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The Declarations of Independents: Open-Ended Survey Responses and the Nature of Non-Identification

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Abstract:

While a substantial portion of the American public has identified as politically "independent" in recent years, the conventional wisdom is that most (particularly independent "leaners") are secretly partisans. However, we argue that distinctions can be found in independents' spoken attitudes toward the political parties, and furthermore that the parties' associations with "politics" are related to political independence. Using ANES open-ended responses from 1984–2020, we perform two empirical exercises to examine the distinctions between independents and partisans' spoken attitudes toward the two major political parties. First, we use a combination of Structural Topic Models and Support Vector Machines to compare the themes that independents and partisans use when saying what they "dislike" about the parties, and show that leaning independents are dissimilar to self-identified partisans in how they speak about the party they favor and roughly as dissimilar as pure independents. Next, we dive deeper into potential reasons for non-identification in the "dislikes" about the parties and show that pure and leaning independents are more likely than self-identified partisans to mention a topic related to "politics" expressed in forms such as political cynicism, concern about the influence of special interest groups, or distaste for partisan conflict. Our findings suggest that there are meaningful ways beyond voting behavior in which independents differ from partisans and suggest caution against overlooking the distinction between these groups.

*Paul Kellstedt is Professor at the Texas A&M University, The Bush School of Government & Public Service. His fields of expertise are public opinion and political methodology. He is the author of *The Mass Media and the Dynamics of American Racial Attitudes* (Cambridge, 2003), which won the Goldsmith Book Prize, given by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.*
