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**The Myth of the Independent Voter,  
California Style**

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**Abstract**

Much recent California political commentary stresses the sharp rise in the proportion of voters declining to state a party preference and the supposed increasing importance of political independents. Yet *The Myth of the Independent Voter* and other political science literature provide grounds for skepticism, emphasizing the strong partisan leanings of most self declared independents. We reexamine the evidence, drawing on the most appropriate source of data: Field Polls of the California electorate over many years. We find that expectations from *Myth* generally hold up well. Most California independents lean toward one or the other major party, the portion of pure independents has increased only marginally, Californians continue to follow their party allegiance in expressing voting preferences, and on several measures pure independents remain the least civically engaged adults. We also analyze why misconceptions about independent voters are so enduring despite political science evidence to the contrary.

**Keywords:** California politics, independent voters, political parties



# The Myth of the Independent Voter, California Style

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“Science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths.”

Sir Karl Popper (1962, 50)

If there is a single theme that dominates commentary about the present California political environment, it may be the importance of independent voters not aligned with the two major political parties. California politics textbooks commonly emphasize independence as a defining characteristic of Golden State voters (see for example Cahn, Schockman, and Shafie 2001, ch. 12). Many commentators point to the sharp rise in the portion of Californians who decline to state a party preference on voter registration forms (e.g., Weintraub 2007). For example, in an early 2010 article entitled “A Wide Independent Streak,” *Los Angeles Times* columnist George Skelton wrote the following:

Democrats and Republicans will make all the noise, but nonpartisan independents will decide the winners of California’s competitive statewide elections in November. This has increasingly become the case in recent years. California may be a Democratic state, but it is not true blue. And the best barometer of how it will vote in any general election is the fast-growing faction of independents. They’re officially registered as “Decline to State”—as in “a pox on both of your parties.” At last count, they made up 20% of registered voters, and the number keeps rising. In 1990 it was less than half that, 9%; in 2002 it was 15%.

Similarly, in his 2002 book on the California electorate, current Public Policy Institute of California Director Mark Baldassare entitled one of his chapters “The Un-Party State.” Baldassare (2002, p. 192) asserted that the emergence of indepen-

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dent voters as a political force was more important than the state's move toward the Democratic column in recent statewide elections.

Yet claims of the above sort are likely to raise suspicions among some political scientists, due in large part to the work of scholars with strong Golden State links. In *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Keith et al. 1992; hereafter referred to as *Myth*), UC Berkeley political scientist Raymond E. Wolfinger and a set of his former graduate students challenged an earlier generation's conventional wisdom that U.S. citizens were becoming more detached from political parties. Many commentators had emphasized the significance of an increasing number of Americans who called themselves independents rather than Republicans or Democrats. The *Myth* authors insisted that this phenomenon needed to be critically examined. They especially emphasized that self-declared independents who leaned toward the Republicans or Democrats needed to be distinguished from people with no such inclination. Examining American National Election Studies (ANES) data from 1952 through 1990, the *Myth* authors found that most self-declared independents indeed preferred one or the other major parties and behaved much like partisans. "Pure independents" were mainly distinguished by their relative lack of civic engagement.

Subsequent political science research has largely supported the notion that, if anything, partisanship is resurgent in the American public. Using ANES data to examine partisanship over five decades, Bartels (2000) found that party loyalties had rebounded since the 1970s, that the portion of pure independents in the electorate had declined since that time, and that partisanship was increasingly determining votes in presidential and congressional elections. Others have made similar findings, as well as determining that partisanship is more closely linked to ideology than in the past, that people are more likely to see sharp differences across the parties, and that the issue positions of Republicans have increasingly diverged from those of Democrats (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Brewer 2005; Bufami and Shapiro 2009; Kaufmann, Perocik, and Shaw 2008).

To be sure, academic controversies remain with respect to the interpretation of partisan trends generally and the arguments in *Myth* specifically. For example, while arguing strongly against the notion of a decline in partisanship, Bartels (2000) suggests that the analysis of cross-sectional data in *Myth* may overstate the apparent link between partisanship and voting behavior. Additionally, Greene (2000) argues that there are important psychological differences as well as some behavioral dissimilarity between people who initially acknowledge being partisans and those who indicate a party leaning after labeling themselves independents. Nevertheless, among scholars examining the national political scene there seems to be widespread consensus that, at a minimum, the arguments in *Myth* must be taken seriously.

