

Political Independents:

Who They Are and What Impact They Have on Politics Today

By Dr. George Hawley, Assistant Professor of Political Science, The University of Alabama



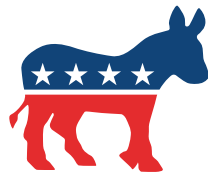
Political Independents

In a previous report for Voter Gravity, we briefly touched on the subject of political “independents” – those voters who do not admit to belonging to a particular political party. Because this subject is so important, and of such interest to campaigns, we will here revisit this issue. We will learn some of the key characteristics of independent voters, and consider the recent trends among independents.

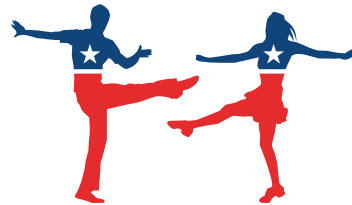
Listening to media commentary about political independents, one could infer that independents are the most important and coveted category of voters. Such a view makes sense, as one might reasonably expect that the independent vote is perennially up for grabs, whereas partisans can be expected to consistently support the same party regardless of the various candidates’

attributes or ephemeral political circumstances. ***On the other hand, the importance of swing voters may be overstated if swing voters are less likely to vote, and if the number of true independents is smaller than it first appears.*** Further, some have argued that both parties have recently neglected independents and swing voters, and have instead focused on targeting their respective electoral bases and raising turnout among strong liberals and strong conservatives – and presumably increasing partisan polarization as a result.

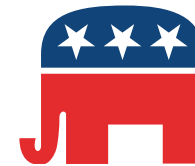
The following will consider what the political science literature and polling data tells us about political independents.



DEMOCRAT



SWING VOTERS



REPUBLICAN

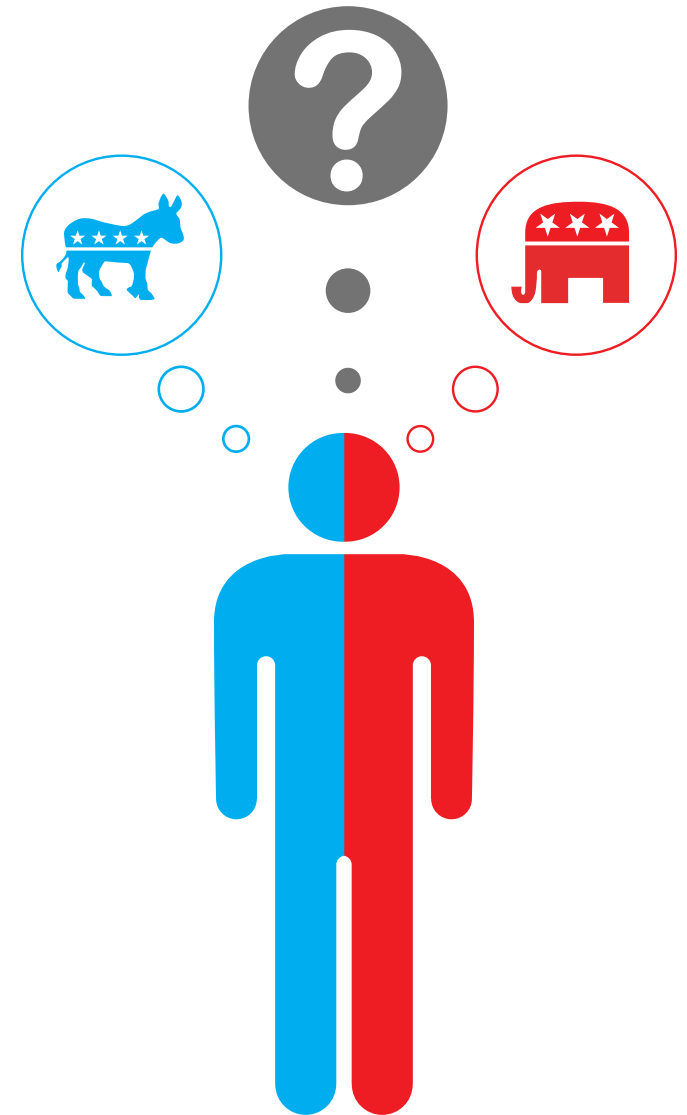
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What is a political independent?

