacies for the presidency, but the party-in-the-electorate has provided a stable base for our party system.

It is useful to step back and look at the several trends described in this section decade by decade, starting with the 1950s and 1960s. One of the most important discoveries of *The American Voter* was that, according to the first national election studies, nearly all Americans relate to the party identification concept and consider themselves closer to one party or the other. Fifty years of survey data now show that to have been a high point for identification with the parties and a low point for political independence. The Democratic majority found at that time was also not permanent, though it reached its peak a few years later, during the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater presidential race in which Republican identifiers showed their least loyalty to their party.

The 1970s were a very different era. The change began with the least partisan of all presidential elections of this period, the 1972 Nixon-McGovern presidential race in which Democratic identifiers showed their lowest level of loyalty to their party. By the 1974 post-Watergate election, the proportion of the public considering themselves closer to one party or the other fell to its low while the level of political independence climbed. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1979) wrote *The Changing American Voter* to describe how the party-in-the-electorate during this period differed from the 1950s as described in *The American Voter*. However, having another quarter century of survey data since then shows that the 1970s were also not typical.

The 1980s were a transitional period. The most important change during this period was a decrease in the Democratic advantage in partisanship beginning around the 1984 reelection of Ronald Reagan and continuing with the 1988 succession by George Bush. The level of identification with parties climbed back up from its low while the proportion of independents inched back from its high. The importance of partisanship in presidential voting went back up, back to the levels of the 1950s.

The 1990s stand out as the most partisan of these periods. Putting aside the third-party vote, the relationship between partisanship and presidential voting was at its fifty-year high in the Clinton elections. The Democratic lead over the Republicans in partisanship hit its fifty-year low as the Republicans regained control of the House of Representatives in 1994, though it has gone back up some since. Meanwhile the proportion of pure independents fell back to 1956 levels, even though the total proportion of independents remained high.

The authors of the 1950 APSA Report were calling for changes in the party system. These survey data show that changes did occur in the party-in-the-electorate over the next half century, but it is necessary to examine one more piece of the puzzle: the differences between the parties as seen by the parties-in-the-electorate.

### The Ideological Polarization between the Parties

The APSA Report sought greater ideological differences between the parties than existed at the time. Unfortunately, it is not possible to trace ideological polarization among the mass public back to the 1950s because ideology was not measured in the early Michigan election studies. *The American Voter* concluded that the public is not ideological in its politics, and this result discouraged researchers measuring ideology. Even without direct measures, though, it is useful to recall the general situation when the Report was written. The South was still solidly Democratic. The Democratic Party contained both Northern liberals and Southern conservatives, while the Republican Party contained both Northeastern liberals and Midwestern conservatives. As a result of these mixtures, both parties had more moderate ideological images than they do today. Meanwhile, the Conservative Coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans dominated Congress, blocking liberal legislation. We lack survey evidence of the extent of ideological polarization between the parties at the mass level during that period, but under these circumstances it would be surprising if there was substantial polarization.

Ideological polarization between the parties has increased since then, especially in Congress. The usual account (e.g., Rohde 1991) is that the change began as Democrats took the lead in passing and enforcing civil rights laws and other liberal legislation. Traditionally Democratic white Southern conservatives began to vote for the Republican Party, electing many conservative Republicans to Congress. Newly enfranchised African Americans in the South voted for Democrats, so the remaining Southern Democratic representatives had to appeal to those African-American voters to win reelection, so their voting records became more like those of Northern Democrats. As a result, the Democratic Party has become much more cohesive in its voting, Conservative Coalition votes in which the majority

of Southern Democrats vote with the majority of Republicans have become much less common, and the Republican Party in Congress has become more conservative. Additionally there is much more party voting in Congress, with the majorities of the two parties more often voting in opposite directions.

### Self-Placement on Ideology

One way to examine polarization at the mass level is to look at the relationship between ideology and partisanship. Not until 1972 did the National Election Studies begin direct measurement of ideology on a seven-point scale. Before looking at the relationship between partisanship and ideology, it is important to recognize that the problems that the early researchers saw with ideology were real -- many respondents do not attempt to answer the ideology question. The level of ideological awareness is much lower than the level of partisan awareness. As a result, the amount of missing data in the ideology scale is unusually high. The proportions of Republicans who place themselves on the scale range from 73 percent to 86 percent (Figure 8), while the proportions for Democrats range from 62 percent to 76 percent. (Independents are least relevant for the comparisons being made in this paper, but their rates are even lower, from 40 to 67 percent.)

The self-placement rates for both Republicans and Democrats were lowest at the beginning of the Reagan administration, in 1980 and 1982. The conventional wisdom is that the country became more ideological with the Reagan conservative revolution, but the data show that to have been a low point in terms of ideological awareness. The highs turn out to be in 1994 for the Republicans and 1998 for the Democrats. A substantial part of the sample still was unable to answer the ideological self-placement question in the 1990s, but ideological awareness was higher in the 1990s than in the 1970s or 1980s.

One measure of ideological polarization is the difference between the proportions of Republicans and Democrats who consider themselves conservatives on the seven-point scale (see Figure 9). The low for this series was in 1972, the first year that the NES measured ideology on a seven-point scale. The high points are 1994 and 1996, with the values in the 1992-1998 period all being on the high side.

The source of this change is Republicans (Figure 9). In the 1970s and 1980s, only about half of Republicans considered themselves conservatives. That proportion went up in 1994 and 1996, and to a lesser extent in 1998. In part this was due to greater ideological awareness among Republicans those years. But it would also seem to be greater ideological polarization among Republicans, with fewer Republicans considering themselves liberals or moderates.

As to be expected, ideological polarization was more extreme among more sophisticated voters. Figure 9 includes the trend in ideological polarization for voters who have at least some college education. The degree of polarization for these voters is always higher than for the total set of respondents, and the increase over time is sharper than for the total sample. Their polarization level in 1972 was relatively low, but it was higher in the 1974-1990 period, and then climbed to new highs in the 1992-1996 period. There is substantial ideological polarization among the group for which it would be most expected, even if there is less polarization among citizens as a whole.

#### Reactions to Liberals and Conservatives

Feeling thermometer ratings of liberals and conservatives can be used as another measure of ideology. These thermometers have been used in the NES surveys since 1964. A summary measure on the NES Web site is a "conservatism index," computed as the difference between the average score given to Conservatives and the average score given to Liberals plus 50. The differences on this measure

between Republicans and Democrats are quite limited. Republican identifiers are always more positive to conservatives than to liberals, while Democratic identifiers are always slightly more positive to liberals than to conservatives (Figure 10). The Democrats gave more of an edge to liberals in later years, but the change is slight.