Recent nonacademic and academic California political commentary largely ignores the scholarly literature challenging the thesis of a national decline in parti-

sanship (but Millian 2009 suggests journalists may be disregarding this evidence at their own peril; see also Jacobson 2004 for a rare academic article that focuses on whether partisanship has increased in California and concludes it has). In the unusual cases in which analysts acknowledge findings such as those in *Myth* they may quickly move beyond them, suggest these findings may be narrowly applicable (Weintraub 2007) or no longer relevant, or assert California is somehow different from the nation as a whole. For example, Baldassare (2000, pp.63) argues:

National studies have also indicated the growth of independent voters in recent decades, but some have insisted that most independents have strong leanings toward either the Democrat or the Republican party (see [*Myth*]). Such is not the case in California, where independent voters have become not only a significant group but also one that shows no signs of having any partisan loyalty.

Any direct responses to *Myth* are too brief to be viewed as a sustained counter-argument. Nevertheless, it is possible to infer a few themes.

- The sheer magnitude and consistency of the two-decade trend toward California voters declining to state a party preference at registration suggests that “something big must be going on” within the electorate. The findings in *Myth* may therefore be outdated.

- Californians often have voted in favor of ballot propositions framed as means of reducing partisanship, including most recently a June 2010 initiative measure to have the two top primary election vote getters appear on the general election ballot regardless of party affiliation—a proposition opposed by all California political parties.<sup>1</sup>

- California’s present demography is markedly different from both what it had been through the 1980s and the remainder of the country, with a relatively large portion of ethnic minorities (especially Latinos) and recent immigrants. Perhaps these differences are associated with weaker ties to political parties, especially because on average Latinos’ ideological views are less in line with the liberal views of Democratic leaders than most other groups that tend to vote Democratic (see Baldassare 2002, ch. 6).

- The most prominent political California figure in recent years, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, has been highly critical of both major political parties and stressed the desirability of being a political independent. Perhaps his views have pushed some Californians in that direction. (On the alleged strong connection between Schwarzenegger and independent voters, see especially Weintraub 2007.)

Accordingly, we think it important to reexamine the political independence question in the California context. More specifically, we focus squarely on the claims made by the *Myth* authors. Do they still hold in contemporary California,

when one in five voters fails to register with a political party? We aim to answer that question.

### **Expectations Based on *The Myth of the Independent Voter***

While *Myth* includes other arguments, we concentrate on four empirical claims that buttress the central contention that the rising number of independents is not of great significance, and does not signal the declining of political parties. We focus on these four claims both because of their importance and because we can test them with the cross-sectional, pooled California survey data at our disposal. (The *Myth* authors drew from panel study as well as cross sectional data, allowing them to assess the stability of party identification among individuals over time). Some of these claims pertain to how one should interpret responses to the “Michigan style” party identification questions, used by generations of political scientists drawing upon the ANES surveys. First, the *Myth* authors claimed that most of those answering “Independent” to the initial question “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?” subsequently indicate they are closer to one of the major parties. These respondents are traditionally labeled “independent Republicans” and “independent Democrats.” Second, the portion of “pure independents” (i.e., those who initially called themselves independents and subsequently failed to indicate they were closer to a major political party) has remained relatively stable, hovering around one in ten adults. Third, independent Democrats and independent Republicans act like partisans; they tend to vote for presidential and congressional candidates from the party to which they lean, as well as make comments about the major political parties consistent with such leanings (hence they are often referred to as “leaners,” a term that we will employ as well). Fourth, rather than possessing superior civic virtue, pure independents tend to be less civically engaged (see also Converse 1964). That is, pure independents on average are less interested in politics, less politically knowledgeable, more likely to avoid voting, and less likely to participate in politics in other ways.

These claims set clear expectations for what we should conclude in our own empirical research. If *Myth* remains applicable to the present California electorate, we should find the following:

1. Most California adults who call themselves independent and/or decline to state a party preference at registration think of themselves as closer to the Republican or Democratic parties.
2. The portion of pure independents in the California electorate has not grown significantly in recent years.
3. Self-described independents in California who lean toward a major political party also tend to vote like partisans.

4. Pure independents in California are distinguished by being less civically engaged.

To assess these claims it is necessary to analyze survey data over many years. Analysis of aggregate registration data is inadequate because the question is how people think of themselves, not how they fill out registration forms. Our prior analysis demonstrates that, in California, “decline to state” registrants and self identified independents are often not the same individuals (Lascher and Korey 2008). Furthermore, not any survey data will do. *Myth* builds on the “Michigan concept” of party identification dating back to *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). Not all available surveys of Californians include true party identification questions. The source of data is therefore critical and we turn to that topic next.

