

Will the Real Independents Please Stand Up?

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For die-hard Democrats and Republicans, the decision of who to vote for in November may be a no-brainer. In recent years, however, many voters have rejected such partisan identities, choosing to call themselves Independents.

But new research suggests that Independents may not be as independent as they think.

Psychological scientists Carlee Beth Hawkins and Brian Nosek of the University of Virginia decided to use a tool called the Implicit Association Test, or IAT, to explore the unconscious biases that churn deep inside the Independent mind.

In one study, a random sample of more than 1800 volunteers participated on the Project Implicit website, where they read a mock newspaper article comparing two competing welfare proposals. One plan was generous in its benefits, the other much more stringent. Some of the volunteers read an article that said the Democrats were supporting the generous plan; Republicans, the stringent plan. The others read the same article, but with the parties switched around.

To explicitly measure aspects of identity, ideology, and policy support, the researchers asked the volunteers to record their policy preferences and describe their political ideology and party identification. Those who selected Independent were asked if they leaned toward either of the two major parties.

Next the volunteers took a version of the IAT designed to measure partisan identities that the volunteers themselves might have been unaware of, and preferences for welfare policies that they may or may not have articulated even to themselves.

The results were intriguing—and politically significant. As Hawkins reported in May at the 24th Annual Convention of the Association for Psychological Science, the participants who identified as Independents varied greatly in their unconscious partisanship, and they made partisan political judgments in line with their implicit political identities. Those Independents who unconsciously identified with Democrats preferred the liberal welfare plan, while those who unconsciously identified with Republicans had a clear preference for the conservative welfare plan.

Furthermore, the Independents who were implicitly Republican preferred whatever plan was proposed by Republicans—regardless of the values underlying the plan—more than they favored any plan proposed by Democrats. The same was true for implicit Democrats.

Despite their claims of disinterested objectivity, the self-identified Independents appeared to be influenced both by ideology and by partisanship when it came to making policy judgments, suggesting that some Independents may be independent more in name than in practice.