Superficially, we can describe a political independent as someone who does not consider himself or herself to belong to a political party. In survey research we typically measure this based on self-categorization; respondents are asked if they belong to one of the parties or whether they are independent. This can be problematic, as the actual political behavior of these respondents may not be congruent with their self-categorization. In many states, it is possible to access lists of party registration, which can be a useful tool for both campaigns and scholars. Again, however, failing to officially belong to a political party does not mean one does not exhibit consistent partisan voting behavior.

It is not unreasonable to define independents as voters without strong party affiliations. However, this purely negative definition tells us little about the set of attitudes independents possess. Writing in 1988, Jack Dennis attempted to formulate a precise definition of political independence.¹ Dennis argued that there were four clusters of attitudes that are associated with political independence:

- 1) **Political autonomy** – that is, they take pride in their own independent thinking and individualism when it comes to politics
- 2) **Anti-partyism** – they have a strong dislike of political parties and political partisans
- 3) **Partisan neutrality** – they are indifferent to the major parties, without a preference for one over the other
- 4) **Partisan variability** – they are inconsistent in their political attitudes or political behavior. Dennis was not arguing that all independents shared all four of these characteristics. In fact, research such as this indicates that independents should be disaggregated according to their cluster of attitudes.



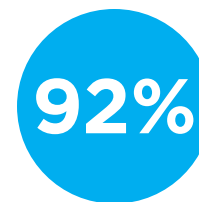
Partisans are your most reliable voters, but many “independents” are closet partisans

As we noted in a previous Voter Gravity report, party identification is a key predictor of political behavior and vote choice. This discovery was one of the most important contributions of *The American Voter*,² published in 1960 and one of the foundational texts for the study of political behavior. We know a few things about party identification: it is generally stable over time, and it predicts how most people will vote in most elections. According to national exit polls for the 2012 presidential election, 92 percent of Democrats voted for Obama and 93 percent of Republicans voted for Romney.

As the number of self-described political independents increased in the later decades of the 20th century, there was some speculation that we were entering a post-partisan era of American politics. In 1972, David Broder published an influential book titled, *The Party's Over*, in which he speculated that the two major parties may soon no longer have a monopoly on higher office.³

The announcement of the death of partisanship was obviously premature. *While the number of people who called themselves political independents was large and growing quickly, the number of people who behaved like genuine independents – characterized by behaviors like split-ticket voting, voting for candidates of different parties in different years, etc. – was not.* As we noted before, there is an important follow up question to ask after asking survey respondents to describe themselves as Republican, Democrat, or independent: **if you are an independent, do you lean toward the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or neither?** Those independents who admitted that they leaned toward one of the major parties typically voted in a manner similar to admitted partisans.⁴ In reality, there are very few American voters who truly have no preference for one party over the other.⁵

Party identification is generally stable over time, and it predicts how most people will vote in most elections.