For a summary measure of party ideological polarization, we can take the difference in the average conservatism index for Republicans and Democrats. The low for this series was in 1968 (Figure 10). Our usual understanding is that the 1960s were an ideological period, but party polarization on ideology during that period was limited, possibly because the presence of conservative southern Democrats diluted that party's ideological purity. The high for this series was 1994, with high readings also for the two Clinton election years. The differences are not large, but party identifiers had become more polarized in their reactions to liberals and conservatives by the 1990s.

The change over time on the thermometer measure is much smaller than that on the ideological self-placement measure. This difference may be related to the lower level of missing data on the thermometer items. Many people who give "don't know" responses to the ideology self-placement question still rate liberals and conservatives on the thermometer scale, but their lack of ideological awareness may dilute the differences found on the thermometers.

The thermometer evidence actually fits well with the data from the seven-point ideology scales. Party ideological polarization on the seven-point scales was lowest in 1972, the first year that the seven-point scales were used. If the thermometer data were truncated to start at 1972, that also would be its low value. The implication is that, regardless of the measure used, ideological polarization of the parties

was low in the 1960s, went up a little by 1972, increased further in the 1980s, and is at a high in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

### Perception of Party Differences

The APSA Report assumed the public does not see the parties as different. Since 1952, the NES surveys have directly asked people whether there are important differences between the two parties. There is a very clear trend for presidential election years (Figure 11), with values below 55 percent through 1976 and values of at least 60 percent since 1984.<sup>4</sup> The public has become more certain that there are important differences between the parties, though a third of the electorate still does not see such differences. As to be expected, partisans are much more likely to see party differences than are Independents. Looking at only college educated voters, the proportion of the public who see differences between the parties is even higher, above 70 percent since the Reagan-Carter election of 1980.

### Summary

The APSA Report's call for more ideologically distinct parties was partially realized by the 1990s. The ideological differences between the parties that have become pronounced in Congress are echoed in the party-in-the-electorate. However, ideological polarization of the parties is far from complete, regardless of how ideology is measured. Even at their highs, all the series discussed in this

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<sup>3</sup> NES respondents are also asked to place the parties on seven-point ideology scales, allowing analysts to compute the difference in locations ascribed to the parties, though this measure is susceptible to partisans pushing the party they dislike to an ideological extreme.

<sup>4</sup> This question has also been asked in several midterm election surveys. Since it is necessarily affected by the campaign, though, its values for midterm elections are discontinuous with presidential election years, with values 4-34 percent lower than in the preceding presidential election year.

section still do not show strong ideological polarization. Ideology per se is of limited relevance to the public, so that many people do not respond in these terms.

What is most important, though, is the coincidence of two trends in the data reviewed in this paper. The 1990s are the high point both for partisan voting, as seen in the previous section, and for ideological polarization, as seen in this section. The party-in-the-electorate is voting more in accord with party responsibility notions, even if partisan voting is more prevalent than ideological polarization.

### The Party-in-the-Electorate as a Basis for More Responsible Parties

Having surveyed the history of the party-in-the-electorate concept, looked at the Downs perspective, and examined change in party identification and party polarization in the second half of the twentieth century, we can now look directly at the relationship between party-in-the-electorate and party responsibility. This requires reexamining the original Downs conclusion that parties will converge, followed by looking at the role of the attentive public in promoting party divergence.

#### Party Divergence under a Modified Version of the Downs Model

The APSA Report called for ideological divergence between the parties as a basis for more responsible parties. As already mentioned, a few years later Anthony Downs (1957) proved that two-party competition along an ideological dimension leads to convergence rather than divergence.

However, several factors lead to modification of that conclusion.

First, multidimensional spatial competition would generally not lead to an equilibrium solution (McKelvey 1976), in which case convergence would not be expected. However, if we are dealing with Euclidean space, the effective competition dimension can be seen as the line connecting the two parties

in the space, returning the model to basic unidimensionality. Enelow and Hinich (1984, chap. 4) similarly distinguish between issues and "predictive dimensions," such that multiple issues can be related to the same predictive dimension in which case what matters is the median position on the predictive dimension.<sup>5</sup>

A second factor to consider is the possibility of selective abstention. Ideological extremists can decide not to vote as a way of punishing their party if it moves too far from them. This logic pulls the parties slightly apart even in unidimensional competition, as each moves slightly away from center to mollify its ideological extreme (Garvey 1966). If either party moves too far away from the center because of its extreme wing, the other can win in a landslide, as happened in the 1964 and 1972 presidential elections. However, a slight shift away from the center by both parties is not enough to hurt either party's chances for victory, and may be enough to keep ideological extremists from abstaining.

A third factor to consider is that candidates may care about policy matters. Downs had assumed that parties only seek to win elections, but Wittman (1983) showed that convergence will not occur if the candidates instead care about policy. Calvert (1985), however, proved that the divergence would still be small because of the effect of the electorate pushing candidates toward the center.

The fourth and most important factor to consider is the nomination process. Candidates have to obtain their party's nomination, and Downsean logic implies that the optimal strategy for a candidate (at least once the race has settled down to two contenders) is to move to the median position of those who choose the party's nominee. Hypothetically, once the nomination is secured, the nominee can try to move quickly to the median position of the entire electorate, but that amount of movement is unlikely to appear authentic. It is more likely that the candidate will move back somewhat closer to the median

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<sup>5</sup> However, they also deal with the case of multiple predictive dimensions, in which case there might not be an equilibrium position.

voter position but not get there entirely. Thus a nomination process has the effect of leading to some divergence between the candidates even with unidimensional politics.<sup>6</sup>

The implication of this analysis is that candidate divergence is to be expected under the mildest modifications of the Downs model. However, the amount of divergence to be expected is minimal, certainly less than the APSA Report advocated. Yet the amount of party divergence that would be expected under these modifications of the Downs model is of the order of magnitude that currently exists, according to the data presented above.

#### Party Divergence at the Level of the Attentive Public

The APSA Report assumed that the public did not see the political parties as standing for different programs, but the Report was written before extensive surveys were available to provide empirical evidence on this assumption. In fact, the data show that a more nuanced view is necessary. There certainly is not complete ideological polarization between Republican and Democratic identifiers, but there are ideological differences and these have grown, especially for the attentive public.