## Data

### **Why the Field Polls Are the Best Source of Data for Party Identification in California**

We focus especially on analysis of survey data from the Field Research Corporation. The Corporation’s Field Poll (formerly known as the California Poll) has a number of distinct advantages with respect to addressing the topic at hand. The Poll dates back to the 1950s, making it by far the longest running, ongoing source of political information about California adults. Polls are also carried out frequently, with an average of at least four in recent years. Sample sizes are relatively robust, typically including about 1,000 respondents. Most important for our purposes, through most of the period we studied the Field Poll routinely included party identification questions similar to those used in the ANES. That is, respondents initially were asked: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?” People who considered themselves Republicans or Democrats were queried about the strength of partisanship; independents were asked if they considered themselves closer to one or the other major parties. This allows for the generation of the traditional seven point party identification scale commonly used by political scientists since *The American Voter*.

By contrast, two other possible sources of information would be unsatisfactory for our purposes. One alternative would be to use the California subsample of a well regarded national survey such as the ANES. This was the method Jacobson used in his 2004 study of party polarization in California. While such an approach may ensure that questions are well validated and facilitate comparisons between California and other states, it presents two serious problems. First, although California is by far the most populated state, we can expect that only about one in nine respondents

of a current national survey (and fewer in prior years) would reside in the Golden State. If the national sample consists of about 1,000 respondents this mean that the number of Californians might be about 111, which is too few for meaningful analysis when disaggregating further into party identification categories, unless the results were pooled over many years which would make it harder to discern the very trends we would hope to identify. Furthermore, ANES state samples are biased because of the sampling design used to facilitate face-to-face interviews. The ANES samples Primary Sampling Units (or metropolitan areas) and then randomly samples within those units. The resulting data tend to be random at the national and regional levels but biased when working with substate samples such as states or congressional districts (Carsey and Wright 1998; Dyck and Lascher 2009; Hill and Hurley 1984).

A second unsatisfactory alternative would be to draw upon surveys of Californians conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). The PPIC is the other major organization that conducts such surveys on a regular, ongoing basis and makes this information available to scholars. Baldassare's book length studies (2000, 2002) of Californians' political opinions are based on PPIC polls. Yet the PPIC polls do not use a measure of party identification analogous to the one used in either the ANES or many Field Polls. Instead, the PPIC polls ask first whether the respondent is *registered* as a Republican, Democrat, a member of another party, or an independent. Major party registrants are then probed about whether they consider themselves strong or not very strong partisans while independents are queried about whether they feel closer to the Republicans or Democrats. While there are similarities between these questions and traditional measures of party identification, the PPIC questions appear to mix together the issue of psychological identification and how people are listed on voter rolls. We are also unaware of any research that validates the PPIC questions as appropriate measures of party identification.

Given such considerations, focusing on Field Poll data is the best option. This is not to deny some problems with the data. The most serious is that Field has generally moved away from asking the traditional party identification questions at the same time as it has concentrated on surveying registered voters rather than all California adults. To date, Field has included measures of party identification on only two polls since February 2006. Accordingly, we have limited relevant data from the most recent surveys. Additionally, Field has been inconsistent in its scheme for weighting the data, and the documentation for how weights are applied is incomplete (for a more extensive discussion of problems with using the Field weights, see Korey and Lascher 2006). Accordingly, we use the unweighted data, which may make the analysis more subject to both random and systematic sampling errors.



## **The California and National Samples**

Our analysis begins with a description of the overall trends in the proportions of independent identifiers in California and nationally from 1980 through 2010. The California data are taken from 100 Field Polls conducted between July 1980 (when Field first began measuring party identification on a regular basis) and January 2010 (the last available Field Poll that did so). National data (including California) are from 14 American National Election Studies from 1980 through 2008. The Field data represent a total of 81,155 registered voters for whom valid measures of party identification were obtained, while the same information was obtained from 25,360 respondents surveyed by the ANES.

