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Independents in Name Only

> "If you say you're a Democrat, that must mean you are a left-wing liberal with no personal responsibility. If you say you are a Republican, you must be a right-wing millionaire who doesn't care about others."
>
> – Jennifer Cummins, Kentucky voter

"Whoever wins independent voters in Ohio, wins Ohio," Mitt Romney's political director told Fox News with forty-eight hours to go until Election Day 2012. Meanwhile in the Democratic camp, the party's Hamilton County, Ohio chairman stressed to the *Financial Times*, "We need a good, solid turnout among the independent voters."[1] During the 2012 presidential campaign, the American media published nearly 2,000 articles addressing the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of independent voters like Kentucky resident Jennifer Cummins, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Pundits and political operatives proclaimed that persuading independents like Cummins to pick one party over the other would be the key to electoral victory.

The pundits and political operatives who believe that independents can be persuaded are wrong.

Political scientists have known for nearly half a century that Cummins, along with the vast majority of independents, have most likely already chosen a candidate long before Election Day.

"Voters are not 'declaring independence' from political parties. . . . In fact, the American electorate is much more partisan than in the recent past," writes political science professor and blogger John Sides. The very same people who avoid

[1] Brett LoGiurato (November 12, 2012) "Why Winning The Independent Vote Can Actually Be A Bad Thing." *Business Insider*.

Barney Jopson (November 6, 2012) "Voters in Crucial Swing County Relish Influence." *Financial Times*.

partisan labels, scholars find time and again, are independent in name only. When asked, the majority of independents will admit that they lean toward one of the two major parties, and these "leaners" appear suspiciously partisan in practice (Hajnal and Lee 2010, p. 46). They vote consistently for one party as opposed to another (Keith et al. 1992; Magleby et al. 2011), they express attitudinal support for one party over another (Keith et al. 1992; Magleby et al. 2011), and their policy preferences and affective predispositions line up consistently with just one of the two parties (Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Magleby et al. 2011). For these reasons, political scientists have dismissed independents – like Jennifer Cummins – as politically inconsequential.

But the political scientists who believe independents are politically inconsequential are also wrong.

In this book we argue that both media and political scientists fundamentally misunderstand independent voters. At best, media view independents as objective observers of American politics. As we will show, media often portray independents as people who are not beholden to partisan allegiances, who listen to new information, who make careful political choices, and who, ultimately, vote for the party that makes the best case during a given campaign. At the very least, media portray independents as electorally unpredictable, which makes them more newsworthy than the ever-predictable partisans (Gans 1979; Boydstun 2013).

Political scientists, on the other hand, dismiss independents as nothing more than "undercover partisans."[2] As such, independents "consistently support only one party's candidates," explained Alan Abramowitz – a prominent voice on partisanship in America – in a 2014 *Politico* column entitled "The Partisans in the Closet: Political independents are (mostly) a figment of your imagination".[3] Indeed, this was precisely the conclusion of one of the most thorough investigations of independent voters to date: the 1992 book *The Myth of the Independent Voter*. Relying on an elaborate series of national surveys, the book's authors argued that the political preferences of independents are virtually identical to those of their partisan counterparts. "Independents," the authors concluded, "are not a bloc. . . . They are largely closet Democrats and Republicans" (p. 4).

Political scientists are right to suggest that independents are not persuadable blank slates, but to dismiss them as merely "undercover partisans" is to ignore the complexity of the democratic process. To assume independents are inconsequential for American politics is akin to a doctor telling a patient that since his

[2] This description is given to independents by the authors of *The American Voter*, Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. Other scholars have also referred to independents as partisans who are "in the closet" (e.g., Keith et al. 1992). Both terms suggest the same idea: people who have clear partisan preferences but opt to hide them. We use the term "undercover partisans" for consistency.

[3] Alan Abramowitz (January 8, 2014) "The Partisans in the Closet." *Politico Magazine*.

nagging cough won't instantaneously kill him, there is no reason to investigate its cause. If independents are nothing more than undercover partisans, why won't they identify with their own party? Why, when given the choice of Democrat, Republican, or independent, do they report that they are independents? *If there is nothing unique about these people politically, why are they so motivated to intentionally misrepresent their own partisanship?*

These questions lead to an even larger one: Do the motivations that lead people to conceal their partisanship – that is, to go undercover – have any broader consequences for American politics? Could the motivations that lead individuals to avoid partisan labels also lead them to change their behaviors in politically important ways? These are the questions that motivate this book.