The different degrees of divergence at different levels of the electorate provide another basis for party responsibility. The general public's ability to understand ideological competition is limited; some people view politics in this way, while others do not. More people will respond to particular issues, which may or may not line up along the basic ideological dimension. Because of the public's inability to relate fully to ideological matters, it becomes possible for parties and candidates to rely on ideology as a selective campaign appeal. Within limits, they can take ideological stands to impress the attentive public, while knowing that most of the public will not notice those stands enough for non-convergence

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<sup>6</sup> Aldrich (1995, 180-92) also shows that the existence of party activists leads to equilibrium positions for candidates in which there will not be complete convergence between the parties.

positions to hurt them. Ideological stands can be used to mobilize supporters, while not having to worry too much that those stands will lose support among the general public. In short, it may be possible for candidates to have their cake and eat it too: they can diverge somewhat without paying the costs for that divergence.

The greater perceived divergence for the attentive public was evident in Figures 9 and 11 when looking at ideological polarization among voters who have at least some college education. The polarization would be weaker for non-voters as well as for those voters who have never gone to college. Similar results would be obtained if the attentive public were defined in other ways, such as focusing on people who are interested in politics, who follow the campaign in the media, or who have greater amounts of political knowledge. People who do not have these characteristics are less likely ideologically aware enough to punish their preferred party when it takes ideological stands.<sup>7</sup>

The existence of financial contributors provides another basis for party divergence. By the 1990s, direct mailing to potential financial contributors became a widespread tactic of interest groups allied with parties. These groups sent out mailings to potential contributors on a variety of topics, from the importance of passing a constitutional amendment making English the official language to both sides of the gun control debate. People who contribute to one of these groups end up on the mailing list of other groups of the same ideological persuasion. These groups generally had alliances with the parties, often by having the solicitation letters be written by Republican or Democratic members of Congress. The very act of soliciting funds on the basis of these appeals has the effect of promoting party divergence. Since funds are being generated on the basis of these appeals, there is an incentive to bring

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<sup>7</sup> The only cost that occurs for limited polarization is when ideological terms pick up negative connotations. Back in the 1950s, the term liberal was more acceptable than the term conservative, but that changed to the point that George Bush could attack Michael Dukakis in 1988 on the basis of the "L-word." Nowadays the term conservative is more acceptable than the term liberal, and surveys consistently show that more people

the issues to floor votes in Congress so the members can show contributors that they are attempting to pass (or block) the legislation of interest. The parties vote differently in Congress on these issues, so the contributors who care about the issue see party differences on that issue and possibly on related issues. Compromise legislation becomes more difficult to craft since each party has a financial incentive to maintain the issue; party convergence would not yield as much financial contributions as divergence does.

The net result of these considerations is that the existence of an attentive public provides a basis for party divergence. The divergence is not extreme, but it allows the parties to stand for different programs, just as the APSA Report desired.

### Summary

Some ideological polarization between the parties is compatible both with reasonable modifications of the Downs model and with empirical evidence. Strategic parties need not converge to the center as Downs had originally predicted, nor need the limited public awareness of ideology prevent parties from appealing to the attentive public on the basis of divergent ideology and programs.

### Conclusions

The 1950 APSA Report largely ignored the party-in-the-electorate and, in so doing, missed an important basis for party responsibility. The party-in-the-electorate has actually been reinvigorated in the five decades since the APSA Report, with the decline in party identification rates largely stemmed,

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consider themselves conservatives than liberals. As a result most liberal politicians would prefer to be called moderate, which has the effect of minimizing ideological polarization.

the development of true two-party politics in the South, and a return to partisan polarization in voting. Meanwhile, polarization between the parties in Congress has been accompanied by Republican and Democratic identifiers becoming somewhat more polarized ideologically and more people seeing differences between the parties. The limited amount of ideological polarization is what is to be expected given a modified version of Downs's model of ideological voting. The existence of an attentive public is what permits party divergence. The parties can diverge enough to satisfy the people who care (the more educated with more political knowledge, those interested in politics who follow campaigns, and the people who participate in nominations and financial contributions) while not diverging enough to lose votes among the public at large.

In retrospect, the distortions produced by the one-party South were responsible for many of the problems that the authors of the APSA Report saw with the party system of the time. The presence of that conservative bloc in the Democratic Party blurred that party's ideological image. When the Republican nominee in 1964 cast a vote against the Civil Rights Act of that year, a clear message was sent to southern whites as well as to blacks. The partisanship of southern white voters correspondingly changed, electing many conservative Republicans to Congress and causing many of the remaining southern Democrats in Congress to be more beholden to the liberals in their districts. The result was to make the Republican Party in Congress more conservative, while leaving the congressional Democratic Party more liberal. The Reagan Presidency labelled the Republican Party more clearly conservative, as did the Republican Congress in the 1990s. The half-century preceding the writing of the APSA Report was generally a period of unified government, while the half-century following has been a period of divided government, which has made disputes between the parties more prominent. Party differences have become clearer to the electorate, encouraging the parties to take different stands on more issues.

Thus, realignment in the South had a snowballing effect, leading to movement toward the type of differences in party programs that the APSA Report favored.

The remaining question is how this projects into the future. We have seen how trends can be temporary, as when the diminished partisan impact in the 1970s was largely reversed by the 1990s. Is there reason to believe the increased ideological polarization of the parties is more permanent? There was more reason for party differences when the economy was weak, when there were large government deficits, and when the nation was in the Cold War. Still, party differences on social issues remain, as well as differences as to whether it is more important to cut taxes or institute new government programs. As long as the parties duel in Congress and across branches of government on such issues, there is likely to be partisan ideological polarization among party activists and the party-in-the-electorate is likely to continue to perceive party differences. Yet it would be a mistake to view this as a permanent development. Ideological polarization could diminish if the Republicans nominate a more moderate presidential candidate or if the Republicans in Congress take more moderate positions. The lesson of the past fifty years is that party differences can emerge in our political system through the interaction of the party-in-government with the party-in-the-electorate. This is no guarantee of party responsibility in the future, but it should be taken as an encouraging sign.

