ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The fluid voter: Exploring independent voting patterns over time

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Abstract

Independents remain hard to categorize because they are, by their choice of self-identification, resisting the standard categories of political classification. Despite the growth in independent voter identity, many political strategists still view independents as partisans. In this article, we contribute to the academic literature on independent voting behavior by exploring whether those who identify as politically independent function as true independents by accounting for their voting patterns over time. We do this by analyzing data produced by the American National Election Studies (ANES) on political identification and voting choices from 1972 to 2020 on each of the three ANES measures of party affiliation. Our findings show when tracking independent voting behavior over more than one election, there is a significant volatility in voting loyalty and independents as a group are distinct from partisans. This volatility was observed in all three measures of party affiliation used by the ANES survey data. The research also finds evidence that a sizeable number of independents move in and out of independent status from one election to another.

Related Articles

Grossmann, Matt. 2014. "The Varied Effects of Policy Cues on Partisan Opinions." *Politics & Policy* 42(6): 881–904. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12102.

Reilly, Thom, and E. C. Hedberg. 2022. "Social Networks of Independents and Partisans: Are Independents a Moderating Forcer?" *Politics & Policy* 50(2): 225–43. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12460.

Saeki, Manabu. 2019. "Anatomy of Party Sorting: Partisan Polarization of Voters and Party Switching." *Politics & Policy* 47(4): 699–747. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12318.

Americans are increasingly declaring independence from the political parties. The rise in political independence is likely an outgrowth of Americans' record or near-record negative views of the U.S. two-party system (Ingraham, 2021) and their low level of trust in government (PEW, 2022). Self-defined independent voters now number between 40% and 46% of the U.S. electorate (Gallup, 2022) and currently constitute either the largest or second-largest group of registered voters in half the states (Gruber & Opdycke, 2020). Despite the historical increase in independent voter identification, many political strategists still view independents as partisans (Magleby et al., 2011; Petrocik, 2009) and contend that the overwhelming majority of Americans who say they are "independent" really lean toward one party or the other. However, other scholars have disputed the findings that most independents are leaners and suggest that there is no conclusive evidence for this position (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011).

Our study seeks to contribute to the academic literature by exploring whether those who are identified as politically independent function as true independents by accounting for their voting patterns over time. We are interested in determining whether independents move in and out of independent status. We do this by reviewing the voting behavior of Democrats, Republicans, and independents over multiple election cycles. Our research seeks to address the following three questions:

1. Does political identification change across time?
2. How do respondents allocate their votes across parties?
3. Do voting choices change over time?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The classification of voters as independent dates back to the seminal work of Angus Campbell and his colleagues, who first published *The American Voter* in 1960 (Campbell et al., 1960). Analyzing data collected under the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (and later aggregated by the American National Election Studies; ANES Data Center, 2021), the authors describe the identity of party affiliation as a central characteristic explaining voting behavior and other political attitudes and behaviors. The surveys that *The American Voter* analyzed have been considered by many to be the gold standard in the field. Though officially founded in 1978, the American National Election Studies (ANES) program has continuous survey data on the electorate since 1948. The survey is usually administered every other year, but occasionally every fourth year. ANES is a comprehensive survey which provides much information on respondents' background and political attitude.

The American Voter authors acknowledged that some kind of "independent" existed but characterized the independent as having little interest in campaigns and outcomes and suggested their choice between competing candidates is uninformed. Most of what we know about independents comes from survey data, and most surveys predispose the majority of independents as leaners toward either of the two political parties. Since 1952, when individuals identified themselves as an independent, researchers and pollsters have asked a follow-up question on whether respondents prefer one party over the other if they had to vote then and there.

In addition to asking respondents to identify themselves from a three-point scale: Democrat, Republican, and independent, respondents were asked to self-identify on the ANES seven-point political spectrum (ANES Data Center, 2015):

1. Strong Democrat
2. Democrat
3. Independent, leans Democrat
4. Independent

5. Independent, leans Republican
6. Republican
7. Strong Republican

Since the seven-point measure was introduced in the 1952 survey, researchers accessing the ANES data were able to use several measures. They could use the seven-point measure, a five-point measure by collapsing the three independent categories into one (as the authors of the *American Voter* did), a three-point measure with leaners classed as independents, or a three-point measure with leaners classified as partisans. Researchers used any or all of these measures often depending on which coding decision gave them big enough cell sizes for analysis by re-coding the data or not (DeBell, 2010).