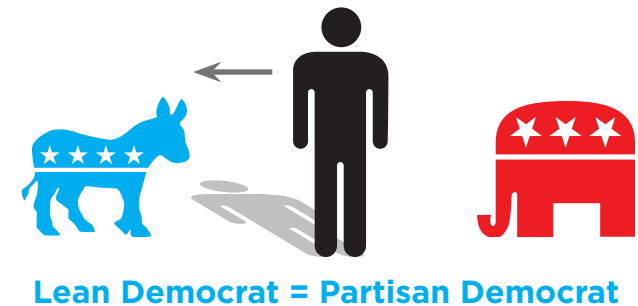


Democrats voted
for Obama

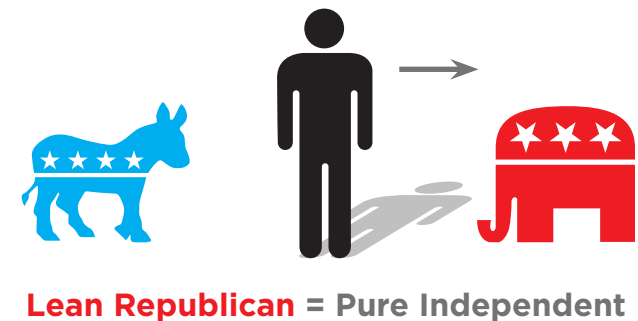


Republicans voted
for Romney

While this description of independents is now widely accepted by political scientists, it is worth noting that not all scholars agree with that independent leaners are closet partisans and should not be conceptually disaggregated from those who immediately identify with a political party. Shaun Bowler and his co-authors, for example, argued that independent leaners are more attitudinally distinct from partisans than other research suggests.⁶ They are similar to partisans in their voting behavior only because our two-party system does not offer them a compelling alternative. Morris Fiorina has noted that independent leaners are less stable in their partisan self-identification than weak partisans, and they have different policy preferences than weak party identifiers – though this difference is not large.⁷



There is also evidence that independents that lean toward the Republicans are different from independents that lean toward the Democrats. **Zachary Cook's research indicates that independents that leaned toward the Democratic Party were more like partisan Democrats, but independents who leaned toward the Republican Party were similar to pure independents.**⁸ He argued that this was because independents that leaned toward the GOP were less economically conservative than the party, and thus felt more cross pressure than independents that leaned toward the Democrats.

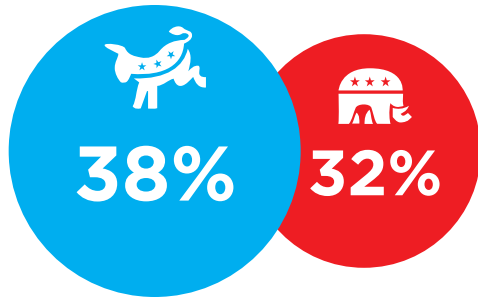


Regardless of how independent leaners differ in terms of attitudes from admitted partisans, they differ little when it comes to vote choice. **Thus canvassers who ask for party identification should always ask independents whether they lean toward one of the major parties.** Not all independents are the same, and independents that lean toward your opponent's party are very unlikely to vote for your candidate.

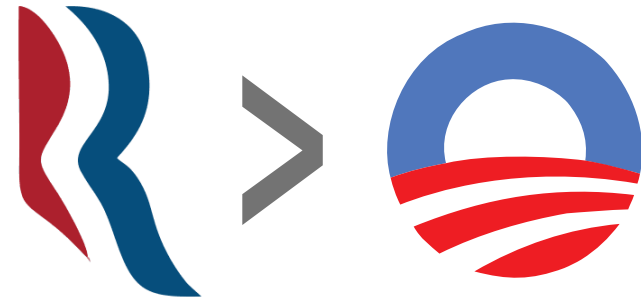
Republicans cannot win presidential elections without a sizable advantage over Democrats among independents

Very few self-described Democrats will vote for a Republican in a given election. Similarly, few Republicans vote for a Democrat. There is more variation among independents in different election cycles. Unfortunately for the GOP, the Democratic Party has typically enjoyed a sizable advantage over Republicans when it comes to party identification. According to 2012 exit polls, 38 percent of respondents described themselves as Democrats. Only 32 percent described themselves as Republicans – we

will see below that the number of Republicans may have since dropped even lower. Assuming neither party has much of a chance of winning converts from the opposing party, Republican candidates need to win beat Democratic candidates among independent voters by a substantial margin. In 2012, Mitt Romney beat Barack Obama by five percentage points among independents and still lost the election.