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FIGURE 1. Partisan Identification Levels, 1952-98

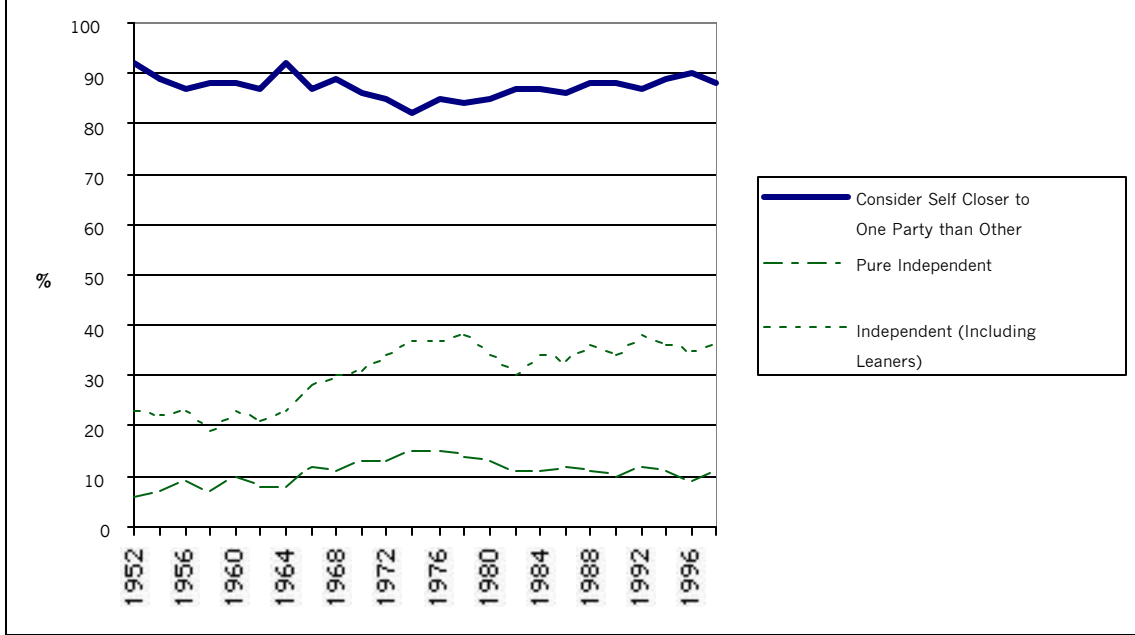
