

Misidentified Independents:

Understanding independents through affective lean

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Abstract

Public opinion research finds that many individuals who claim to be politically independent maintain partisan attachments. The current best practice for identifying these partisan attachments is to ask those who identify as independents a follow-up question asking if they lean toward one of the parties, or if they still prefer to select independent. Those who select independent in the follow-up question are often called pure or true independents. However, we show that many individuals who select independent in the partisan lean question (two-click independents) are willing to reveal partisan preference if they are allowed to assess their feelings for the parties independently and do not have to explicitly pick one over. An example of just such party elevation can be found in partisan feeling thermometers. In partisan feeling thermometers, many two-click independents indicate feeling warmer towards one political party than the other. We call these respondents *affective leaning independents*. Leveraging the American National Election Studies, America's Political Pulse Survey, and original Lucid data, we demonstrate that: (1) The majority of affective-leaning independents have a weak but meaningful partisan social identity in the same direction of their affective lean. (2) A large proportion of all two-click independents have an affective lean. (3) Affective-leaning independents have distinctly partisan preferences and behaviors related to candidate selection, voter turnout, and other partisan outcomes. Identifying the affective lean of two-click independents allows researchers and practitioners to better predict the behavior and attitudes of two-click independents and better understand America's partisan landscape generally. Identifying the affective lean of two-click independents allows for these benefits without requiring any new or additional survey items and can be used on most contemporary and historical datasets without any modification. The affective lean among two-click independents is simultaneously real, meaningful, and easily accessible. Thus, we strongly recommend its adoption by relevant research and practitioner communities.

Key Words: Independents, Feeling thermometers, Affective lean, Partisanship, Social Desirability Bias, Partisan Social Identity.

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The Partisanship of Independents

Political Scientists have long acknowledged the importance of understanding the behavior and preferences of independents in American politics. When asked about partisan preference, those who select independents constitute the plurality of Americans, and have been increasing over the past several decades (Klar and Krupnikov 2016; NW, Washington, and Inquiries 2019). Independents are often misrepresented as individuals with few partisan ties that are "up for grabs" so to speak during elections (Reilly, Salit, and Ali 2022). However, for decades it has been known that the majority of these self-identified independents behave and believe in very predictable and partisan ways (Keith et al. 1992; Klar and Krupnikov 2016; Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2022).

This work is based on the realization that many individuals who select "independent" when first asked, do so primarily as a function of social desirability bias instead of as an accurate reflection of their true partisan preferences (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). However, the majority of those who indicate "independent" the first time they are asked are, in fact, willing to reveal partisan preferences in a follow-up question that asks respondents if they tend to lean toward one party or the other more frequently. These independent leaners not only make up the vast majority of all individuals who select independent in the first partisanship question (one-click independents) but also constitute a large proportion of Americans generally (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2022). Independent leaners have sometimes been described as undercover partisans due to how partisan their attitudes, behaviors, and political preferences tend to be. For instance, leaning independents tend to vote overwhelmingly for the presidential candidates of the party they lean towards, largely align with the policy and ideological positions of the party they lean toward, hold implicit partisan identities with similar or greater strength than many self-identified partisans, and are more likely to vote in general than two-click independents. (Keith et al. 1992; Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2022; Theodoridis 2017).

After accounting for independents who self-identify as partisan leaners, we are left with a group that the literature often calls pure or true independents. These are the people who select "independent" twice, once in the partisan self-identifying question and a second time in the partisan lean question.¹ These independents have been the subject of much literature identifying who they are, what their political attitudes, behaviors, and motivations are, and how they categorically differ from both self-identified partisans and self-identified partisan leaners (Keith et al. 1986, 1992; Klar 2014; Magleby and Nelson 2012; Thornton 2013; 義人 2006). This work has shown that true independents are politically unstable (Reilly and Hunting 2023), that their ideology tends to be more moderate and that their social networks are more politically diverse (Reilly and Hedberg 2022). They are less likely to engage in formal political behavior like voting (Magleby and Nelson 2012) and they express a stronger preference for incumbent candidates

¹ A small portion of two-click independents select 'other' rather than 'independent' in the first partisanship question, but in the lean question, 'other' is not generally given as an option.

than self-identified partisan learners or self-identified partisans (Sniderman and Highton 2011). This literature is robust, and it is beyond dispute that respondents who selected independent twice -- two-click independents² -- are, *in the aggregate*, less partisan than groups with any amount of self-identified partisan preference, lean or otherwise.

However, it is important to note that almost all of the claims that are often made about two-click independents can also be made about one-click independents when looked at in aggregate without the filtering lens of the lean question. A cursory look at the ANES and many other datasets reveals that those who select independent the first time are also more moderate, less likely to vote, and more likely to split ballots than those with self-identified partisanship (Campbell et al. 1980; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Reilly, Salit, and Ali 2022). An argument to this end can be found in *The American Voter*, which is likely why the authors largely ignored the lean questions for the majority of the analysis even though they had that data. Despite this, it is standard practice now to filter one-click independents out by the lean question. Doing so makes it apparent that, while in the aggregate, one-click independents are less partisan than other self-identified partisans, many of these individuals do have partisan attachments, and accounting for these partisan attachments improves our understanding of the partisan landscape and enhances our models of many political outcomes.

While two-click independents look distinct from self-identified partisans in aggregate, this does not mean that two-click independents themselves don't have partisan attachments. Indeed, many authors have speculated about the presence of those with partisan attachments among two-click independents (Campbell et al. 1980; Klar and Krupnikov 2016; Theodoridis 2017). The difficulty is that many of the measures that we might want to use to uncover these partisan attachments are the very political outcomes that we would like to model, creating an endogeneity problem (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). This has meant that measuring partisan attachment has, by and large, been done using only self-identification measures, and as such, attempting to measure and utilize the partisan attachment of two-click independents is very uncommon in political science (Theodoridis 2017). However, implicit measures of partisan identity, including among two-click independents, are not unheard of.³ Hawkins and Nosek (2012) demonstrated that many independents including two-click independents have implicit partisan identities and that these partisan identities can and do predict partisan-like behavior just as the partisan lean questions can. Utilizing similar Implicit Association Tests, Theodoridis (2017) also found that two-click independents have implicit partisan identities.

² While these individuals go by various names in the literature, sometimes simplifying to be referred to as independents, or sometimes pure or true independents, we chose to call them two-click independents in order to reflect the fact that they selected 'other' or 'independent' in the first partisan question and "independent" in the second partisan question thus clicking independent twice. Two-click independent lacks the ascriptive sanctity that the other titles can impart, reflecting our belief that this group of individuals is largely a product of survey design and not something pure, true, or inherent.

³ Implicit-association tests are intended to detect subconscious associations. They attempt to do so by having respondents rapidly categorize two target concepts with an attribute. For example, Democrats and Republicans with the attribute 'selfish.' When the pairing coincides with the respondent's perception, it should be easier for them to process, leading to quicker completion of the task than if the pairing seems unnatural to the respondent (Nosek, Greenwald, and Banaji 2005).