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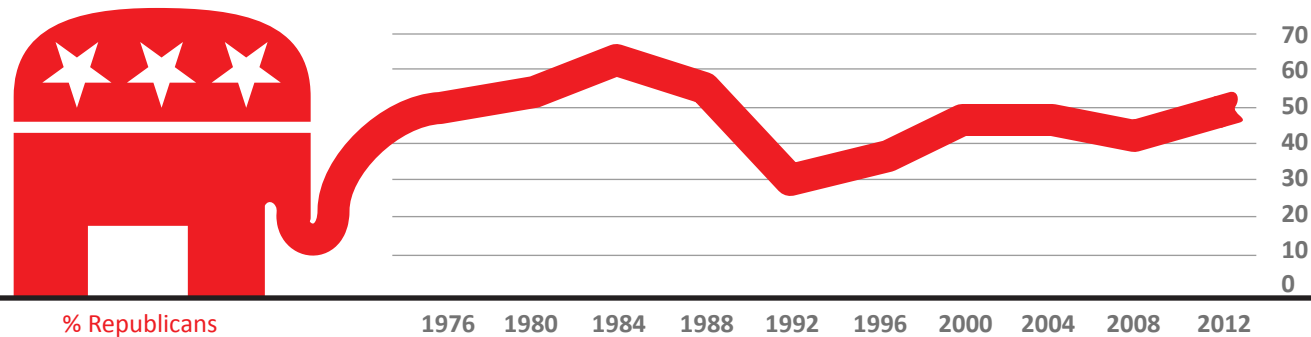
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The number of self-described independents is increasing, and this growth is at the GOP's expense

According to a Gallup poll released in January of 2014, the number of political independents in the United States was at a record high.⁹ Specifically, the percentage of Americans who identified as independent was 42 percent, the highest percentage since Gallup began asking this question in the 1980s. Most of that growth was at the expense of Republican identification. This same series of polls estimated that only 25

percent of Americans identified as Republicans – down from 34 percent in 2004. Thirty-one percent of Americans identified as Democrats, which is down from its 2008 peak of 36 percent. The Gallup report speculated that this growth of self-described independents was due to “Americans’ record or near-record negative views of the two major U.S. parties, of Congress, and their low level of trust in government more generally.”

Vote Choice Among Independents, 1976 – 2013

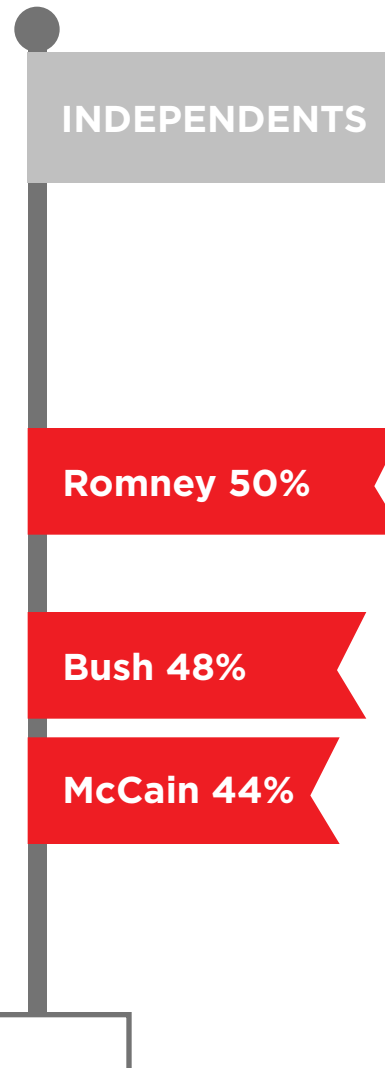


In 2012, the GOP improved its performance among independents, but it needs to do better

The Roper Center, which maintains a database of presidential exit polls, includes polls that provide the party identification of respondents. Using these data, we can examine the trend in vote choice in presidential elections among self-described independents.

We see immediately that Romney performed reasonably well among self-described independents, earning a higher share than McCain or Bush. *In fact, Romney was the first Republican presidential candidate since 1988 to win 50 percent or more of the independent vote.* While this is encouraging news for Republican operatives, it is important to know that, going forward, the Republican Party will have to either substantially increase the number of Americans that identify with the party or gain an even greater share of the independent vote if it wishes to remain competitive at the national level.

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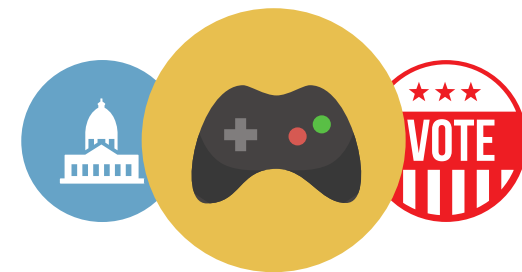
Independents pay less attention to politics

Instinctively, many Americans will think about political independents as a normative ideal. That is, we tend to think highly of people who dispassionately look at issues and candidates without regard for party labels or ideological classification. To many of us, political independence is associated with thoughtfulness and unprejudiced thinking. **In reality, political independents tend to be people who do not care very much and do not pay very much attention.**

To demonstrate this, we can turn to the 2012 American National Election Study. This survey asked respondents the following question: “How often do you pay attention to government and politics?” The results of this question, broken down by partisan group, are below.