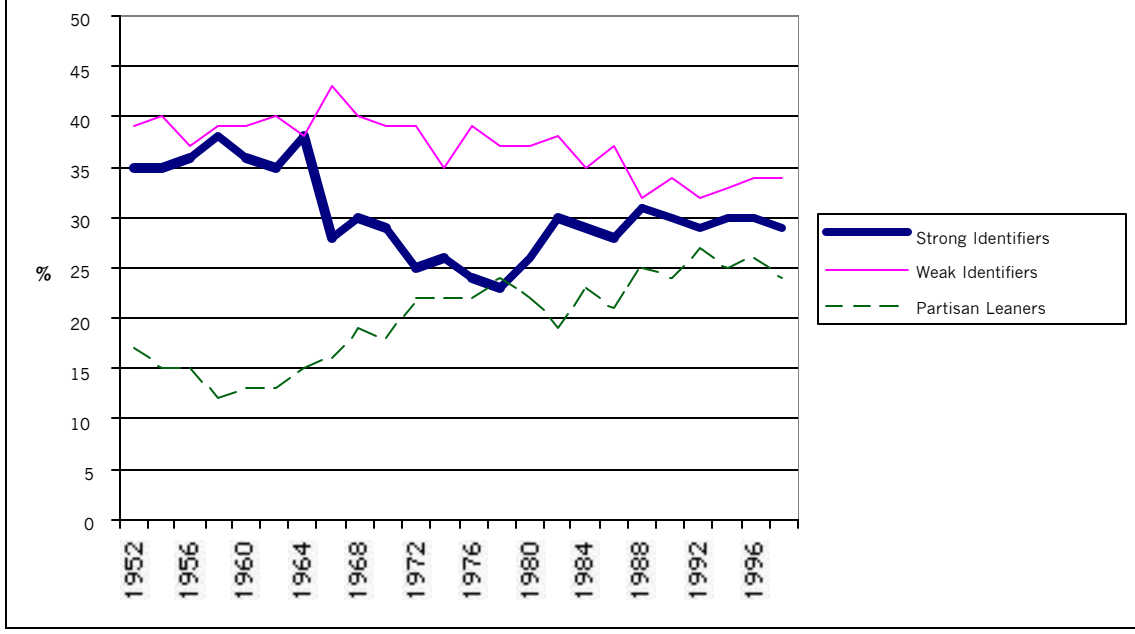
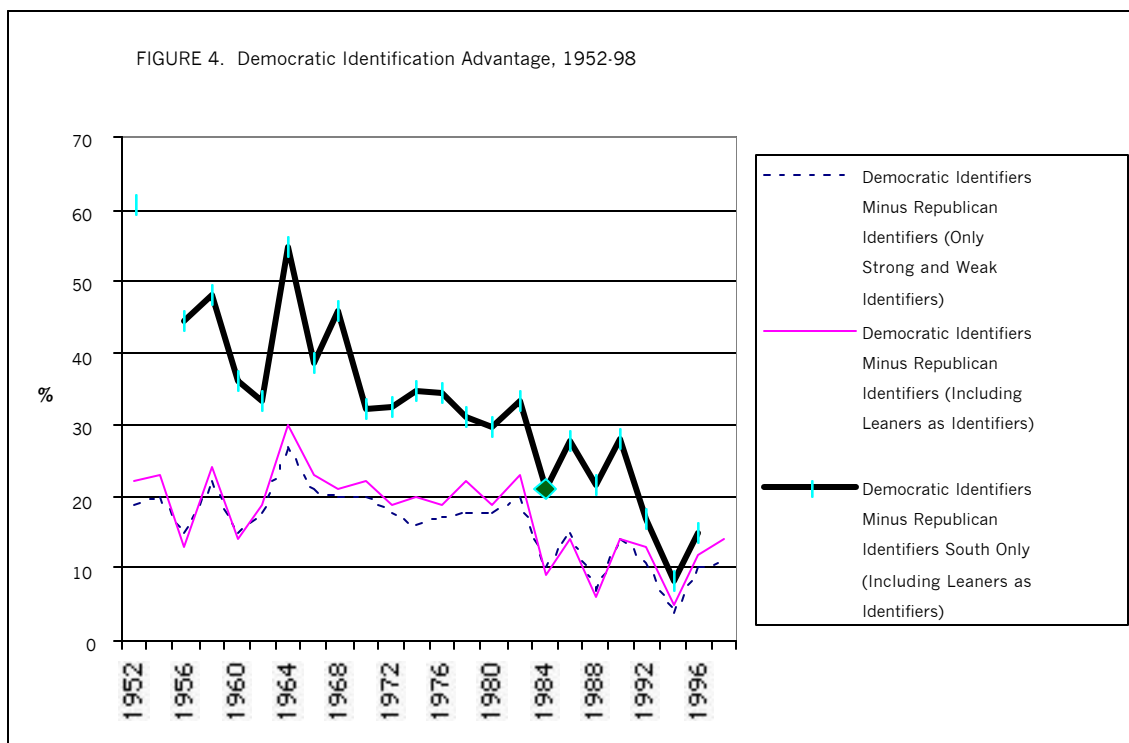
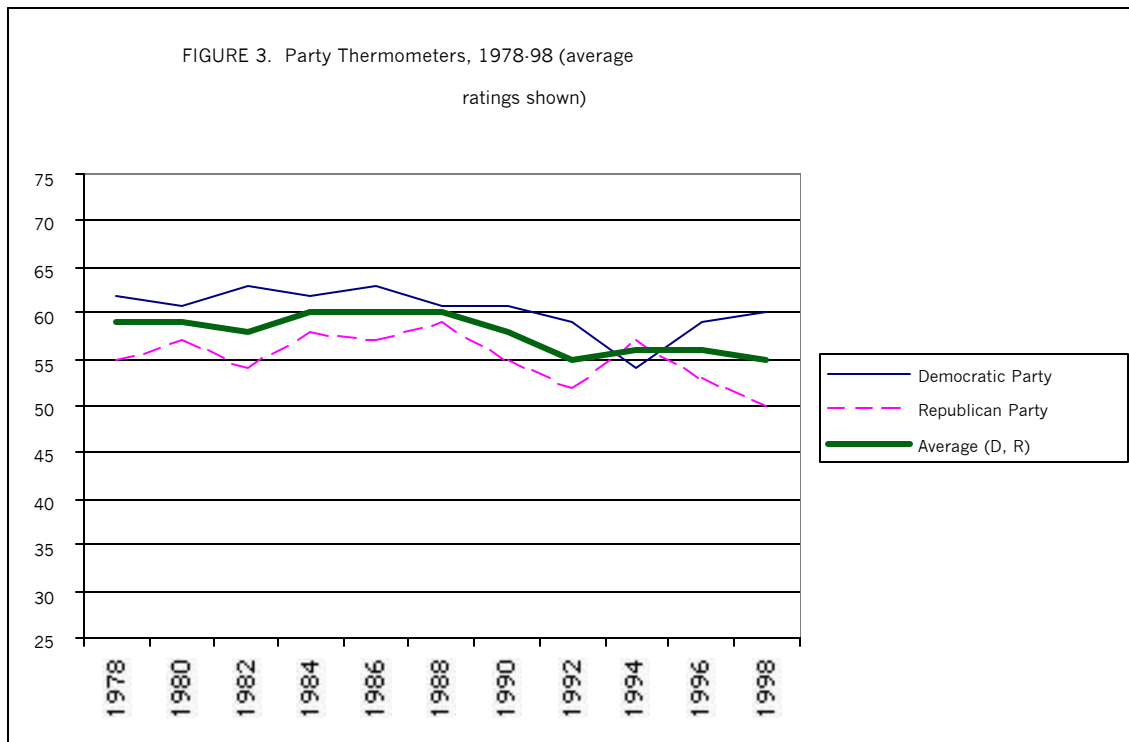
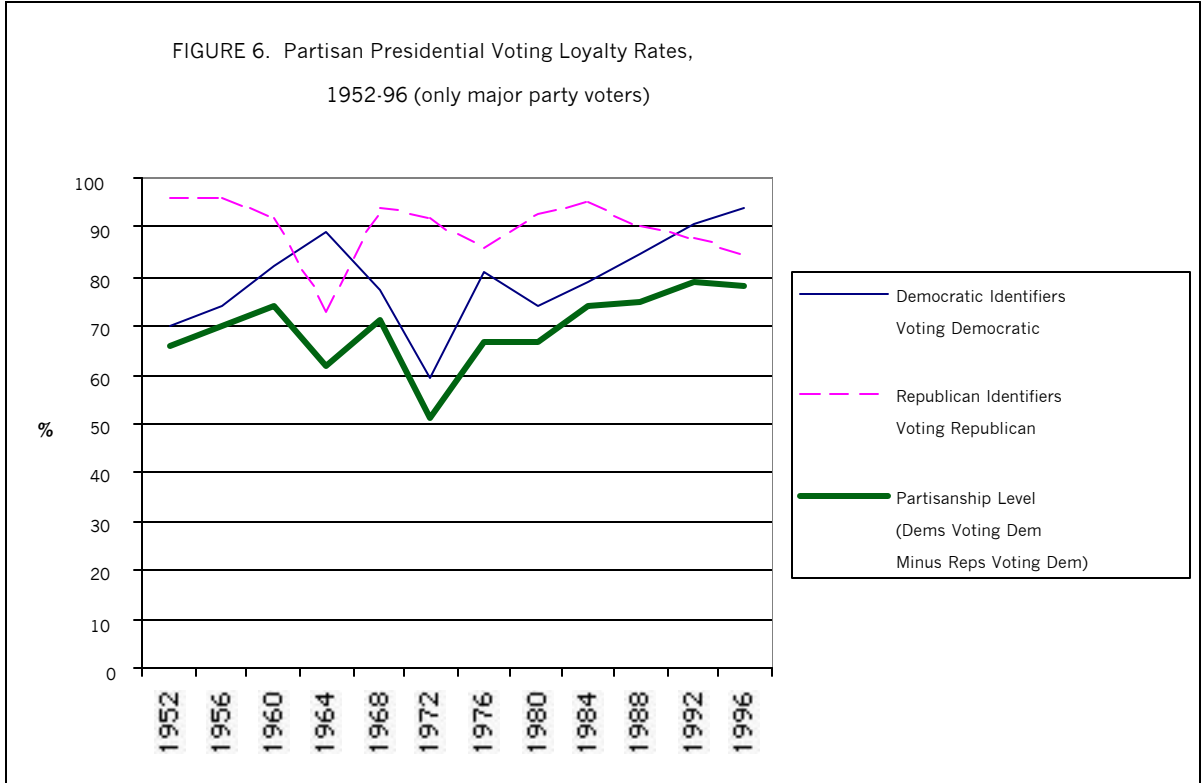