We argue that independent voters are consequential for American politics in ways that neither journalists nor political scientists have predicted. In doing so, we tell a new story about independents and partisans in America. It is a story that should alarm both partisans and political parties. The endless conflicts and the seemingly insurmountable disagreements between parties have led many Americans to dislike partisans. As a result, people who hold clear partisan preferences have gone undercover. Going undercover means not only that people avoid revealing their partisanship but also that people refuse to engage in consequential political actions simply because these actions could make them appear partisan. Struggling to balance their hatred of partisans with their political preferences, undercover partisans create a Catch-22 for American parties: represent my interests at all costs, but don't bicker with the other party while doing it, and don't expect any help from me!

1.1 GOING UNDERCOVER

Our story begins with a puzzle. Since about the 1970s, a sizeable portion of Americans have avoided offering a partisan identification, instead reporting that they are independent. Yet, there exist virtually no demographic or even political differences between these independents and partisans. Independents look like partisans and partisans look like independents.[4]

In the summer of 2013, for example, 45.7 percent of the participants in the Pew Politics Survey picked "independent" as their initial identification. In Table 1.1 we provide demographic data for Democrats, Republicans, and independents. Independents as a group appear slightly less educated than Democrats, but they match the education rate of Republicans. Independents are less likely to regularly attend religious services than are Republicans, but they attend at similar rates as Democrats. On average they are closer in age to Democrats, but they are closer in racial makeup to Republicans. On the whole, there is nothing particularly distinct about independents.

[4] We focus on these particular demographic characteristics, as these are the characteristics that often drive participation and engagement in politics (Verba et al. 1995).

TABLE 1.1. *Demographic Characteristics of Independents and Partisans*

	Basic Demographic Characteristics (N = 1408)^			
	Independents	**Democrats**	**Republicans**	**All**
% Male	56.5%	40.6%	50.0%	49.9%
% with BA +	38.18%	44.49%	37.03%	39.6%
Avg. Age	50.1	52.3	56.4	52.3
% White	80.5%	44.49%	89.5%	76.3%
Regular religious attendance	35%	39.8%	48.7%	39.8%
% with income of 50,000+	50.9%	45.82%	50.36%	48.6%
	Additional Demographic Characteristics (N = 2104)*			
% Labor Union Connection	14%	15.9%	12.4%	14.2%
% Military Connection	25%	19.3%	26.2%	23.1%
% Currently Employed	49.2%	48.8%	47.4%	48.5%
% with children under 18	36.3%	34.9%	41.2%	37.2%
Where do you get your news:				
% from TV	48.1%	58.7%	55.5%	54.4%
% from radio	16.3%	15.2%	25.2%	18.5%
% from newspapers	30.6%	36.2%	26.9%	31.7%
% very interested in politics	44.5%	56.9%	47.1%	50.1%

^ Results from Pew July 2013 Political Survey: "Regular religious attendance" means the respondent attends religious services at least once a week.

* Results from the 2007 Washington Post Kaiser Family Foundation-Harvard University Survey of Political Independents: Labor union connection means the respondent or someone in the household is a member of a labor union; military connection means the respondent or someone in the household either serves in the military or is a veteran. Survey includes an oversample of independents, so results presented are weighted in order to compare across partisan groups.

A similar non-pattern emerges when we consider additional demographic characteristics, as well as non-ideological political factors (bottom of Table 1.1). Here we turn to the 2007 Survey of Political Independents, a survey conducted to explore independents as a group. The findings reveal that independents are just as likely as partisans either to be a member of a labor union or to live with someone who is a labor union member.[5] They are also just as likely to have some connection to the military – either through their own service or by living with someone who has served. Political scientists would predict that independents are slightly less interested in politics – and they are, but the actual differences are small.

The similarities between independents and partisans persist when we consider voting choices. In 2012, nearly 40 percent of independents said that they

[5] The Survey of Political Independents was conducted by telephone from May 3 to June 3, 2007. Independents were randomly selected for participation post-self-identification as "independent." Due to this oversample we use weights to compare across the parties. We do not use weights in the Pew 2013 survey. Plase see the web appendix for Chapter 1 for weighted results.

generally "leaned toward" the Democratic Party, and among them only 4 percent voted for Romney. About a third of independents, meanwhile, said that they "leaned toward" Republicans, and among them less than 7 percent voted for Obama. This pattern nearly replicates the behavior of voters who report that they are partisans. According to the American National Election Studies, just over 4 pecent of self-identified Democrats voted for Romney in 2012; among self-identified Republicans, just over 6 percent voted for Obama. Overall, in the 2012 presidential election – as in most prior elections – independents appeared to behave much like partisans. These patterns reinforce what many political scientists have long argued: there exist almost no differences between partisans and independents.