How often do you pay attention to what’s going on in government and politics?

	Republican	Independents	Democrats
Always	20.65	13.85	15.76
Most of the time	33.84	31.42	30.43
About half the time	19.38	23.77	22.26
Some of the time	25.36	27.36	29.2
Never	0.77	3.59	2.34



We see that, compared to Republicans, independents were much less likely to claim they pay attention to government and politics all or most of the time. They were also slightly less likely to do so than Democrats. Your typical independent is not closely monitoring political news, and likely has little interest in overly wonkish discussions about specific policies.

On most issues, independents are less knowledgeable than partisans

The above findings may be unfair to independents, however. After all, just because a person claims to follow the news closely does not indicate that they actually do so, or that they have more political knowledge.

A 2012 study by the Pew Research Center allows us to consider this possibility.¹⁰ This survey asked a series of simple questions about the two major political parties, and disaggregated the results by party identification. The survey asked respondents to name the party of important political figures, to name the symbols associated with the major parties, and name the policy positions of the major parties.

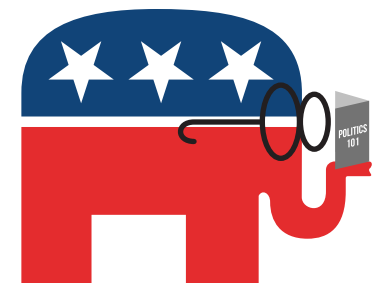
The results indicated that Republicans, on average, are much more knowledgeable than Democrats and independents on most issues. The difference between Democrats and independents was not as large, but Democrats also tended to know more about politics than independents.

Before Republicans pat themselves on the back for their higher average level of knowledge about politics, however, it is important to remember that part of this finding is due to other differences between Republicans, Democrats, and independents. Republicans are also, on average, older and wealthier than other partisan groups, and this partially explains these differences in knowledge.

The finding that independents are less knowledgeable and engaged than partisans is not new. In fact, it was a key discovery noted in *The American Voter*:

The ideal of the Independent citizen, attentive to politics, concerned with the course of government, who weighs the rival appeals of a campaign and reaches a judgment that is unswayed by partisan prejudice, has had such a vigorous history in the tradition of political reform and has such a hold on civic education today that one could easily suppose that a habitual partisan has the more limited interest and concern with politics. But if the usual image of the Independent voter is intended as more than a normative ideal, it fits poorly the characteristics of the Independents in our samples. Far from being more attentive, interested, and informed, Independents tend as a group to be somewhat less involved in politics. They have somewhat poorer knowledge of the issues, their image of the candidates is fainter, their interest in the campaign is less, their concern over the outcome is relatively slight, and their choice between competing candidates, although it is indeed made later in the campaign, seems much less to spring from discoverable evaluations of the elements of national politics.¹¹

More recent research has indicated that the gap between partisans and independents (whether true independents and independent leaners) on variables like attention to politics has only grown larger in recent decades.¹²