While Implicit Association Tests provide evidence that many two-click independents have partisan attachments and may be useful in certain research applications. However, their is still a rigorous debate on their validity generally (Carlsson and Agerström 2016; Kurdi et al. 2019; Nosek, Greenwald, and Banaji 2005) and have two notable drawbacks for this specific application. First, they are not simple to implement in most survey settings; second, they are simply not present on the large publicly available surveys that form the bedrock of individual-level political attitudes research in the US. Taken together, this means that Implicit Association Tests for the partisan attachments of two-click independents are inaccessible to most researchers and practitioners. However, these tests do provide evidence for the idea that many two-click independents do have partisan attachments. If these attachments exist then finding simple accessible ways to identify them in surveys would help improve our understanding of the partisan landscape and enhance our models of many political outcomes just as the self-identifying lean questions did when they first began to be used.

Up to this point in the literature, there have been three primary challenges to measuring partisanship. First, social desirability bias leads individuals to underreport their partisan attachments. To a great extent, the incorporation of partisan lean questions into the standard measure of partisanship addressed this, but we have evidence that there are at least some individuals who selected independently in the lean question who do have partisan attachments. So social desirability bias is still likely a aberari to capturing some respondents' partisan attachments. Second, almost all other explicit survey items that might be used to determine the partisan attachments of these individuals are often the very factors we want to use partisanship to predict, and as such, are ill-fit to define partisanship itself. Third, while Implicit Association Tests overcome the first two obstacles, their inaccessibility severely limits their utility to most researchers. To meaningfully measure the partisan leanings of two-click independents, all three of these limitations: social desirability, endogeneity, and accessibility need to be addressed. The survey instrument would need to be: less prone to social desirability bias than the traditional partisanship or lean questions, not be an item that researchers are interested in predicting with partisanship, and be widely accessible, meaning it's present in most of the important political science surveys such as the American National Election Study (ANES), the Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), and others. Lastly, it must be simple to integrate into original surveys moving forward. We posit and present evidence that the “affective lean” of two-click independents from the partisan feeling thermometers provides just such an opportunity.

Affective lean

Affective lean is derived by taking the difference between the two partisan feeling thermometers to determine which party the two-click independent feels warmer towards. Because affective lean is derived from partisan feeling thermometers, it is important to briefly delineate its distinction from other common derivatives of the partisan feeling thermometers. Perhaps the most common product of partisan feeling thermometers is affective polarization.

Affective polarization can be measured in a number of ways but is most commonly done by taking the absolute difference between the Republican and Democratic feeling thermometers (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). Taking the absolute value of this difference strips affective polarization of any sense of directionality, leaving only the magnitude of the difference in feeling regarding the two major parties. The second most common use of feeling thermometers in political science is probably out-party animus. Out-party animus is found by first identifying which political party the respondent self-identifies with and then observing their feeling thermometer score for the relevant out-party (Druckman et al. 2022).⁴ Just as with affective polarization, the partisan direction of the animus is stripped out of this measure. Affective lean is distinct as it is only concerned with the partisan direction of respondents' feelings; while both other measures are completely devoid of direction. When used as outlined above, the raw variable of affective lean is categorical with three levels: "Affective Democratic-leaning independent," "No-lean Independent," and "Affective Republican-leaning independent."

We believe that using the affective lean of two-click independents addresses each of the three challenges that have limited the discipline's ability to account for the partisan attachment of two-click independents. We address them each in turn. First, because these feeling thermometers ask respondents to evaluate their feelings towards the political parties one at a time, they don't require the respondent to explicitly pick one party over the other as the traditional partisan identity questions do. We argue that this non-exclusive nature of partisan feeling thermometers provides respondents with a way to indicate which political party they lean towards without triggering as strong a social desirability bias as the traditional partisan identity questions, including the lean question, do. Second, regarding the issue of endogeneity, there is limited or no research that has attempted to model affective lean. Affective lean is not like other political data such as ideology, policy preferences, and vote choice, which are each of substantial importance in their own right. Thus, researchers are very unlikely to use the partisan attachment of two-click independents derived by affective lean to predict or model affective lean, thus avoiding the endogeneity problem. In regards to accessibility, feeling thermometers are simple to implement and a common component of many political surveys. Affective lean is a widely accessible measure that can be used to detect the partisan attachments of two-click independents both in

⁴ We chose to frame these phenomena as conceptually distinct, despite a trend in the literature to conflate affective polarization and out-party animus. This trend is likely due to famous results that demonstrate that the growth of affective polarization over the past few decades has largely been driven by out-party animus (Iyengar et al., 2019), leading many researchers to choose to focus on out-party animus while still using the language of affective polarization. The result is that there are competing definitions and thus operationalizations of affective polarization, sometimes even within a single author's work. Eminent affective polarization scholar James N. Druckman epitomizes this. In "Affective polarization in the American public" (2018), James N. Druckman and Jeremy Levy define affective polarization as "the gap between individuals' positive feelings toward their own political party and negative feelings toward the opposing party," this is the traditional definition and the one we use in this paper. However, in "(Mis)estimating Affective Polarization" (2022), James N. Druckman et al. define affective polarization as "the tendency of ordinary partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party." We feel definitions like these muddle the distinction between affective polarization and out-party animus and as such do not use them in this paper.

historical datasets like the ANES and in original survey work, even if the researchers were not intending to collect the affective lean of two-click independents.

Measuring and accounting for the partisan attachments of two-click independents have historically been quite challenging, but affective lean, with its low social desirability bias, lack of an endogeneity concern, and wide accessibility, appears to, at least theoretically, hurdle each of the traditional obstacles. However this promise can only be delivered if: 1) a sizable portion of two-click independents has an affective lean, 2) that affective lean is indicative of real partisan attachment, and 3) accounting for the affective lean of two-click independents noticeably improves our ability to model various political outcomes for two-click independents.