So why are these people independent?

1.2 "I DON'T LIKE POLITICAL PARTIES"

The idea that there are so few discernible differences between partisans and independents may be comforting to some researchers. If independents are "a bit bashful about admitting it, but partisan nevertheless" (Wolfinger 1995, p. 184), then the fact that more than a third of Americans eschew partisanship is largely politically inconsequential.

Yet the similarities between independents and partisans are puzzling. If these two groups are virtually identical along characteristics that are politically important, why do some group members identify as partisans and others as independents? And if the lack of discernable differences is due to the fact that independents are simply undercover, *why are they undercover*? Indeed, the idea that individuals – who by all accounts have no explicit reason to do so – are avoiding partisanship should leave both scholars and political elites uneasy. As we will argue and demonstrate in this book, the superficial similarities between partisans and independents mask a series of critical, and politically consequential, differences.

In the 2007 Survey of Political Independents, self-identified independents were presented with a list of reasons why someone might choose to be an independent, and they were asked to select the reasons for their own decision to cast partisanship aside. Some of the reasons in the choice set provided to respondents by the survey reflected an idealized view of independents ("*I vote for candidates, not parties*"), others suggested a more practical reason for opting out of partisanship ("*I am not comfortable with either the Republican or Democratic Party*"), while still others spoke to a general avoidance of politics ("*I'm not very interested in politics*"). Respondents were first asked to answer whether something was a reason for why they are independent; if they answered affirmatively, they were asked a follow-up question to determine whether this was a major or minor reason for their independent identification.

Figure 1.1 displays the patterns of reasons provided. The white bars represent the proportion of people who selected a response option as a reason for

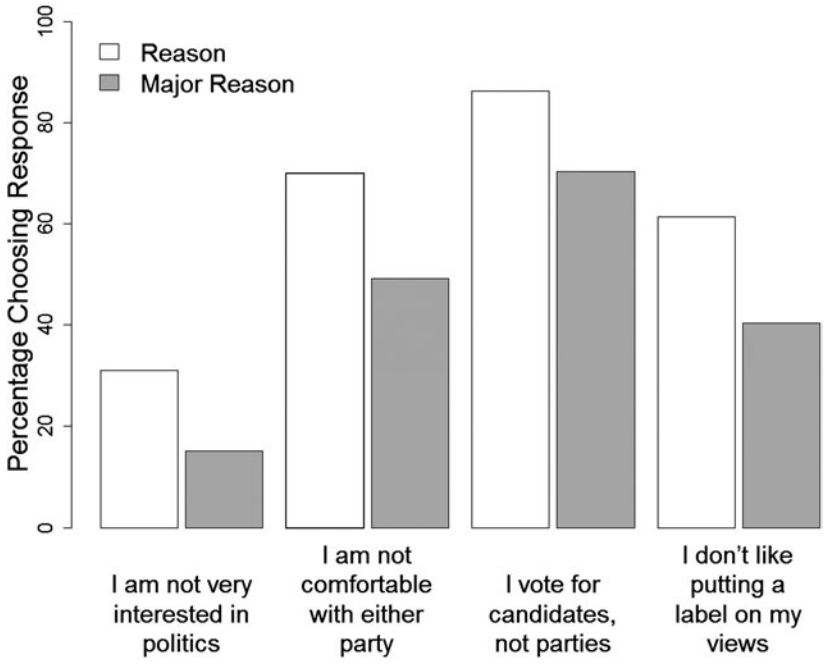

FIGURE 1.1. Reasons Why People Select Independent.
Data from the 2007 Washington Post Kaiser Foundation Harvard University Survey, N = 2104.

being independent and the gray bars show the proportion of respondents who subsequently reported that a particular response option is a *major* reason for their independent identification. Nearly 70 percent of independents reported that they are not comfortable with either of the two parties, while 61 percent reported that they simply do not like party labels. In contrast, very few independents explained that being an independent is driven by their lack of interest in politics. Selecting independent, at least at first glance, seems to be an exercise motivated by avoiding labels, rather than by a disinterest in politics.

