

## The myth of the independent voter

How many times have we heard friends say, "The Republicans and the Democrats are all alike. They'll do anything for power and control. They can't even sit down in the same room together let alone find agreement on even the most basic issues. I'm finished with both of them. I'm an Independent." The national dislike for both parties ebbs and flows depending on who's in charge of the country and how radically the administration is governing, but the basic sentiment of dissatisfaction and disgust seems to be a lingering one.

Many pollsters and political research organizations religiously track and record how Independents feel about issues and candidates and how they react to politics in general. Their hope is to find some common threads that help to clarify just who Independents really are and how they really think. Why? Because they believe that Independents hold the keys to the political 'kingdom' and by appealing to them they can win elections.

Major polling organizations like Gallup and research organizations like Ballot Access News (BAN) have been following Independents for many years and have come to some important conclusions. One of them is that there are precious few voters that are true Independents - people who do not lean Left or Right but are really agnostic about both the Republican and Democrat parties and who base their votes solely on candidates' positions on issues that matter to them.

There is one major difference on how both Gallup and BAN come to their conclusions, however. Gallup surveys voters who 'self-identify' as Independents while BAN only tracks those who are registered as Independents, and the data for both groups can vary significantly. For example, Gallup posits that there is a paucity of true Independents and that most of the voters they survey that claim to be independent are actually pretty partisan though they won't come right out and say so (Gallup believes that three out of four Independents actually lean Left or Right because of their answers to key survey questions). On the other hand, BAN only tracks voters that have officially declared themselves as registered Independents in 31 states, not all 50.

Both organizations continue to 'strip mine' these groups and their findings do reveal some interesting facts about them but also tell us something about both major parties. For example, during the presidency of Donald Trump, party registrations stayed pretty static and didn't shift in any appreciable way. That's a stark contrast to voter registrations just prior to Obama's presidency in 2008 when Democrat registrations peaked at 43.62%. Back in 2004, under George W. Bush, Republicans' peaked at 32.79%.

Since October 2016, GOP registrations dropped by only .50% while the Dems' dropped by 1% (though the Democrats still represent 39.66% of all registered voters). A particularly interesting statistic is that as of February 2020 there were more registered Independents than Republicans. According to BAN, there are now 29.09% registered Independents and 28.87% registered Republicans (back in 2004 the Republicans outnumbered the Independents by 10%).

That begs an obvious question or questions. The first is, "Which is the best way to track Independents - through surveys or by official registration?" The second is, "Is the growth of Independents due to overall dissatisfaction with the two major political parties or does their frustration go even deeper than party platforms (like an ingrained dissatisfaction with leadership, a breakdown in our society's values that are reflected in the laws our elected officials pass or is it something even more general like a massive distrust in our political system?)

Are the Independents trying to send both political parties a message or are they just trying to sit on the fence because of a lack of information on key issues, a yet-to-be-defined personal position on the issues or information (or mis-information) overload? Either way, the Independents are making their voices heard by keeping their powder dry and playing their cards close to the vest. This is, understandably, very frustrating for political campaigns that need to tailor their messaging to this growing voter group and presents a formidable challenge for their candidates.

If we look at current 'right way/wrong way' polling about the direction that America (the Biden Administration) is taking, it is apparent that all voters (69%) believe we're on the wrong path - and that includes Independents. If something tangible is not done quickly by the Administration and the Congress to stem the rising tide of inflation, solve the border/energy/health crises AND convince Americans of all political stripes that their government has a plan of action (and that it will work), we may see a massive upset at the polls in November of 2022, leaving the Republicans in charge of the House and possibly the Senate.

If that happens, will it please the Independents? That is an open question at this point, but polling organizations are probably burning the midnight oil to find out. While there is value in keeping one's options open, we are living in dangerously-challenging times that demand citizens to take a side. History teaches us that no one can remain neutral for long without suffering the consequences of their unwillingness to step out from the shadows. Holocaust survivor (of both Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps) Elie Wiesel may have said it best: "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor not the tormented." I would add that fence-sitting only gives the fence-sitter a false sense of security...and a bad case of hemorrhoids.

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