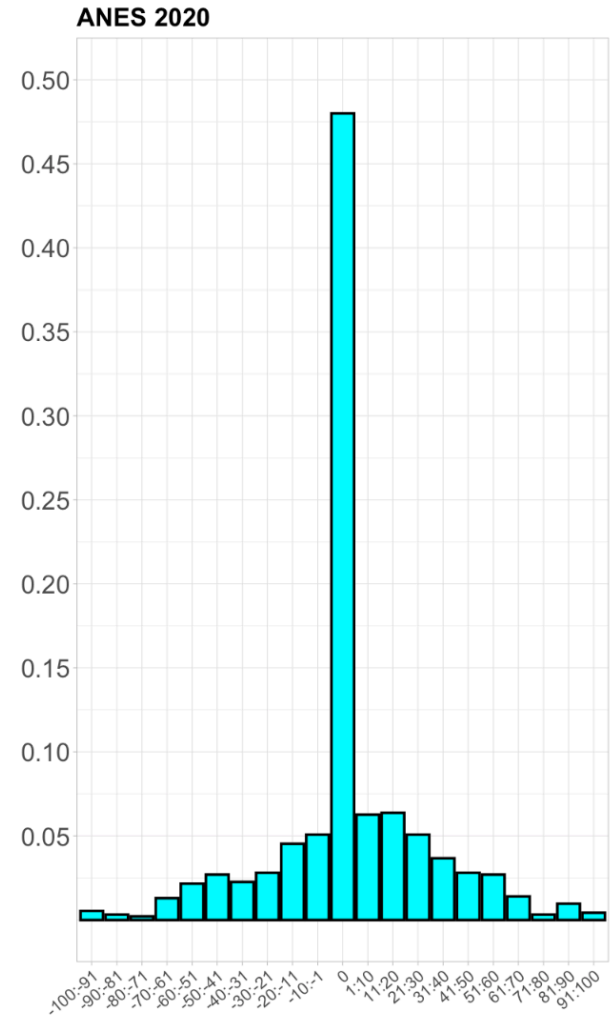
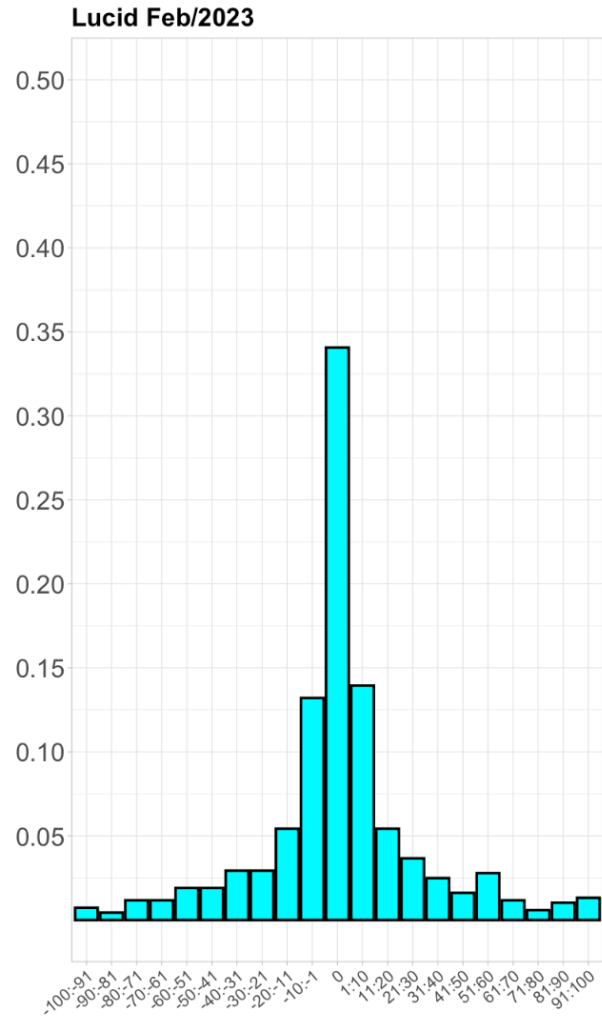
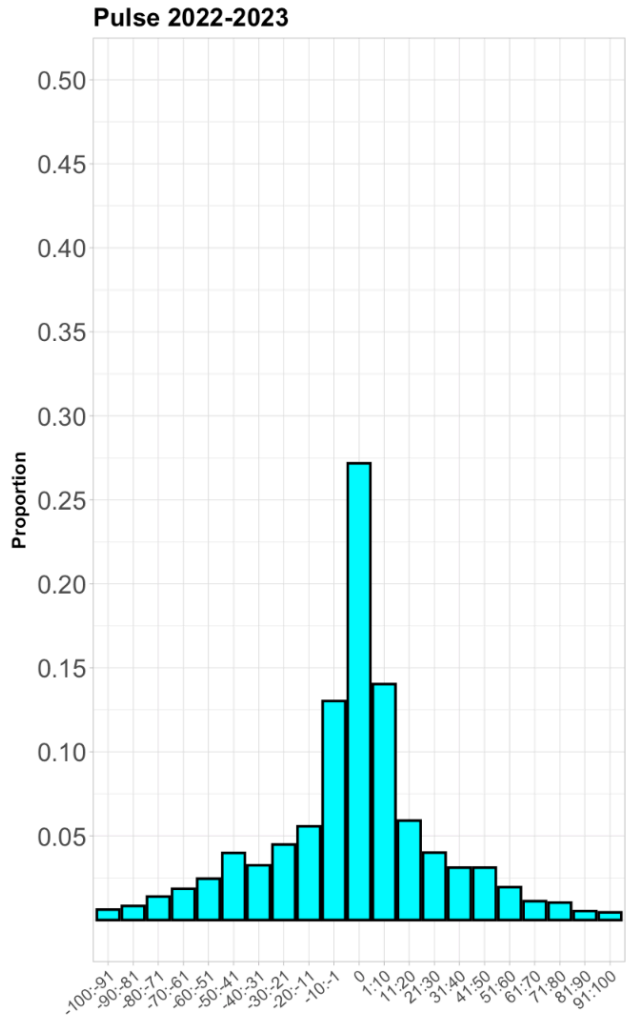
Prevalence of affective lean among two-click independents

Figure 1 below demonstrates the distribution of the affective lean among two-click independents in the American Pulse from 2022 to 2023, from an original survey conducted in February 2023, and the 2020 ANES (American National Election Studies 2021; Iyengar, Lelkes, and Westwood 2023). Representing a sample size of 10,527, 681, and 925 two-click independents respectively. Although the specific proportion of two-click independents with an affective lean varies by survey, in each of these surveys the majority of two-click independents feel warmer towards one political party than they do towards the other.⁵ For instance, in the American Pulse Data Set (Pulse), 72% of all two-click independents have some affective lean, and 37% have an affective lean of more than 21 points. It is difficult to imagine that a respondent who reports such clear differences in feelings towards the parties is best thought of as being a pure independent.

In several large independent surveys during the early 2020s, the majority of two-click independents are willing to indicate that they feel more warmly toward one party than the other when asked to independently evaluate their feelings towards Democrats and Republicans, even if they are reluctant to do so in the mutually exclusive framework of the traditional self-identification questions. While this may be true in the early 2020s, that does not mean that it has always been this way. Utilizing the Partisan Feeling Thermometers in the ANES, it is possible to look at the prevalence of affective leaning independents over time. The stacked area plot represented by Figure 2 plots the proportions of different levels of partisanship, including affective-leaning independents, from 1996 up to 2020. Figure 2 reveals that affective leaners

⁵ While we see the same trend in each survey, there is no doubt that the presence of no-lean independents varies drastically by survey, representing 27%, 34%, and 48% of their respective surveys. This variance could have several causes, perhaps most obviously the different sampling strategies of the different surveys, with the ANES having a more rigorous sampling procedure than the other two. It is not unreasonable to suspect that no-lean independents are less likely to end up taking a political survey on the Lucid platform than in a higher quality sample such as those used by the ANES. Another possible explanation of this variance is that the presence of no-lean independents dropped between 2020 and 2023. Comparing between surveys is not sufficient to test this because of the confounding nature of these surveys' differing methodologies. However, looking within the Pulse data, which took place over the course of a year, there is a moderate correlation (0.44) between the temporal element of the survey and the proportion of no-lean independents out of all survey respondents. This is suggestive and is an interesting point of inquiry for further research.

being the majority of two-click independents is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the affective leaners being the minority of two-click independents up until 2012 and then remaining



Affective Lean of Two-click Independents

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⁶ Figure 1

relatively stable through 2020. While the exact proportion of affective-leaning independents both out of all two-click independents and out of the entire sample has varied over time, since 1996 they have always been a substantial proportion of two-click independents and a modest but notable proportion of all respondents.

The Partisan Social Identity of Affective leaners

While many two-click independents have an identifiable affective lean, it is possible that this affective lean is less a meaningful indicator of partisan preferences than it is simply a result of clicking through feeling thermometers. Feeling thermometers themselves have been controversial at times (Brady 1985), and partisan feeling thermometers in particular have been called into question (Green 1988). While recent scholarship has found that these feeling thermometers are largely a reliable way to measure feelings towards the political parties (Tyler and Iyengar 2023), it is not impossible that affective lean among two-click independents is simply the result of survey error. To address this, we explore the extent to which affective learners have a partisan social identity in alignment with their affective partisan leanings.