An even more interesting pattern emerges when we break with convention and allow people to *explain* their partisan identities in their own words. Unencumbered by the constraints of survey questions, we gave a group of ordinary Americans the chance to tell us – under the cloak of anonymity – as much or as little as they wanted about why they selected a particular partisan category.[6]

[6] Responses from open-ended items in a 2014 study conducted via the Internet with a nationally representative set of adults using Survey Sampling International (SSI). Although SSI is a non-probability sample, other scholars have used SSI to collect not only experimental but also survey data (Iyengar and Westwood 2014). These open-ended responses were obtained by

The explanations most partisans offered reflected most of the factors that we have long known to contribute to partisan identification. Republicans and Democrats alike mentioned their ideological connections to a given political party: "I chose to affiliate myself with the Republican Party mostly because of fiscal policy," explained one participant. Another supported the Democrats because the Democrats "seem to be more for the middle and low income people and not the upper class. Republicans are for the rich and not for the poor." People spoke about family history and a tradition of partisan affiliation. "When I got married my husband was Republican, so I guess I went with him, that is the reason I am with the Republican Party," explained a participant. Still others noted that their identities had led them to a party; one participant explained a preference for Democrats as follows, "I am an African American follower when it comes to politics for the race."[7]

What the independents offered, however, was far more complex. Some described selecting independent as a means of avoiding a direct affiliation to either party. "Belonging to a herd is not my style," explained one participant (who also noted wanting a "none of the above" option to the partisanship question). "I do not want to be affiliated with a certain party," explained another. Another participant noted that they "don't want to be associated with either party." This participant would later go on to explain that the Democrats have "gone off the rails." And one simply concluded, "I don't like political parties."

For others, the choice of "independent" represented rising above what they perceived to be traditional political machinations and persistent political problems. "I am independent because anything else would make me feel I was contributing to disunity," offered one participant. Another noted, "if current government Democrats and Republicans [are] what we have to choose from then I will be independent."

"I am very tired of the fighting between both the Republican and Democratic political parties," explained one participant. "I think that there is a need for balance and compromise, and so I am an independent," concluded another.

These anonymous responses reflect the way independents present themselves to media. Shortly before the 2012 election, CNN was among the numerous media outlets that allowed independents to tell their own stories and discuss why they turned away from partisanship. In this series, a number of people

providing individuals with unlimited space to explain their partisan identifications. We discuss this sample in Appendix A1. Please note that the open-ended responses have been edited for spelling and grammar. We provide the verbatim versions of the responses in the web appendix to Chapter 1.

7 Of course, people cannot always successfully explain their own motivations or may provide a well-thought-out justification for a choice that was based on impulse or made "without awareness, effort or intent" (Pronin 2009, 2). In our case, however, the public explanation for selecting the independent identification is also quite important and informative. Put another way, people's justification for their identification as independent can help illuminate their perceptions of partisanship in American politics.

who described themselves as politically independent walked CNN journalists through the reasoning behind the "independent" label.[8]

We opened this chapter with Kentucky resident Jennifer Cummins's explanation to CNN for why she identifies as independent. Similarly, Omekongo Dibinga of Washington, DC explained, "I don't like being labeled. I've been labeled a lot of things in my life." Roger Cantillo, a New York voter who had only recently traded in his Democratic affiliation for independence, invoked a more practical approach: "It's just unfortunate that there's a lot of gridlock, and people are playing both sides."

What is notable about individual explanations of independence – offered by both our anonymous participants and the CNN interviewees – is that they also underscore the idea of independence as a *positive trait* relative to the less desirable partisan affiliation. North Carolina voter Mary Helen Yarborough, for example, reported, "I feel better as an independent. I feel like it's a more honest position." Similarly, one of our anonymous participants explained that being independent is just "common sense," while another wrote that being independent means being "more open to the truth." When Arizona voter Bretton Holmes claimed independents are voting as "free thinkers," he made this point even more directly. Independents, these explanations suggest, break the mold. They break with the "dogma" of partisanship, as Texas independent Jim Mitchem called it. Independents in their own words appear to think of themselves as a political scientist's ideal voter: rational, thoughtful, and fair.

And so a pattern finally emerges: partisan labels are negative and oppressive. Identifying with a party is akin to affiliating oneself with disagreement, fighting, and gridlock. Being independent is different; being independent is positive; being independent is constructive; being independent is *American*.[9]

1.3 THE SOCIAL VALUE OF INDEPENDENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The possibility that there is a benefit – *a social value* – to identifying as an independent holds the key to answering the questions we posed at the beginning of this chapter. Political independents, we suggest, are viewed more positively than are partisans: independents are perceived as "free thinkers" who are "more open to the truth" and able to set aside the "dogma" of partisanship. The belief that political independents are in some way superior intersects with people's existing motivations to make the best impressions they can on others (Schlenker

[8] Christina Zdanowicz (November 2, 2012) "Neither Republican Nor Democrat: Why I'm an Independent." CNN.com. The quotes included are part of this article. A number of the participants in the CNN story also recorded their own videos with fuller explanations of their independent identifications.