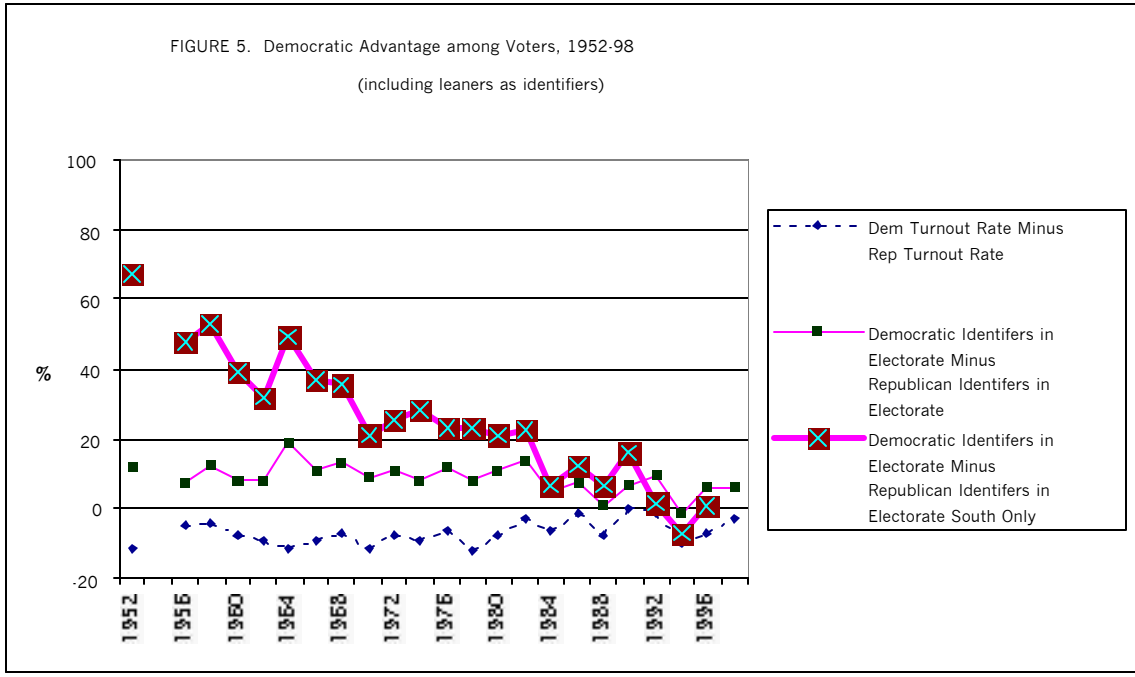
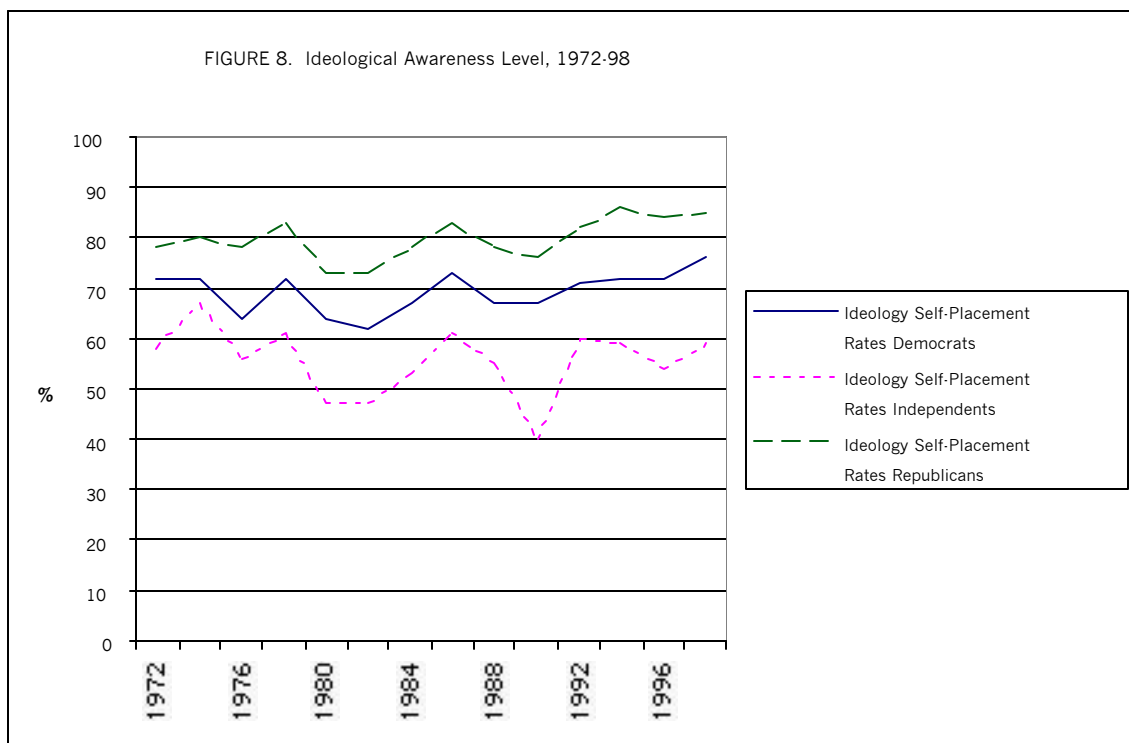
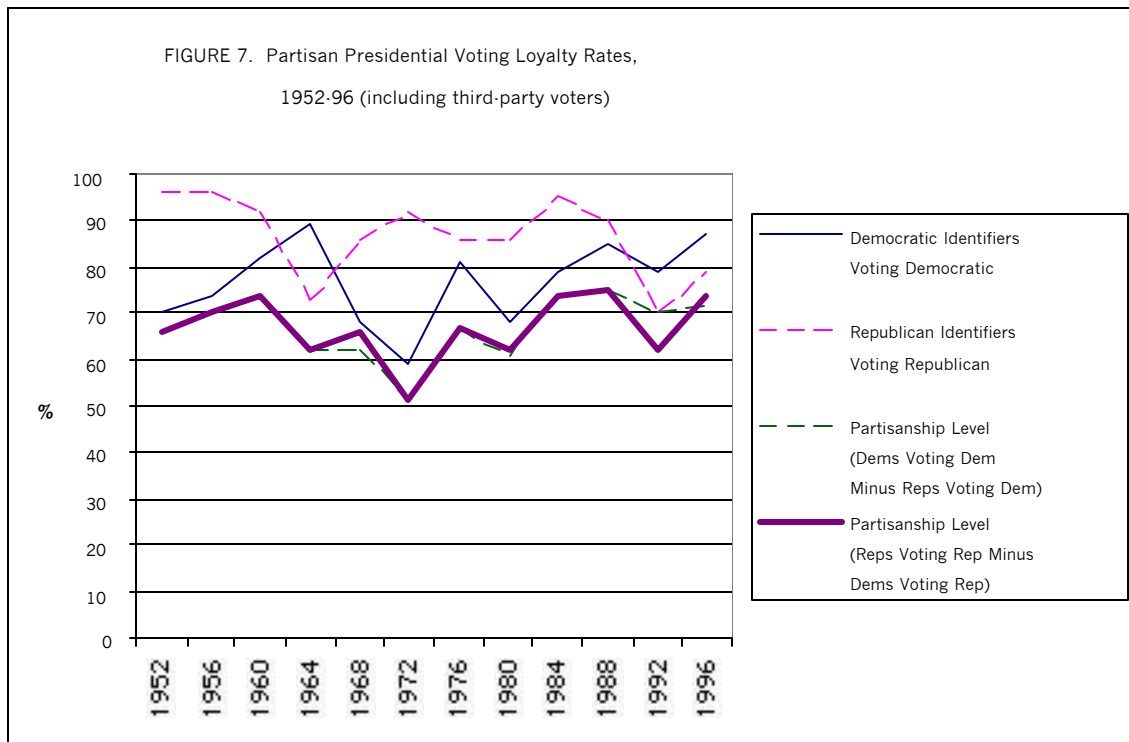