Viewing the majority of independents as partisans originates from the formative research popularized in *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Keith et al., 1992), which claimed that the ANES' "Seven-Point Scale" should only include three actual categories (Democrat, Republican, and Independent). After the Petrocik (2009) and Keith and others' (1992) articles, it became more common to use a five-point or three-point measure with leaners classified as independents.

Most independents indicated a lean toward one of the two major political parties' candidates. Political scientists have labeled these individuals as "independent leaners" and have argued that the number of pure independents is actually quite small—below 10%. This percentage has remained constant since the 1950s (Mayer, 2008; PEW, 2019; Sides, 2013), and many political scientists assert that the overwhelming majority of Americans who say there are "independent" lean toward one party or the other (Teixiera, 2012).

Klar and Krupnikov (2016) have recently added some important research on the independent voter. They explored the social significance of the growth in people refusing to identify themselves with a political party and suggested that independents and partisans differ psychologically (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). They do not dispute the notion that independents may be "closet partisans" (they call them "undercover partisans"); but they do dispute the bias that independents are not politically engaged, stating that "engagement levels are comparable across independents and partisans" (Klar, 2014). They assert that many Americans are embarrassed by their political party and do not wish to be associated with either side. Instead, they intentionally mask their party preference, especially in social situations (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Nonetheless, they contend that the refusal to publicly identify with a party must be revealing something important. And they believe the predictors of independent political engagement differ substantially from partisans.

However, there are some researchers that disagree with the assertion that independents are leaners and suggest there is more volatility in their voter patterns, and that a sizeable number of independents move in and out of independent status in ways that impact independent voting over time (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011; Fiorina, 1977, 2016; Jackson, 1975; Page & Jones, 1979). Their identification may depend on specific candidates or issues on the ballot (Reilly et al., 2023) or may derive from short-term interest rather than a long-standing loyalty (Miller, 1991). Fiorina (2017), professor of political science at Stanford University and former chairman of the board of the ANES, contends that following independent leaners over several elections is key to understanding their voting patterns. Along with his colleague Samuel J. Abrams, they conducted such an analysis and found that, following independent leaners across multiple elections, their partisan stability is closer to pure independents than weak partisans (Fiorina, 2017). They also noted that "classifying all leaners as weak partisans mis-characterizes the partisanship of Americans and overestimates the rate of party voting" (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011). Other researchers have argued that responses to survey question probes asking independents if they lean toward the Democratic or Republican Party are significantly contaminated by short-term electoral elements operating in the campaign, such

as the candidates and specific issues (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011; Brody, 1978, 1991; Brody & Rothenberg, 1988; Miller, 1991).

Finally, given the lack of data on voting patterns of independents in state races and down-ballot (other than for president, governor, and Congress), there is growing interest in examining the characteristics and attitudes of unaffiliated or independent voters as they compare to voters from the two major parties. Bitzer and others (2022) researched down-ballot voters in North Carolina and found unaffiliated voters were not simply shadow partisans but varied from Democrats and Republicans in terms of demographics, political behavior, and political attitudes.

OUR EXPECTATIONS

Our study seeks to contribute to the academic literature by exploring whether those who are identified as politically independent function as true independents by accounting for their voting patterns over time. The study also explores whether independents move in and out of independent status.

We begin with a description of ANES data and the three measures of party affiliation used by the survey. Analysis then begins with a look at how the political identification of voters changes over multiple survey waves using each of the three ANES scales to be described in the next section. This analysis includes a parallel review of respondents who voted in both waves and those who voted in neither wave. We next investigate how frequently respondents to the ANES vote "straight tickets"—always choosing candidates from the same party—or "mixed tickets" where some Republican and some Democrat candidates are chosen. It is expected that those identifying as Democrat or Republican will mostly choose candidates from their own party, while independents will show more variety in their choices. These results will also be reported on each of the three political identification scales discussed below. Finally, we explore the degree to which individuals change their voting choices over time.