Political scientists have been talking about partisanship as a form of social identity for decades and now it is one of the most prominent ways to view partisanship in the American context (Greene 1999; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Mason 2018). The strength of a partisan social identity is traditionally measured in the way that Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) proposed. That is by asking the following four questions:

How well does the term [Republican/Democrat](#) describe you?

Extremely well, Very well, Not very well, Not at all

When talking about [Republicans/Democrats](#) how often do you use the term we instead of they?

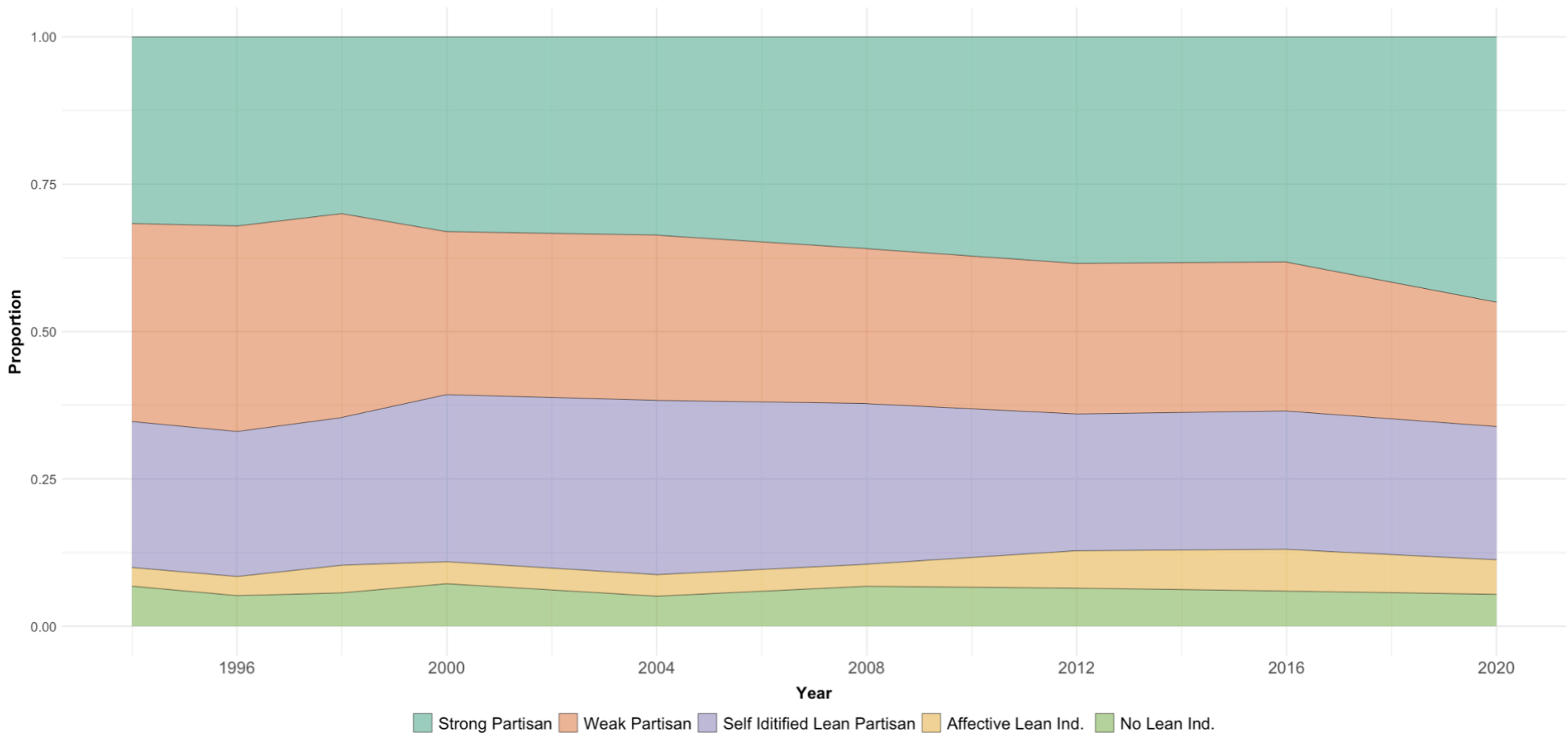
All the time, Most of the time, Some of the time, Never

To what extent do you think of yourself as being a [republican/democrat](#)?

A great deal, Some wheat, Very little, Not at all.

How important is being a [republican/democrat](#) to you?

Extremely important, Very important, Not very important, not important at all



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⁷ Figure 2

While this question battery is excellent at uncovering the strength of a partisan social identity among those who self-identify as partisans, due to the content-controlled nature of these questions, they haven't been meaningfully applied to two-click incidents (Theodoridis, 2017). However, using the affective lean of two-click independents allows us to insert the partisan content into these questions and ask if affective learners have a partisan social identity in the direction of their affective lean. To do this we rely on original lucid data collected in February of 2023. Figure 3 displays the mean strength of the partisan social identity at the varying levels of partisanship for both political parties.