The two datasets are roughly comparable, but there are some differences:

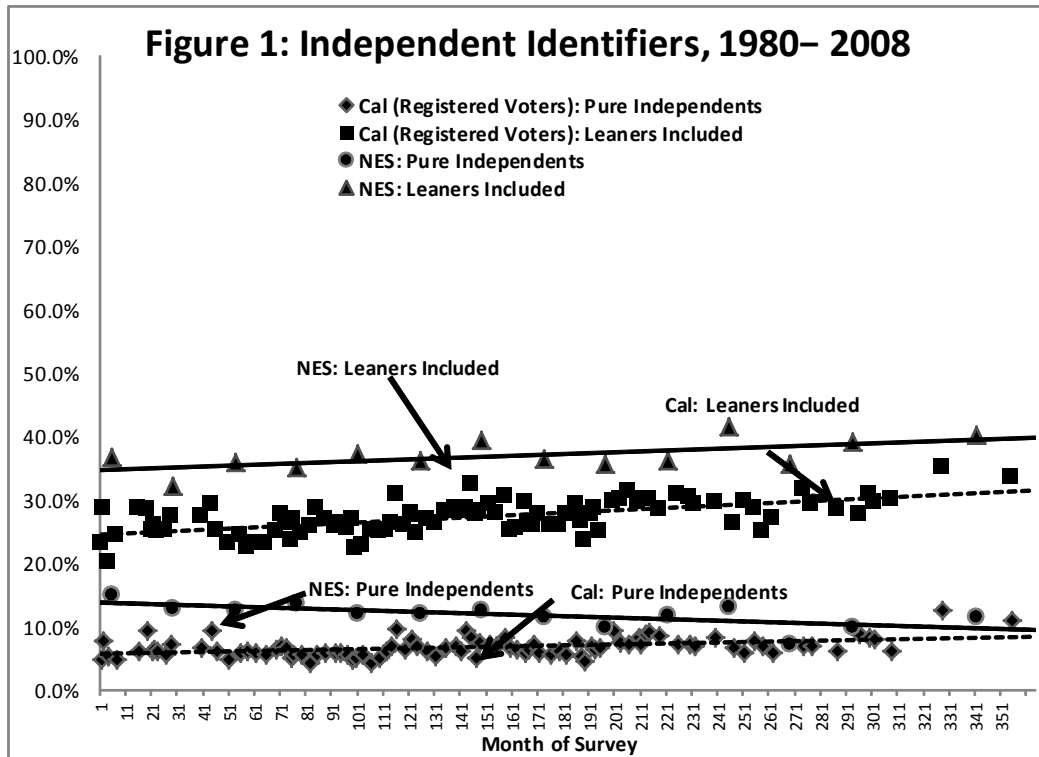
- The ANES surveys are cross-sections of all adults. A number of Field Polls, especially those conducted in recent years, include only registered voters. For most of the period included in our study, voter registration was self-identified. Beginning in 2006, Field has in most cases moved from samples derived through Random Digit Dialing (RDD) to samples of registered voters (whose registration is already known before respondents are contacted). Limiting the analysis to registered voters produces somewhat fewer independents. For the sake of consistency, when pooling data over a series of polls we focus only on registered voters. When examining individual polls we include all available respondents in order to facilitate comparison to the ANES surveys. Limiting the analysis to registered voters produces fewer independents. This can make a substantial difference, as we will note below. There are minor differences in the way in which Field and the ANES measure party identification.

- ANES data have been weighted using pre-election weights. Field Poll data are not weighted because of a lack of consistency in the weights applied to different surveys.

## **Findings**

### **“Leaners” and “Pure Independents” Over Time**

Figure 1 sets forth, for both sets of data, the percentage of valid responses consisting of: (1) all independents, including leaners, and (2) pure independents only. The horizontal axis represents the month of the survey, with July 1980 coded as “1.” Field polls that spanned two months were coded for the month in which the survey began. In a few instances, two surveys started during the same month, and



so the results were pooled. NES surveys were coded as having taken place in November.

We first emphasize that, consistent with *Myth*, the large majority of independents in California indicate a leaning toward one or the other major political parties. While the exact proportions vary over time, inspection of Figure 1 shows that pure independents never constitute more than about one-third of independent identifiers. This was true in the 1980s, before some commentators mark the emergence of independent voters in the Golden State, but it was also true in the 1990s and thus far is the case in the 21st century. In short, our first expectation from *Myth* is decisively confirmed.

When we turn to the questions of how California compares to the nation as a whole and trends over time, the story requires more subtlety. With leaners included among those classified as independents, the percentages for California are somewhat lower than for the nation as a whole though, as noted, this is in part an artifact of limiting the California data to registered voters. For California, independents have been increasing at a rate of .019% per month, or about .22% per year. For the nation as a whole, there has actually been a slight decrease in the percentage of pure independents (.012% per month, or approximately .14% per year) among all adults.