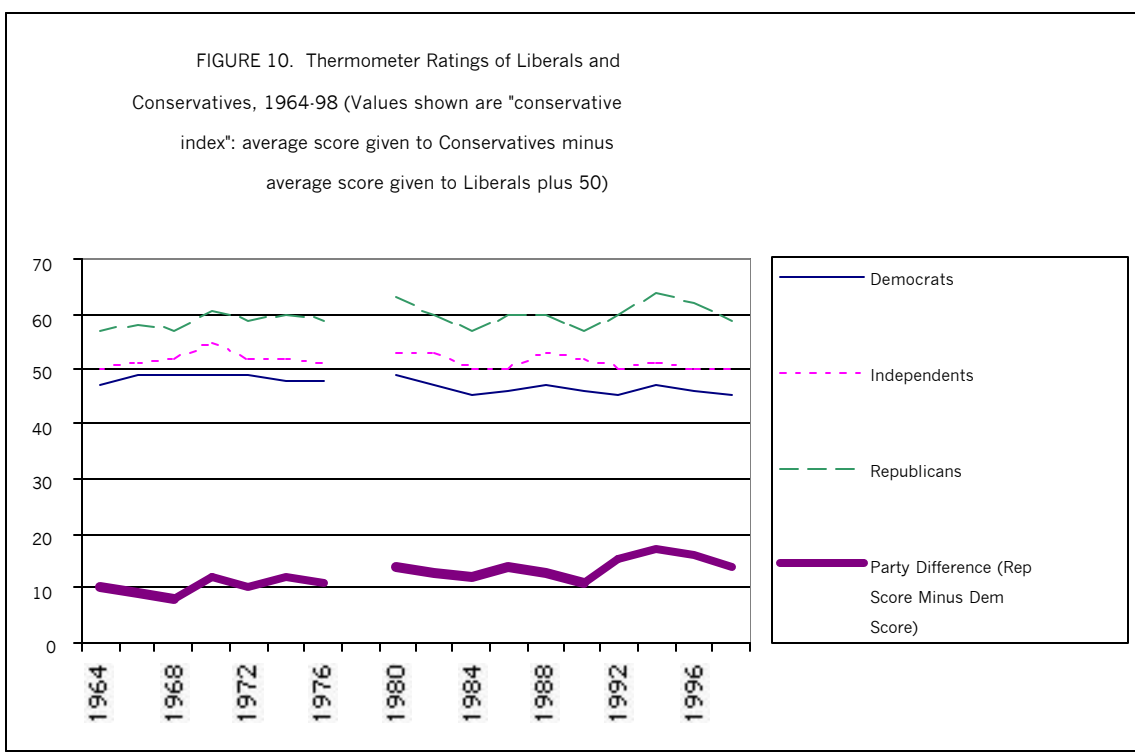
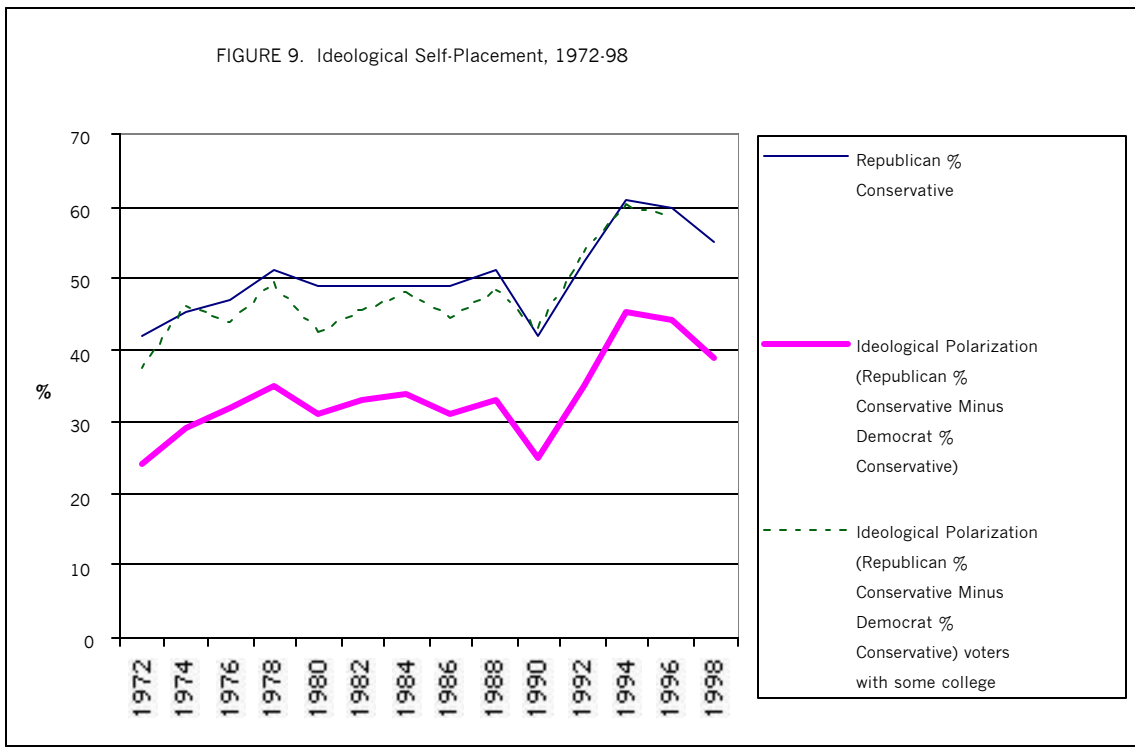
FIGURE 2. Strength of Identification, 1952-98