[9] Indeed, as Mary Helen Yarborough tells CNN, beng independent is "more American … America was born on the theme of independence, and I find that being a committed independent is therefore truer to our national pride."

and Weigold 1989; Goffman 1967; Holtgraves 1992). This desire to portray a positive political image is further magnified when people are led to believe that negative traits are associated with partisanship. Driven by a natural need to make a positive impression and believing that being openly partisan is likely to make a terrible impression, people retreat undercover. This reluctance to associate with a party, however, is not limited to just rhetorically identifying as independent. More importantly, these same motivations can lead people toward an avoidance of political *actions* that betray any partisan preference.

There are numerous ways in which individuals may receive negative cues about partisans, thus motivating them to avoid partisanship altogether. This information might come from family and friends or it might come from media and partisan politicians themselves. This information need not directly state that partisanship is negative. In fact, as we will show, media coverage of partisan disagreement – something that has become a news staple (Levendusky 2009; Mattes and Redlawsk 2014) – associates partisanship with a series of negative traits, such as stubborn inflexibility, bitterness, closed-mindedness, and anger. These are characteristics that individuals generally perceive in a negative manner both politically and socially (Kinder et al. 1980; Rodríguez-Bailón et al. 2000; Hardy and Jamieson 2005; Oltmanns et al. 2005). When people believe that partisanship is associated with these types of traits, they go undercover and opt to identify themselves as "independents."

Put more broadly, our approach demonstrates that there is a critical component to partisanship that few scholars have previously considered: the *expression* of partisanship. As we will show throughout this book, people may have stable and consistent partisan identities and preferences, but their willingness to *express* these identities can fluctuate. Our goal is to consider the political forces, conditions, and motivations that drive these fluctuations. Ultimately we find that Americans' systematic, deliberate, and often frequent choices to self-identify as "independent" signal serious consequences for partisanship and, in turn, for political parties.

1.3.1 The Partisan Consequences of Going Undercover

By focusing on what motivates individuals to avoid partisanship, our work stands as one of the first systematic examinations of *why* American partisans go undercover and what this means for American democracy.[10] Although scholars have reasoned that people who identify as independents may have an overall different connection to the party than do those who identify as partisans (Magleby et al. 2011; Miller and Shanks 1997), to date there has been little empirical or theoretical examination of the individual processes or broader

[10] Discussing the research presented in *Myth of the Independent Voter*, Magleby et al. (2011, p. 258) note, "In *Myth*, we stopped short of adducing causes for *why* individuals in the electorate identify as independents rather than as partisans."

political conditions that motivate individuals to report that they are independent.

Beyond identifying these motivations, our work challenges some of the most deeply held conclusions in research on political partisanship and political behavior. Through an elaborate series of novel experimental and observational studies, we demonstrate that independence is not simply a "myth" – rather, it is a paradox. Contrary to what journalists and pundits suggest, people who call themselves independents are not pure blank slates – they are unlikely to swing between the two parties depending on the election.[11] These people have consistent partisan preferences that lead them to the same party's candidates in most elections.

Even more importantly, we also break with decades of political science research. Independents may not differ from partisans in their ideological profiles or political choices, but they *are* unique. Determined to present themselves in the best possible way, these Americans represent an unusual breed of voter – ones who would rather undermine their own partisan preference than damage their perceived social image. The undercover partisan refuses to openly identify with a party, all the while holding their preferred party to an impossibly high political standard.

1.3.2 The Behavioral Consequences of Going Undercover

Not only do our findings have key implications for understanding why people avoid partisanship; our book is also the first to show that the same motivations that lead people to identify as independent have profound consequences for political behavior. In particular, the conditions that motivate people to go undercover also lead people to avoid political actions that publicly display their partisanship, actions such as advocating for a party when chatting with a friend or coworker, wearing a political button, posting a campaign sign, or even sharing a message from a political party with their social network. A decline in these types of behavior is consequential, as public displays of partisanship are often the simplest – and most persuasive – forms of political participation.

Advocating for the importance of this type of citizen communication, James Stimson writes that politicians, parties, and campaigns need people "with the personal attributes of good salesmen" (Stimson 1990, p. 354). Stimson suggests that political actors need ordinary people to sell them to other ordinary people. Public displays of partisanship, then, become "sales techniques." Research shows that these types of sales pitches by ordinary people can have profound

[11] This is not to suggest that there is no evidence of people who describe themselves as independent swinging between parties. Indeed, Campbell et al. (1960) show some evidence of this pattern in *The American Voter*. This is simply to acknowledge that these swing voter characteristics are unlikely to be the norm, and people who identify as independents show a greater tendency to consistently vote for the same party than to move between parties.