

Independent Voters as ‘Partisans in Disguise’



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A record high 40% of Americans call themselves political Independents, refusing to align with either the Democratic or Republican parties. Independent voter registration has increased dramatically over the past several years, in some states surpassing Democratic registration. Some Independents may be disengaged citizens, some may fall far to the right or left ideologically, and others may simply fail to connect with one of the two parties. Since Independents are not necessarily unified by common ideological beliefs or principles, it's easy to ignore them.

But consider this: in the 2006 Congressional elections, Democrats won Independents by 17 points—and captured the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2010, Republicans won Independents by 18 points—and wrested control of the House back from Democrats. Winning the vote of Independents has real-world consequences for who controls our government and what happens—or doesn't—in Washington.

At any point in time, most Independents say they are closer to one party or the other. These are often called Democratic leaners or Republican leaners. That means in a single election, Independents may appear to be "partisans in disguise," i.e. voting for President Obama if they tell a pollster they are leaning towards the Democratic Party or voting for Mitt Romney if they claim to lean towards the Republican Party. Yet they don't act like reliable partisan voters. When you follow the same people over multiple elections, loyalty to the party they once claimed to lean towards dwindles. For example, nearly 40% of Independents who claimed to lean Democratic in 2000 were voting for a Republican House candidate in 2004. Between this data and the fact that the Independent vote swung by 35 points from 2006 to 2010, it's obvious this voting bloc isn't locked in.

Nearly half of Millennial, Hispanic, and Asian-American voters—three groups that are key pillars of the Democratic coalition—call themselves Independent. So changing demographics in the country won't change this fundamental truth: Democrats ignore Independent voters at their own peril.

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