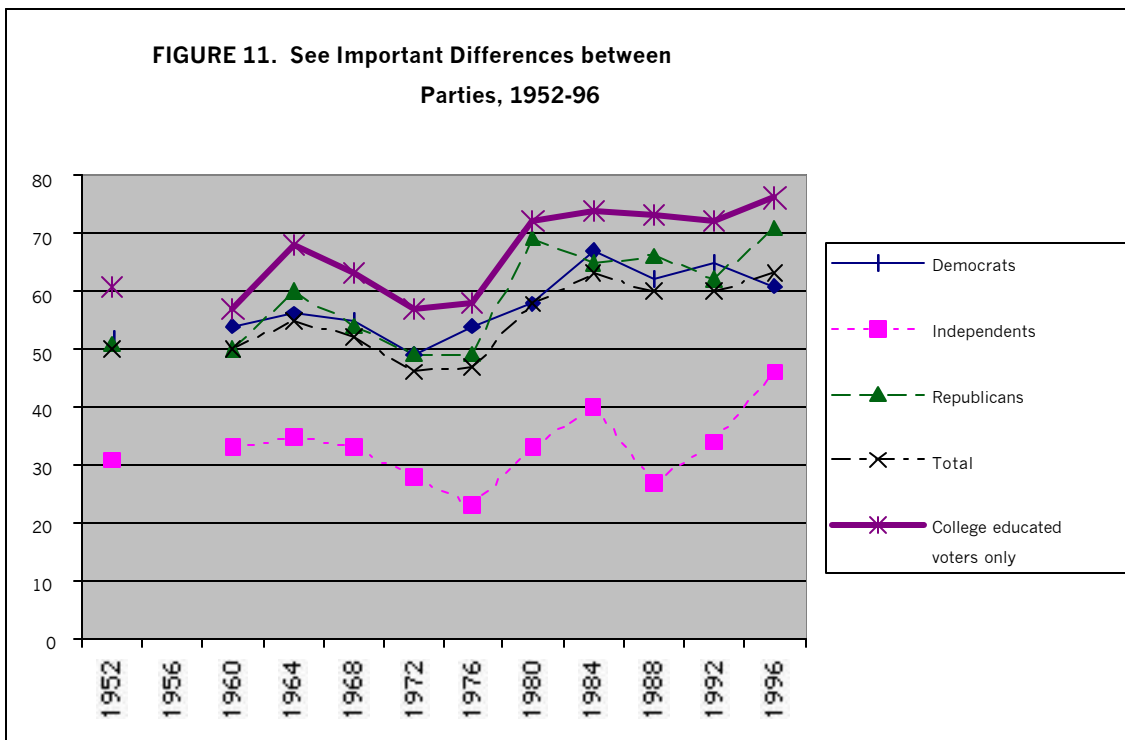








**FIGURE 11. See Important Differences between  
Parties, 1952-96**



## Appendix. Correlations of Series over Time

	r with time
Figure 1: Partisan identification levels	
Consider self closer to one party than other	-.163
Pure independent	.445
Independent, including leaners	.837
Figure 2: Strength of identification	
Strong identifiers	-.554
Weak identifiers	-.775
Partisan leaners	.886
Figure 3: Party thermometers	
Democratic Party thermometer average	-.628
Republican Party thermometer average	-.504
Average thermometer ratings of two parties	-.757
Figure 4: Democratic identification advantage	
Dem identifiers minus Rep identifiers, only strong and weak identifiers	-.700
Dem identifiers minus Rep identifiers, including leaners as identifiers	-.613
Dem identifiers minus Rep identifiers, South only -- including leaners as identifiers	-.879
Figure 5: Democratic advantage among voters	
Dem turnout rate minus turnout rate	.420
Dem electorate minus Rep electorate	-.546
Dem electorate minus Rep electorate, South only	-.943
Figure 6: Partisan presidential voting loyalty rates, major party voters only	
Dem identifiers voting Democratic	.518
Rep identifiers voting Republican	-.224
Partisanship level: Dems voting Dem minus Reps voting Dem	.463
Figure 7: Partisan presidential voting loyalty rates, including third-party voters	
Dem identifiers voting Democratic	.314
Rep identifiers voting Republican	-.479
Partisanship level: Dems voting Dem minus Reps voting Dem	.261
Partisanship level: Reps voting Rep minus Dems voting Rep	.155
Figure 8: Ideological awareness level	
Democrats	.339
Independents	-.148
Republicans	.516
Figure 9: Ideological self-placement	
Republican % conservative	.710
Ideological polarization: Rep % conservative minus Dem % conservative	.675
Ideological polarization, voters with at least some college education	.753
Figure 10: Thermometer ratings of liberals and conservatives (Conservative index = average score given to Cons minus average score given to Libs plus 50)	
Democrats	-.760
Independents	-.332
Republicans	.409
Party difference: Rep score minus Dem score	.817
Figure 11: Important differences in what parties stand for	
Democrats	.746
Independents	.351
Republicans	.737
Total	.731
Voters with at least some college education	.749