Figure 3

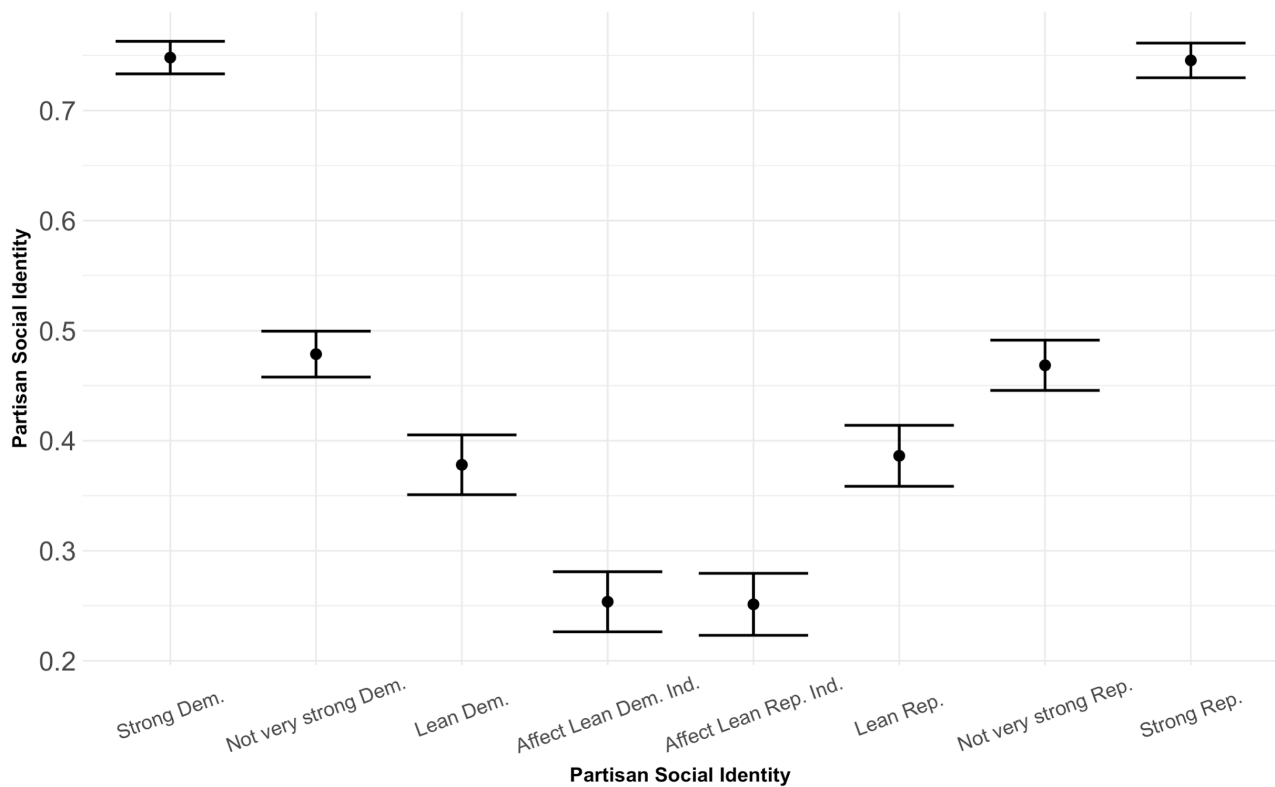


Figure 3 is a test of convergent validity between Huddy's Partisan Social Identity measure and the traditional partisan identity scale with the addition of affective learners. As we would expect, if these two measures had convergent validity, respondents who strongly self-identify as a partisan have by far the strongest sense of partisan social identity, and with every step down the partisanship scale, there is an associated decrease in the strength of the partisan social identity until we arrive at affective learners. Historically, these individuals would have been categorized as independents and would not have been provided with these questions.

However, by utilizing the affective lean of these respondents, we can assign them to the appropriate partisan treatment and measure the strength of their partisan social identity.⁸

Note that while affective leaners on average have the weakest sense of partisan social identity compared to other partisans (as one would expect), they do, in fact, have a partisan identity. The mean strength of the partisan social identity of affective-leaning independents hovers right around a partisan social identity score of .25, with the lower bounds of both confidence intervals hovering around .22.⁹ The strength of the average affective-leaning independent's partisan social identity is a quarter of the scale away from 0, with average scores being closer to that of self-identified partisan leaners than they are to not having a partisan social identity. Every one of the questions in this battery has a response option that essentially says, "I don't have this social identity" or "This social identity is not applicable to me." While that option was frequently chosen by two-click independents, in all but one question, a majority of affective-leaning independents did not choose it, opting to indicate some level of partisan social identity. In total, 69.4% of all affective leaners indicated some level of partisan social identity.^{10,11,12} Meaning that a large majority of affective leaners are willing to indicate on a survey that they have a partisan social identity even if they refuse to indicate a partisan identity in the traditional questions. That social identity is consistent with the party that they affectively lean towards, and the strength of that social identity fits in with where we would expect it to when considering affective leaning independents as an added level of partisan identity to the traditional scale. This provides evidence that the affective lean of two-click independents is not simply some arbitrary artifact of the partisan feeling thermometers but indicative of a level of partisan attachment.

Partisan outcomes

Up to this point, we have demonstrated that 1) affective-leaning independents, both now and in the past, have made up a substantial proportion of all two-click independents, and 2) that the majority of affective-leaning independents do in fact have a partisan social identity consistent with the direction of their affective lean. The final analysis we will perform in this article is to

⁸ While beyond the scope of this paper, using affective learning to assign partisan content-control content to two-click independents is another very promising application of affective lean that warrants further research.

⁹ And just as at every other level of partisanship the strength of the partisan social identity is nearly identical between those that have attachments to the Republican party and those that have attachments to the democratic party.

¹⁰ This analysis, and every other one performed on the Lucid or pulse data, excluded respondents who did not pass an attention check.

¹¹ Some might argue that indicating the second lowest option for the items in this battery is equivalent to communicating that the respondent doesn't have that identity. However, it is worth considering how you would respond if presented with questions about a social identity you do not have, such as the opposing political party, a racial, gender, or religious identity that you do not hold. For example, consider the first item in the battery: "How well does the term _____ describe you?" If you do not identify with that term at all, which response option seems most appealing to you: "Not very well" or "Not at all"?

¹² Additionally, some of them carry a very strong partisan social identity, with 15% of all affective-leaning independents scoring higher than 0.5 on the partisan social identity index.