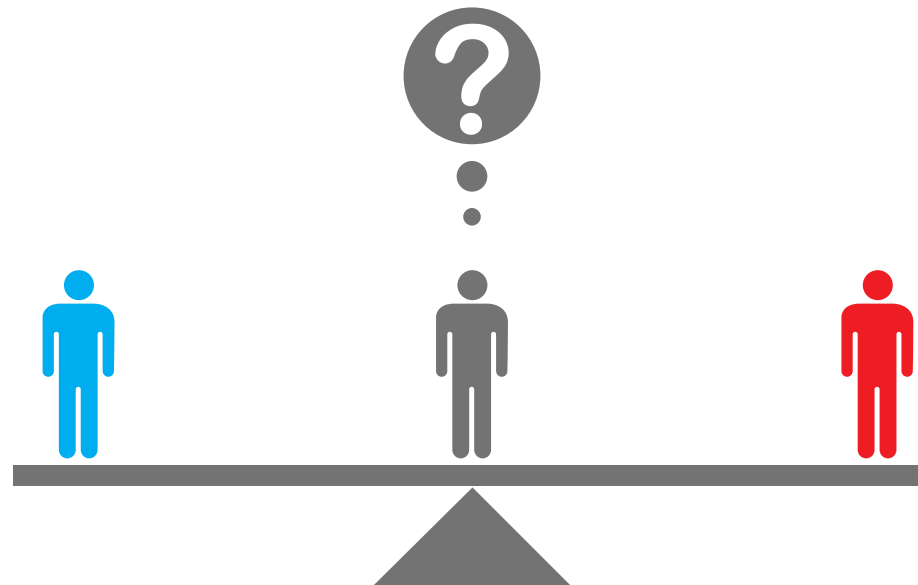


Political independents may determine election results

There are two undeniable facts about presidential elections in the United States: Presidential elections are highly competitive, and relatively few votes are actually up for grabs. This is one reason why candidates and parties are so heavily focused on turning out their voters, rather than trying to persuade voters of the other party to defect. This does not mean that “swing voters” are not real, however, or that they do not swing elections. We need to be careful to note that the terms independent and swing voter are not perfectly synonymous – **there are plenty of political independents who vote exclusively for one party.**

However, it is certainly true that most swing voters are also politically independent, or have only weak preferences for one party over the other.

William Mayer argued that, despite the decline in the number of swing voters, they remain important and typically determine the outcome of presidential elections.¹³ However, there is not a consensus on this issue. James Campbell argued that swing voters do not play a definitive role in determining presidential election outcomes.¹⁴



What do independents want?

To reach out to self-described independents, it may be useful to know what, exactly, self-described independents want out of government. Once again, the 2012 American National Election Survey can give us some insights. This survey also asked all respondents for their opinions on a wide variety of policy issues, both social and economic. The results of this survey, restricted exclusively to self-described independents, are below.

The results demonstrate the degree to which independents are heterogeneous in their policy preferences. There are few issues on which massive numbers of independents are in agreement. Further, on some of these issues, independents are generally conservative, and on others they are generally liberal.

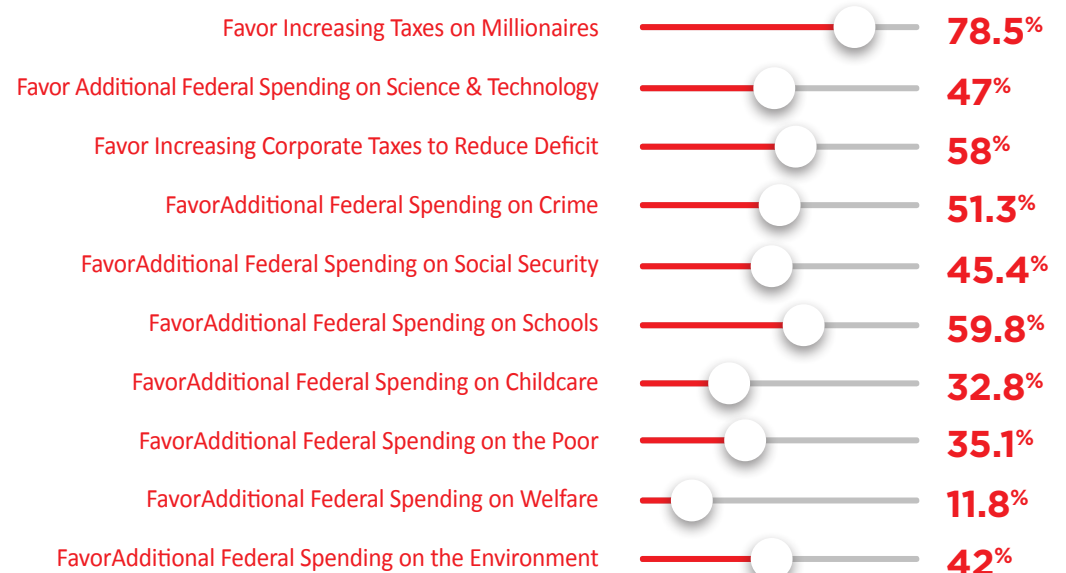
One thing we can say with confidence is that independents are not very conservative when it comes to economic issues.