Our analysis therefore provides some evidence that Californians are becoming a little more truly independent, relative to the state's past and perhaps the nation as a whole. Yet the differences are small in magnitude. At the end of our time series only about one in 10 California registered voters identified as a pure independent—nowhere near the proportion cited by some recent commentary about the emergence of the independent voter (e.g., Skelton 2010). Moreover, it is possible that our analysis overstates even the slightly greater independence of California voters relative to the nation as a whole because our data include polls from earlier months and nongeneral election years while the ANES data are from surveys near national elections.

### **Voting Preferences of Independents**

Thus far we have concentrated on how Californians identify themselves. Table 1 addresses the next question: the extent of party loyalty in voting preferences over time. Data are from the Field Poll most proximate to the November general election for governor, and note that for this subsection of our paper we focus on all respondents rather than simply registered voters (if such information is available), so as to enhance comparisons with national data. Table 1 shows the percentage of consistent party voters in California gubernatorial elections, i.e., self-identified Democrats and Republicans as well as independent leaners who indicated they would vote for the gubernatorial candidate from their preferred party. The table also presents the portion of “defectors,” i.e., those indicating they would vote for a gubernatorial candidate from the other major party or a third party. Finally, the table shows the portion of pure independents in each survey. For comparison purposes Table 1 also includes similar information on presidential elections presented in *Myth*.

Consider for example the 2006 poll. Among respondents to that survey, 82% were consistent party voters, i.e., Republican identifiers and leaners supporting Arnold Schwarzenegger (the Republican nominee) as well as Democratic identifiers and leaners supporting Phil Angelides (the Democratic nominee). Another 13% were defectors, consisting of identifiers and leaners supporting someone other than their preferred party's candidate. Finally, 5% of survey respondents were pure independents.

The striking thing about Table 1 is how similar the California findings are to those presented in *Myth*. In both cases, roughly three of every four people surveyed were consistent party voters, with the exact number proportion varying from year to year. This was true of national presidential election voting from 1956 through 1988. It was also true of California gubernatorial election voting from 1982 through 2006. Defectors—avowed partisans and leaners voting for the opposite party's can-

**Table 1. Consistent Party Voters and Others in U.S. Presidential Elections and in California Gubernatorial Elections**

Year	Consistent Voters	Defectors	Pure Independents
<b>I. U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (FROM <i>MYTH</i>)</b>			
1956	76	15	9
1960	79	13	8
1964	79	16	6
1968	69	23	9
1972	67	25	9
1976	73	17	10
1980	68	24	9
1984	79	13	8
1988	81	12	7
<b>II. CALIFORNIA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS (FROM FIELD POLLS)</b>			
1982	77	17	6
1986	74	21	5
1990	80	15	5
1994	75	20	5
1998	79	15	7
2002	69	26	5
2006	82	13	5

<sup>1</sup> Presidential election data are from Table 10.1 in *Myth*.

<sup>2</sup> For presidential election data, cell entries are portion of all voters who voted for their own party's candidate, for another party's candidate, or were pure independents.

<sup>3</sup> Gubernatorial election data are from the Field Poll closest to the general election for governor.

<sup>4</sup> For gubernatorial election data, cell entries are portion of all voters who supported their own party's candidate, another party's candidate, or were pure independents.

didate—never amount to more than a maximum of about one in four voters. Here as well, our expectations based on *Myth* are strongly confirmed.

Inspection of Table 2 reinforces the above points. That table shows support for Republican gubernatorial candidates over the years for each category of the seven point party identification scale. The substantive conclusions to be drawn from Table

**Table 2. Party Identification and Vote for Republican Gubernatorial Candidates, 1982–2006**

	Percentage Supporting the Republican Candidate							Unweighted Average
	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	
Strong Democrats	6	18	9	7	4	4	14	9
Weak Democrats	14	44	26	36	10	5	15	22
Independent Democrats	28	34	21	33	13	12	13	22
Pure Independents	32	63	52	67	22	19	38	41
Independent Republicans	65	76	73	73	67	64	83	72
Weak Republicans	63	87	86	74	73	54	86	76
Strong Republicans	95	93	96	96	91	85	90	93

*Note:* data are from the Field Poll closest to the general election for governor.

2 are identical to those that could be drawn from a similar chart (Table 4.1) in *Myth*. Strong partisans almost always support their party's candidates. Independent leaners consistently act very much like weak partisans in terms of voting preferences. Pure independents are very different from leaners, and support for the Republican or Democratic candidate among the former group varies widely from election to election. Little has changed over time with respect to patterns of partisan support for governor.