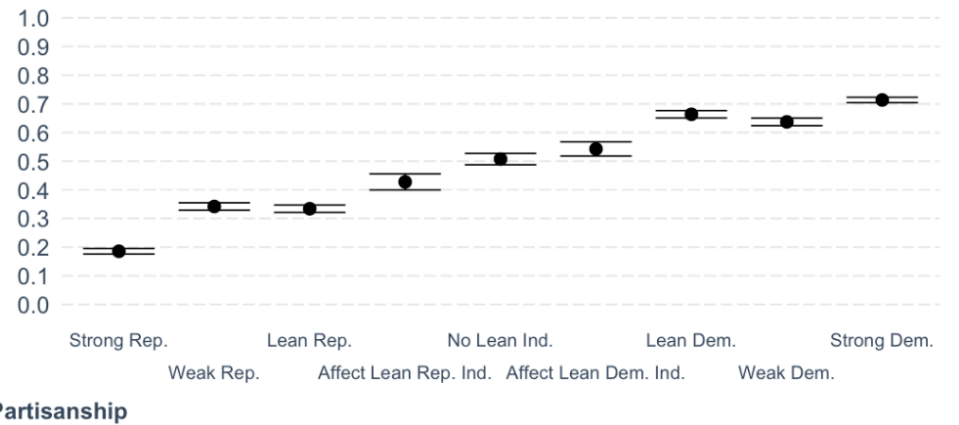
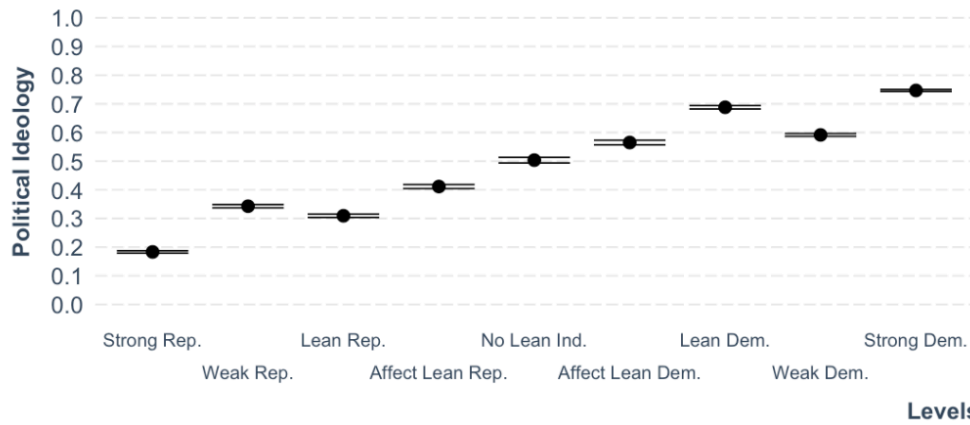
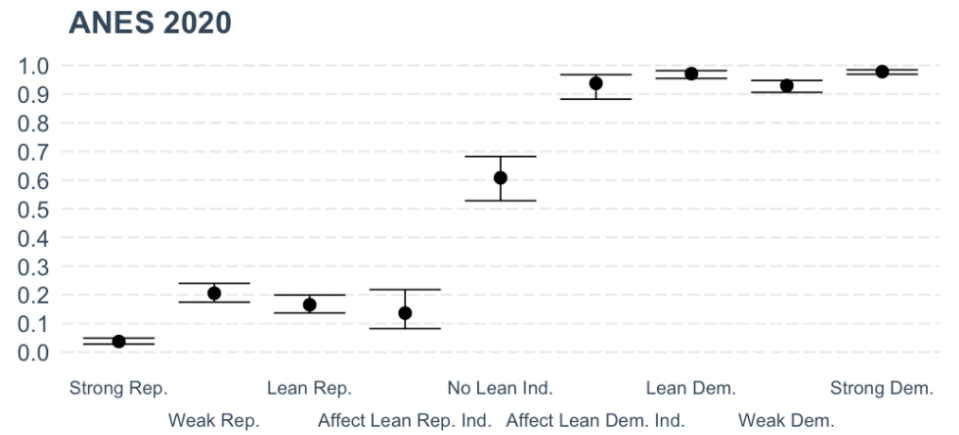
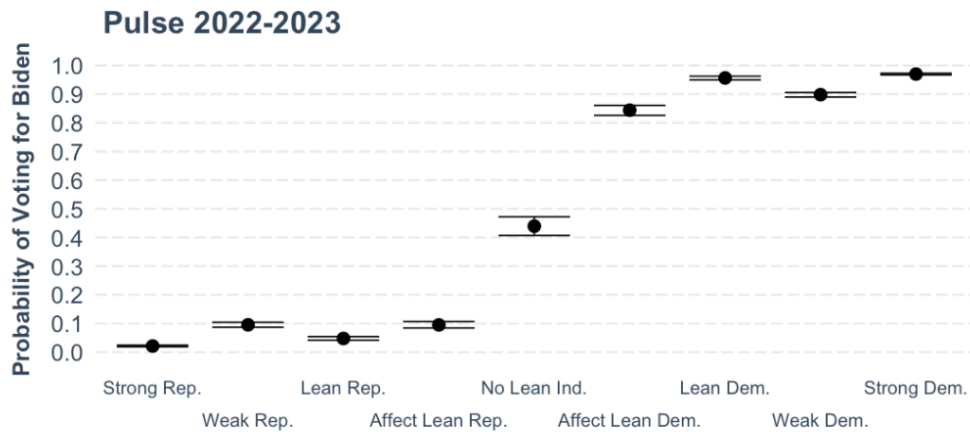
determine whether the affective lean of two-click independents predicts partisan preferences and behaviors among two-click independents, just as accounting for the self-identified lean of one-click independents made partisan order arise out of a previously unsystematic scene. Using the Pulse and the 2020 ANES Figures 4 and 5 address this question. Figure 4 explores the effect of the directionality of two-click independents' affective lean. Do affective learners who lean towards Republicans choose candidates and hold a political ideology similar to how self-identified Republicans and self-identified Republican leaners do, and does the same apply to Democrats? To answer these questions, Figure 4 presents the predicted probability of voting for President Biden as opposed to voting for Trump in the 2020 election and the mean left-right ideology score (liberal high) for the various levels of partisanship from the traditional levels of partisanship with the addition of affective leaning two-click independents.¹³ This changes the traditional seven-level scale centered around “Pure Independents” to a nine-level scale centered around “No-lean Independents”, flanked on either side by affective-leaning independents from the two political parties, and then follows the remaining traditional levels of partisanship.

Figure 4 demonstrates that two-click independents overwhelmingly vote for the presidential candidate from the political party associated with their lean. Indeed, they vote for the candidate from their preferred party at rates very similar to various types of self-identified parties or self-identified partisan leaners. In the ANES Affective learners are statistically indistinguishable from self-identified partisans, with the point estimate actually being more partisan in some cases than the self-identified partisans. A similar trend appears in the Pulse data, although the increased sample size reduces the uncertainty sufficiently that in most cases, affective learners are statistically distinct from self-identified partisans from the same party in the direction of slightly less partisan-like candidate preference during the 2020 presidential election. However, the difference in magnitude between affective leaners and self-identified partisans is minuscule when compared to the magnitude of difference between affective learners and no-lean independents. No-lean independents from both surveys hold a similar likelihood of voting for one candidate over the other, while affective leaners overwhelmingly support the candidate from the party that they lean toward. Remember that in both of these surveys, affective-leaning independents make up the majority of all two-click independents. Before incorporating the affective lean of these two-click independents, predicting who they would vote for was essentially a coin flip. But once the affective lean of these two-click independents is accounted for, we can predict with high accuracy which presidential candidate they will select. This increase in predictive accuracy, of course, corresponds to increases in model fit. Even when controlling for all standard predictors of vote choice, including the affective lean of two-click independents into the models, results in higher pseudo R^2 and lower AIC when compared to models that do not include this information. These improvements in model performance are large when only modeling the vote choice of two-click independents and modest when predicting the candidate selection among all survey respondents. This is what one would expect as

¹³ Voting for Biden was modeled logistically, while left-right ideology was modeled with ordinary least squares regression. The regression table associated with each of these models are available in Appendix XX.

affective-leaning independents make up the majority of all two-click independents in these studies while making up a relatively small proportion of respondents overall.

Turning to political ideology, we can see that affective leaners fit very nicely into the traditional seven-level operationalization of partisanship, with affective leaners being statistically and meaningfully more ideological in the direction that we would expect given their affective lean. While at the same time being slightly less ideological than those who hold a self-identified partisanship. If modeled traditionally, the affective leaners would be coded among the two-click independents and would essentially cancel each other out, leaving two-click independents in the middle of the distribution and widening the confidence intervals for that group. Once their affective lean is taken into account, however, their partisan-like inclinations are able to be observed. The same trend is apparent in both the Pulse and the ANES. As with candidate selection, including affective lean once again improves model performance when compared to models that do not take it into account. Although the model improvements are more modest in the case of predicting ideology than for vote choice, as would be expected given Figure 4 which demonstrates that the magnitude of the effect on ideology is substantially smaller than it was in candidate selection.