A large majority of independents would favor higher taxes on the wealthy and on corporations in order to reduce the budget deficit. This does not mean, however, that they are in favor of massive government redistribution. Most independents also oppose increases in welfare spending and other spending to alleviate poverty.

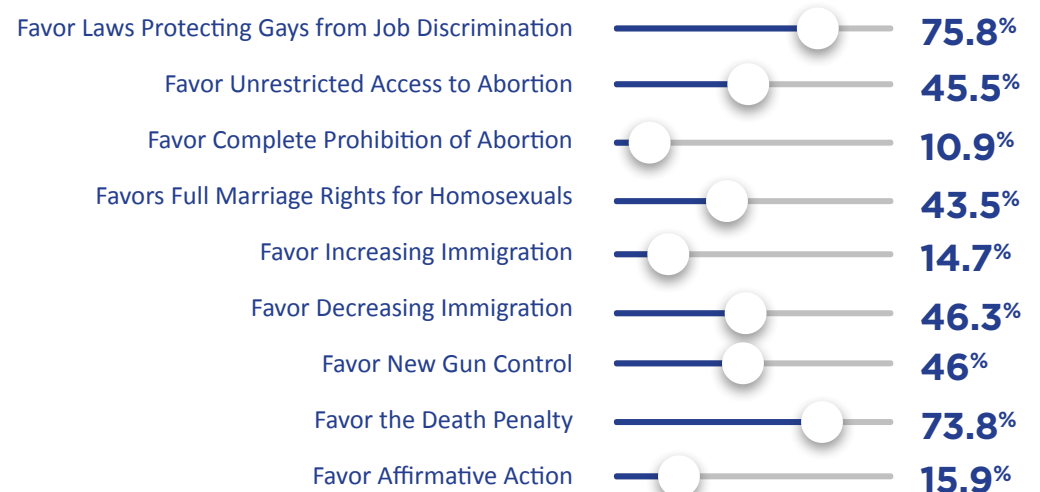
On social issues, we see that independents are, on average, very much in favor of laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination. However, they are split on the issue of gay marriage. We also see that far more independence are pro-choice purists (believing that abortion should be legal in all circumstances) than pro-life purists (believing that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances). However, a large majority of independents were opposed to increases in immigration, were opposed to affirmative action, and in favor of the death penalty.

Percentage of Independents Favoring Specific Policies

Economic Issues



Social Issues



Conclusion

Independents are an important and often studied element of the American electorate. However, while most of us have an intuitive idea as to what constitutes an independent, accurately categorizing and counting independents in the United States is more difficult than it first appears. Furthermore, it is important to disaggregate self-categorized independents according to whether or not they lean toward one of the major political parties.

One thing we know about independents is that they, on average, pay less attention to politics than strong partisans.

They are also less knowledgeable about politics. We also know that they are politically diverse. On many policy issues, independents are split down the middle. On others, they are majority conservative or majority liberal. Knowing which way independents lean on a particular public policy is valuable information for a campaign specifically trying to target independents, though campaigns should be wary about pursuing independent voters if such efforts risk alienating strong partisans.



About the Author

George Hawley is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Alabama. He received his PhD from the University of Houston. His research interests include demography, electoral behavior, political parties, immigration policy, and the U.S. Congress, and his doctoral dissertation and first book, *Voting and Migration Patterns in the U.S.*, focused on migration and the geographic partisan sort in the United States -- that is, he examined the degree to which migration is leading to an increasing number of politically homogeneous geographic units throughout the United States. His forthcoming book, *White Voters in 21st Century America*, examines the voting behavior of non-Hispanic whites, and speculates on how the changing demographic profile of the United States will influence American politics in the decades ahead.

He earned BA degrees in journalism and political science at Central Washington University, and earned his MA in political science at the University of Houston. He also has years of work experience in Washington, DC.

Dr. Hawley is a proud native of northwest Washington State, but presently enjoys life in Alabama with his wife and son.

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