### **Civic Engagement of Independents: Interest in Politics**

Our final topic is the civic engagement of independent voters. Because the concept of civic engagement is multidimensional we address it in different sections of our findings, providing more detail about the relevant survey questions along the way. Again, following *Myth* we hypothesize that pure independents in California are less civically engaged than others.

A number of Field Polls include questions asking respondents' opinions of political actors and institutions. In more recent polls, respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of an institution's or individual official's job performance. In earlier polls, respondents were asked to base their evaluations on a five-point scale.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, we distinguish between those who are willing and able to provide a rating and those expressing no opinion. We expect that most people would develop opinions about these topics, and that failure to do so would indicate a lack of political interest.

While Field asks the above questions of a variety of actors and institutions, we have limited our analysis to those regarding the state legislature and California's two current U.S. senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. We have done so because these three have been in place throughout all or most of the timeframe under discussion. (Feinstein and Boxer were both elected to the senate in 1992, Feinstein in a special election made necessary by the election of then Senator Pete Wilson as governor two years earlier.) We limit our analysis to the period beginning in 1993 after Feinstein and Boxer took office.

Analyzing such data (as noted earlier, for registered voters only), we find some support for our principal hypothesis. Table 3 presents our key findings in this area. While the differences are not large, all relationships are statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) whether the dependent variables are considered to be nominal or ordinal. In all three cases, pure independents are most likely to have no opinion. Leaners, on the other hand, are slightly more likely than weak partisans to hold opinions. Strong partisans are most opinionated on two of the measures, though they are edged out by leaners in holding an opinion of the state legislature.

### **Civic Engagement of Independents: Voting Participation.**

Scholars commonly use willingness to cast a ballot as a measure of civic engagement. Sometimes, Field asks respondents whether they intend to vote in an upcoming election. Acknowledging the tendency of respondents to overestimate their likelihood of participation, we distinguish between those who are certain that they will vote and those who are less than certain or who do not know. When Field

**Table 3. Percent Failing to Express an Opinion about Senator Boxer, Senator Feinstein, or the California State Legislature (Registered Voters)**

	Strong Partisans	Weak Partisans	Independent Leaners	Pure Independents	N
Feinstein	11.3	18.4	16.0	24.2	20,884
Boxer	12.9	23.2	18.2	29.2	21,220
Legislature	14.2	15.7	13.4	19.1	18,432

asked about more than one upcoming election (a primary and a general election) we include only the election most proximate to the survey.

As shown in Table 4, among registered voters, pure independents are least likely to be sure that they will vote. Strong partisans are most likely to express such certainty. The percentages for leaners and weak partisans are nearly identical. (The overall result is again statistically significant at the .001 level.)

To be sure, expressed voting intention is an imperfect measure of actual behavior. The generally positive responses to this question (in contrast to actual voting turnout) suggests there is an upward bias among all responses, likely reflecting social acceptability concerns among survey respondents. Nevertheless, we see no reason to believe that partisans would be more subject to this bias than independents.

### **Civic Engagement of Independents: Political Knowledge**

The *Myth* authors (1992, p. 45) remark that: “Pure Independents are consistently the most ignorant of all Americans. Strong partisans are a bit better informed than leaning Independents, and weak partisans are in third place.” Our data provide only limited opportunity to try to replicate these findings or to compare the level of knowledge of independent identifiers with that of independent registrants. The February 1996 survey (of registered voters only) did ask respondents to identify the month in which the upcoming presidential primary of that year would occur. (The correct answer was March.) In March of 1998 (a survey of all adults), the following questions were asked:

- Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Al Gore?
- Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not? Is it the responsibility of the president, the congress, or the Supreme Court?
- In order to override a presidential veto, does the U.S. Senate and house require a simple majority vote or a two-thirds majority vote?

**Table 4: Percent Certain of Voting in Upcoming Election (Registered Voters)**

	Strong Partisans	Weak Partisans	Independent Leaners	Pure Independents
Certain of Voting	82.4	71.5	71.7	67.4
Less than Certain of Voting	17.6	28.5	28.3	32.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	15,642	13,651	8,208	2,914

• Do you happen to know which party—the Democratic Party or the Republican Party— has the most members in the House of Representatives right now?

Although officials of all branches of government take an oath to uphold and defend the constitution, we take “the Supreme Court” to be the correct answer to the question asking who is responsible for determining the constitutionality of laws. Another question that was asked—“Is one of the two major political parties more conservative than the other at the national level?”— was excluded on the ground that it involved too much subjective interpretation to be considered purely factual.