Levels of Partisanship

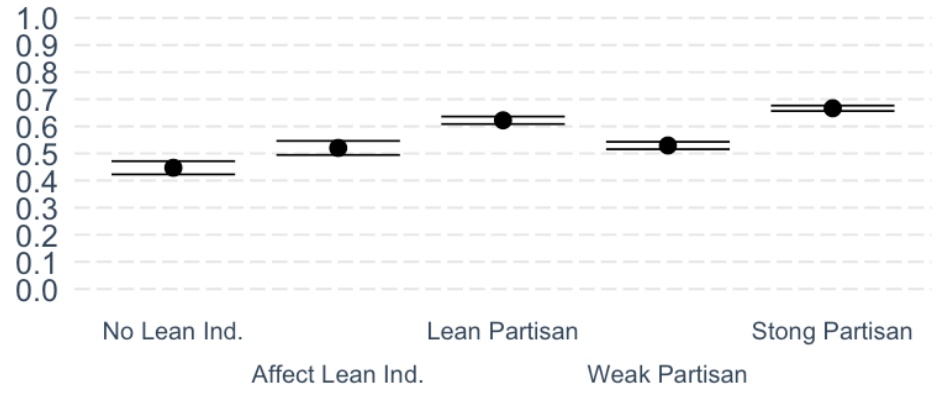
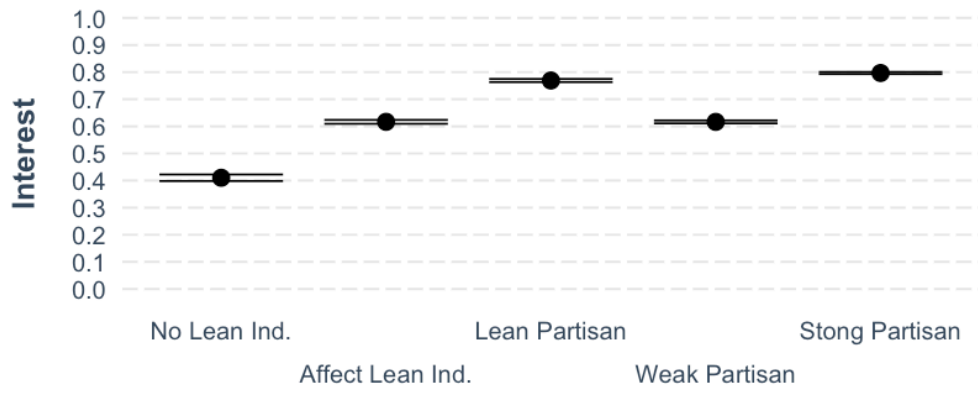
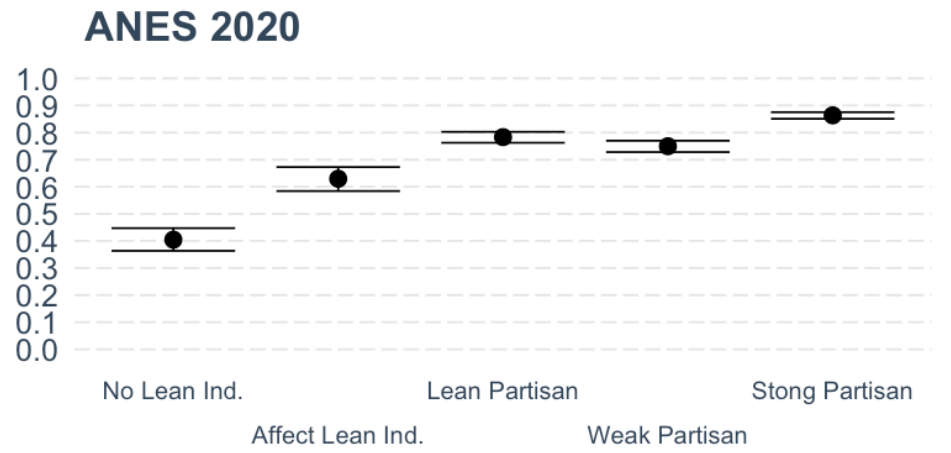
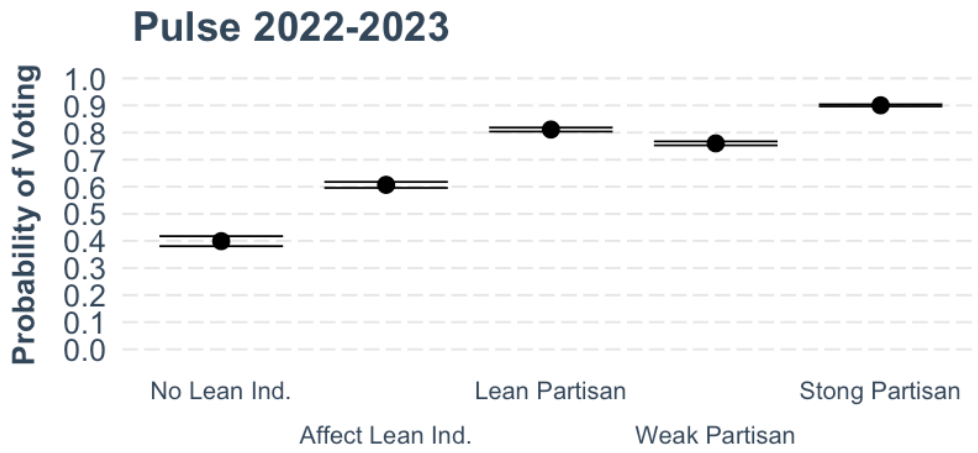
Turning now to Figure 5, the partisan-like preferences and attitudes among affective leaners extend not only to measures that we associate with the direction of partisanship like political ideology or candidate preference but also to measures that we associate with partisanship itself, such as interest in politics/news¹⁵ and voter participation. Once again, these analyses were performed in the Pulse and the ANES. However, this time the independent variable is not partisanship, but instead the strength of that partisanship in a folded measure. Traditionally, this measure would have four levels: “Pure independent”, “Lean partisan”, “Weak partisan”, and “Strong partisan”. Utilizing the affective lean of two-click independents, we use a five-level scale: “No-lean independent”, “Affective Leaning Independent”, “Lean partisan”, “Weak partisan”, and “Strong partisan”.

Looking at both Interest and voter participation simultaneously. As one would expect increased levels of partisanship lead to increased levels of voter participation and interest, with the notable exception that self-identified leaners often outperform weak partisans in this and other regards. We see that affective leaners fit right into this paradigm. With affective leaners in every case being both meaningfully and statistically more partisan in each of these particular outcomes and scores both for these surveys than no-lean independents while simultaneously being meaningfully and statistically less partisan in each of these behaviors/dispositions than self-identifying lean partisans. As before, taking into account the affective lean of two-click independents yields to a meaningfully better model performance when modeling each of these variables of interest than models that group together all two-click independents. With the result being worse predictions both for no-lean independents and for affectively leaning independents.¹⁶

Each plot in Figures 4 and 5 tells the same story: that affective partisan leaners are partisan in the direction that would be expected and the strength of their partisan response is consistently less than, but often close to, those of self-identified partisans fitting in nicely with established levels of partisanship. Accounting for the affective lean of two-click independents reveals clear partisan patterns and preferences among a substantial proportion of two-click independents, confirming that a lack of partisanship in aggregate does not imply a lack of partisan attachments on the individual level. Accounting for those partisan attachments yields meaningfully and statistically better-performing models of various political outcomes, especially when modeling two-click independents but when modeling all respondents as well, even after accounting for a whole host of standard controls.

¹⁵ While both the Pulse and the ANES have “interest” questions, they are operationalized differently. While the ANES asks respondents to report their interest in politics and the Pulse asks respondents to report their interest in the news. While there is meaningful overlap between these two concepts as much news is political, the two are not identical as a lot of news is not inherently political in nature. This may explain the difference in the range of average responses in the two different surveys, with the difference between no-lean independents and strong partisans spanning about 20 points in the Pulse, while only spanning about 15 points in the ANES. By the same token, however, the nature of the relationship between partisan strength and both types of interest is nearly identical, hence our decision to include them together.

¹⁶Full regression tables and model comparisons corresponding to the plots found in Figure five can be found in Appendix XXX.