The results are shown in Table 5. Keeping in mind the tentativeness of any conclusions in this area given the limited data available, the political knowledge results clearly show that pure independents fare most poorly and strong partisans do best on all questions. Leaners, however, tended to do less well than weak partisans. Note that, with one exception, the questions were taken from a survey of all adults. When the analysis of these questions is limited to registered voters only (not shown in the table), the sample is more partisan, and the differences between pure independents and partisans are substantially less clear. Put another way, being unregistered (by choice or otherwise) is another measure of lack of civic engagement.

Finally, the July 1989 Field Poll asked respondents to name 10 officeholders, ranging from the president of the United States to their local representative in the state assembly. For each correct answer, respondents were then asked to identify the official’s party affiliation. We created a simple additive index giving each respondent a point for each correct answer. Table 6 shows the mean score (out of a possible 20) for strong partisans, weak partisans, leaners, and pure independents.

The results are similar to our other findings. Strong partisans are most knowledgeable and pure independents least so. Leaners did a little less well than weak partisans. We should note that (1) between group differences are small (accounting for only four percent of the variance) and (2) differences would have been smaller had we included only registered voters.



**Table 5. Percent Answering Political Knowledge Questions Incorrectly\***

Survey	Question	Strong Partisans	Weak Partisans	Ind. Leaners	Pure Ind.	p
Feb. 1996	Not know month of primary	46.9	61.6	64.9	69.8	<.001
Mar. 1998	Not know Gore is VP	10.7	16.4	26.0	38.5	<.001
Mar. 1998	Not know SCOTUS interprets constitution	24.6	29.0	32.5	40.6	<.001
Mar. 1998	Not know 2/3 vote to override veto	13.1	18.2	25.4	32.4	<.001
Mar. 1998	Not know GOP has House majority	21.3	34.1	36.4	49.0	<.001

\*Includes “not sure” and no answer.

*Note:* the February 1996 survey included only registered voters (N = 806); the March 2008 survey included all adults (N = 782).

### Civic Engagement Summary

Our findings tend to support our expectations, although not uniformly. Pure independents tend to be relatively less interested in politics. They are less strongly committed to voting and are less knowledgeable than other respondents.

### Discussion

On the whole, expectations based on *The Myth of the Independent Voter* hold up remarkably well when applied to early 21st century California. Most California independents lean toward one or the other major political and this has changed little over time. Pure independents amount to only about one in 10 voters. Independents leaning toward one of the major parties tend to have voting preferences similar to those who at least weakly identify with the Republicans or Democrats. Partisanship dominates vote choices. With respect to civic engagement, pure independents are mainly distinguished by their lower interest in politics, weaker commitment to

**Table 6. Number of Correct Answers Identifying Office Holders and Their Party Affiliations, July 1989 Poll (All Adults)**

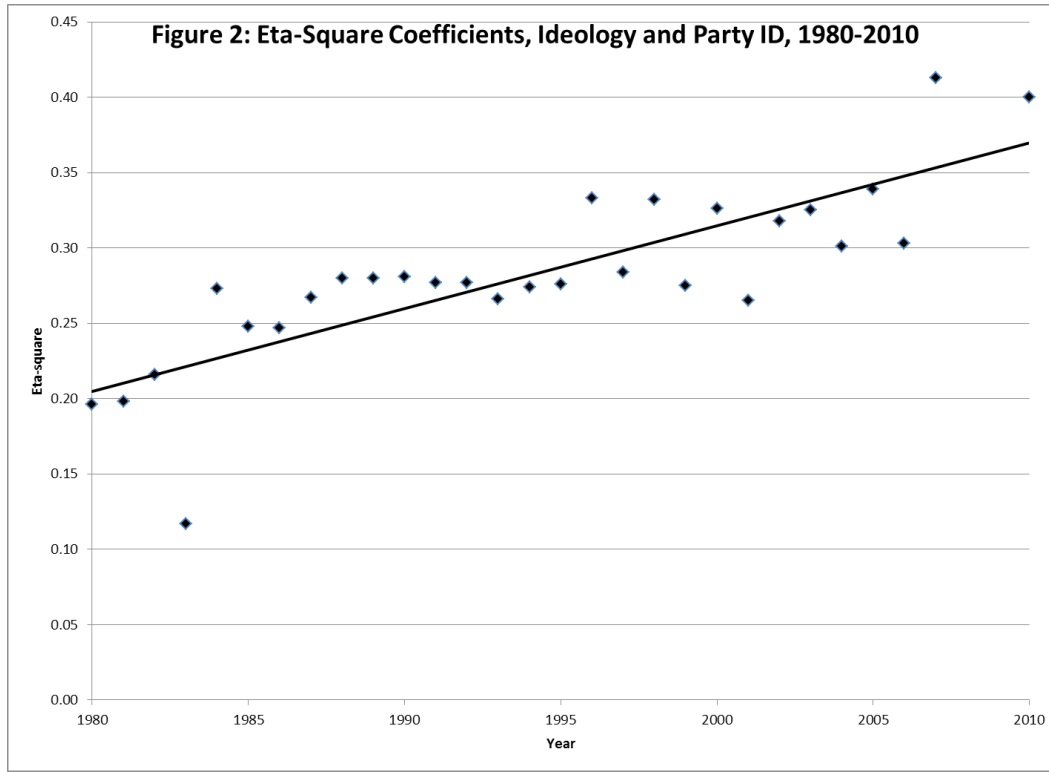
	Strong Partisans	Weak Partisans	Independent Leaners	Pure Independents	Total
Mean	10.3	9.0	8.6	7.7	9.3
N	323	359	211	963	963