Partisanship Strength

17

¹⁷ Figure 5

Discussion

The tendency for survey respondents to underreport their partisan attachments is well documented, and while the inclusion of self-identified partisan leaners into our operationalization of partisanship drastically improves our ability to accurately account for a substantial portion of that underreported partisanship, the possibility that it is still underreported has often been discussed (Hawkins and Nosek 2012; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Theodoridis 2017). However uncovering these partisan attachments has always been difficult because of the social desirability bias attached to being perceived as non-partisan (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), the Endogeneity issues associated with using non-self-identified partisanship measures as evidence for partisanship, such as vote choice or ideology, and the inaccessibility of implicit attitudes tests, which, while solving the first two problems, are difficult to implement and uncommon in our large, publicly used datasets. We propose that using the partisan feeling thermometers to ascertain the “affective lean” of two-click independents represents a meaningful step forward in measuring previously undiscovered partisan attachment of those who are reluctant to claim a self-identified partisan identity. First, we argue that affective lean is able to succeed in this feat whereas other measures have failed because the partisan feeling thermometers are not as intrusive as the self-identified partisanship questions are. This means that respondents don’t have to explicitly pick one party over the other, but instead rate their warmth towards each party individually. This survey design characteristic makes it much easier for social-desirability-sensitive respondents to indicate which party they prefer without having to claim a party as their own.

Second, we observe that affective lean is able to overcome the second hurdle (Endogeneity) by being of little interest of its own. Among self-identified partisans, their affective lean matches their self-identified partisan identity at very high rates,¹⁸ and as such, for the vast majority of respondents, it is redundant to model with partisanship itself. As such, incorporating affective lean into our operationalization of partisanship is very unlikely to result in researchers modeling affective lean, with affective lean. Third, affective lean overcomes the accessibility hurdle as partisan feeling thermometers are one of the most ubiquitous survey measures in political science research. Meaning that the affective lean of two-click independents is already available in many pre-existing datasets, will continue to be available in many datasets that do not intend to calculate the affective lean of two-click independents, and are very simple to integrate into surveys that otherwise might not have included them but want to account for the affective lean of two-click independents. Taken together, this means that affective lean is theoretically an ideal measure for accounting for the partisan attachments of two-click independents.

¹⁸ 92%, 88%, and 90% in the Pulse, lucid, and 2020 ANES respectively, with only 5% ,4%, and 7% having a lean in the direction of the opposing party.

Coupling the strong theoretical argument for using affective lean to capture the partisan attachment of two-click independents with the empirical evidence that:

1. Affective leaning independents make up a large portion, if not a majority, of all two-click independents,
2. A large majority of these affective leaners have and, perhaps more meaningful for this group, are willing to report a partisan social identity in the same direction as their partisan lean,
3. Incorporating affective leaning independents significantly and meaningfully improves our ability to model many political outcomes of interest both among all respondents generally but specifically when modeling the attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of two-click independents.

We present a strong case that incorporating affective-leaning independents into our operationalization of partisanship is to the advantage of both political science researchers, pollsters, and practitioners. Just as incorporating the partisan lean questions into our operationalization of partisan identity (PID) moved the field from PID5 to PID7, we propose integrating the affective lean of two-click independents into our operationalization of partisan identity, moving from PID7 to PID9. This includes levels corresponding to: Strong Partisan, Weak Partisan, Self-identifying lean partisan, Affective lean independent, and No-lean independent. This is simple to do and has several direct benefits. First, for those interested in modeling the political attitudes, behavior, and preferences of two-click independents incorporating their affective lean dramatically improves our ability to predict outcomes of political interest. It essentially brings the discerning and clarifying light of partisanship, one of, if not the most important organizing principles of American politics, to a group that heretofore we could only observe in the dark.

Second, the partisan landscape of American politics has long been known to be stark and domineering, with partisanship affecting almost every corner of people's lives—political outcomes like candidate and policy preference to where they live, whom they date, their religious identity, the type of cars they buy, how much compensation they are willing to except for work, and much more (Easton and Holbein 2021; Egan 2020; Gimpel and Hui 2015; Hetherington and Weiler 2018; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; McConnell et al. 2018). This, in addition to individuals' willingness to prioritize partisan advantage over democratic values (Bankert 2024; Graham and Svolic 2020), means that partisanship is even more important to understand now than ever before. Incorporating affective-leaning independents into our understanding of the partisan landscape helps us correct for underreported partisanship, thereby allowing us to see more of the partisan landscape than we were before.

While the primary focus of this article revolves around the partisan attachments of affective leaning independents, incorporating those partisan attachments into our operationalization of partisanship inadvertently introduces a new category at the center of our partisanship measure: No-Lean independents. Throughout this paper, we have consistently

referred to the center category in PID7 as two-click independents, emphasizing that this group is merely a product of survey design. The term "No-Lean independents" was chosen with the same rationale. We have demonstrated that the majority of two-click independents exhibit measurable partisan attachments that lead to distinctly partisan outcomes, thereby challenging the notion of their independence as being "pure" or "true." Similarly, we contend that there is likely nothing particularly distinctive about No-Lean independents. While they may indeed possess weaker partisan attachments on average compared to affective-leaning independents, it is equally plausible, in our view, that the primary distinguishing factor between the two groups lies in an increased sensitivity to social desirability bias not a lack of partisan attachments.

Looking to future research, this article presents a multitude of new questions and avenues for further investigation. Beginning with No-Lean independents, are they more susceptible to social desirability bias compared to affective-leaning independents? Similarly, are affective-leaning independents more sensitive to social desirability bias than self-identified partisan leaners? Additionally, is there convergent validity between implicit association tests for partisan attachments and affective lean? We speculate that two-click independents who score highly on the partisan implicit attitudes test likely have affective lean toward the partisan implicit attitudes, but this cannot be directly tested without conducting implicit attitude tests. Likewise, what do implicit attitude tests reveal about the partisan attachments of No-Lean independents? Furthermore, who are these Affective Leaning Independents, and what are the underlying factors driving their affective leanings? These are all essential questions that warrant further exploration and investigation in future research endeavors. How stable is the position—is it primarily expressive or instrumental? Can affective lean be utilized to allocate partisan content-controlled treatments and wordings to two-click independents? Has the percentage of No-Lean two-click independents indicating an affective partisan leaning been increasing in recent years, and if so, what factors may be contributing to this trend? What is the effect of the magnitude of the lean? It would also be interesting and helpful to directly compare the strength of two-click independents' social identities towards the Democratic and Republican parties. This comparison is particularly intriguing concerning No-Lean independents but would be valuable for assessing the claims made in this paper regarding the strength of the social identity of affective-leaning independents as well.

Conclusion

While these represent promising directions for future research, for now, we focus on the important implications expressed in this article. Researchers and practitioners stand to improve their models, predictions, and understanding of the attitudes of two-click independents specifically, and enhance our understanding of the American partisan landscape generally by incorporating affective lean into our operationalization of partisanship. Additionally, these gains come with little to no drawbacks; in many cases, nothing about survey design needs to be altered to take advantage of these benefits, merely adding a couple of lines of code to your standard data

cleaning procedure.¹⁹ If researchers do need to integrate the partisan feeling thermometers into their surveys to capture the affective lean of two-click independents, the procedure is simple and will not significantly increase the length of their surveys. As such, we strongly recommend that those interested in modeling political attitudes, behaviors, and preferences, or interested in understanding or controlling for the effects of partisanship, incorporate affective lean into their operationalization of partisanship.

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¹⁹ See Appendix XXX for an explanation of the coding procedure in R and possibly Stata.

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