p<.001  
 $\eta^2 = .04$

voting in upcoming elections, and lower levels of knowledge about basic facts of government and politics.

We do not wish to argue that partisanship in the mass public has been static. Indeed, our prior research (Korey and Lascher 2006) emphasized a pronounced shift toward the Democrats among California adults during the 1990s and analyzed some of the reasons for this major change. We also find evidence in California for the ideological sorting emphasized by other scholars examining the United States as a whole (e.g., Abromowitz and Saunders 1998; Levendusky 2009). That is, liberals in the state are more consistently Democrats and conservatives more consistently Republicans than was the case in the past. Figure 2 underscores this point. As shown in Figure 2, reflecting data that have been pooled for each available year from 1980 through 2010, the ( $\eta^2$ ) coefficient between party identification and ideological self identification has steadily increased over time in California. So it is not the case that parties at the mass level are “forever the same” in the Golden State. However, what *does* seem inaccurate is the notion that Californians are losing their party moorings.

In that sense, many California political pundits’ claims about the burgeoning importance of independent voters appear misinformed. This raises a larger question: Why are misconceptions about independent voters so enduring nearly 20 years subsequent to *Myth’s* publication, and after release of much other political science work emphasizing the enduring importance of partisan ties? In a book directly aimed at challenging a number of popular political misconceptions, including the supposed declining importance of political parties, Karen Kaufmann and her colleagues (2008, ch. 1) offer a number of explanations. These include the increasing number of people from outside the academy (e.g., political consultants) who claim political expertise, the tendency of modern political scientists to focus on conceptual issues not of interest to ordinary citizens, the technical nature of much political



science writing, and the preference of members of the mass news media for simple, dramatic stories.

We believe the explanations given by Kaufman and her colleagues are plausible. However, we would offer another one as well that is at least applicable in the California context. That is: understanding how Californians identify politically requires more time and skill than understanding how Californians are registered to vote. A journalist in a hurry for a story about political trends could visit the California Secretary of State’s web site and within a couple clicks of a mouse find a table showing the recent historical pattern with respect to the portion of adults registering as Democrats, Republicans, members of other parties, and “decline to state” (<http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/60day-gen-10/hist-reg-stats.pdf>). Among other things, inspection of this table makes clear that the portion of voters who decline to state a party preference has grown dramatically. By contrast, a journalist wishing to investigate party identification on his or her own would at least need to know how to locate polls with appropriate questions, download computer files, enter the data into a program capable of statistical operations such as SPSS, and conduct at least simple tabulations. It is unlikely many people would go so far, especially since they

may be unaware of reasons to be cautious about conclusions based on registration data alone.

But understanding why myths about political partisanship are enduring does not make them acceptable. As political scientists we see our task as in part to confront such myths. We hope this article is a step in that direction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <<http://californiachoice.org/ballot-measures/endorsements>> for a summary of positions on the June 2010 statewide ballot propositions.

<sup>2</sup> The numbers of the specific Field Polls used in this analysis are available from the authors. The universe for most of these polls is California adults; the universe for the 1986 and 1990 surveys is registered voters.

<sup>3</sup> Five-point scales were used through 1996. In 1997 polls, the samples were split and half of respondents were administered five-point scales while the other half were asked to simply “approve” or “disapprove.” Beginning in 1998, two-point scales were used, except for the August 1998 poll, when a five-point scale was used for the state legislature.