METHODOLOGY

The ANES Cumulative Data File (CDF) is used to examine political identification and voting choices from 1972 to 2020 (ANES Data Center, n.d.). Although the CDF contains data dating back to 1948, restricting the analysis to data from 1972 onward provided the best balance of: (a) providing a large enough sample to be useful and (b) capturing attitudes and trends that are relevant in the current social and political climate. There have been substantial demographic changes in the United States over the 72 years of ANES data. Additionally, prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, large portions of the population were effectively disenfranchised. These changes become evident when pre-1972 ANES data are compared to 1972–2020 data. Prior to 1972, 6.4% of ANES respondents who reported voting were non-White, but the figure jumps to 22.4% when looking at voters between 1972 and 2020. This percentage is much more in line with current voter profiles. Smaller, but still important, changes are evident in the age distribution and gender of respondents across the two time periods. Eighteen- to twenty-year-olds made up 1.5% of the pre-1972 respondents and 5.9% after that. Females made up 52.4% of the pre-1972 respondents and 53.8% from 1972 to 2020. The 1972–2020 data are more closely aligned with current voter demographics, making this analysis more applicable to today's voters.

This dataset includes political identification information for respondents and self-reported voting choices for president, Senate, Congress, and governor races. Since the ANES does not show 2020 election preference data in the CDF, these data were linked to the CDF using the Respondent ID from the ANES 2020 timeseries file. The resulting file was then formatted so that

each record represented a unique respondent, capturing party identification on three scales and reported voting choices for all survey waves that each respondent answered.

We examine three questions, looking at each on three different political identification scales:

1. Does political identification change across time?
2. How do respondents allocate their votes across parties?
3. Do voting choices change over time?

To probe these areas, we look at political identification with three different scales commonly used by the ANES. First, with the initial party identification queried in question VCF0302, which asks, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?" This "Initial Party ID Response" gives a three-point scale with Democrats and Republicans, and all minor-party and independent respondents grouped under the independent umbrella. Second, we use the ANES Seven-Point Scale (VCF0301, "Seven Point Scale") that divides Democrats and Republicans into "strong" and "weak" supporters of their parties, and divides independents into Democrat-leaners, Republican-leaners, and true independents. Finally, we use the modified three-point scale from VCF0303 "Summary 3-Category." The Summary 3-Category measure collapses the Seven-Point Scale by counting Democrat-leaning independents as Democrats and Republican-leaning independents as Republicans. This leaves only a small fraction of the respondents as independents.

American National Election Studies Survey

The CDF was downloaded in SPSS format and filtered to include responses from 1972 to 2020. Since 2020 post-election voting information is not currently in the CDF, data from the 2020 time-series file were joined to the CDF to provide complete information on the 2016–2020 panel. The resulting file contains responses from 43,423 individuals, of whom 27,832 voted in at least one election (Table 1).

The ANES contains data on how respondents reported voting on four different contests, giving the party choice for president, Congress, Senate, and governor. Respondents do not necessarily vote in each of these races due to the timing of elections. Choices for a total of 77,729 contests are recorded for the 27,832 voters in the data. For each election cycle, the total number of votes for Democratic, Republican, and third-party candidates were totaled for each respondent, along with their party identification at that time. The survey has also included time-series panel data from time to time, where respondents are contacted multiple times over the years. For respondents that appeared in multiple waves of the survey, their votes and party identification were tallied at each survey point.

Since 1970, there have been seven panels as shown in Table 2, each covering a single presidential election. Of the 13,399 respondents to the survey in these panels, 4770 voted in all waves available to them. These voters reported their voting choice on a total of 25,024 races for president, Congress, Senate, and governor. Due to the timing of election cycles, not all respondents reported voting in each of these races in each wave of the survey.

Party identification on three scales

ANES CDF classifies the political identification of respondents according to their answers to questions VCF0302, VCF0301, and VCF0303.

VCF0302 is the initial party identification response and asks:

T A B L E   1   ANES respondents by year

Year	Total respondents	Respondents who voted	Total votes tallied
1972	2705	1718	7215
1974	475	237	760
1976	1323	691	1731
1978	2304	1167	2463
1980	1614	989	2572
1982	1418	798	1860
1984	2257	1427	3314
1986	2176	1087	2549
1988	2040	1226	3104
1990	1980	1236	4294
1992	1126	807	3888
1994	1036	693	2575
1996	398	239	562
1998	1281	648	1509
2000	1807	1240	3838
2002	324	160	247
2004	1212	829	2058
2008	2322	1580	3624
2012	5914	4355	11,322
2016	4270	3124	12,981
2020	5441	3581	5263
Total	43,423	27,832	77,729

T A B L E   2   Multiple-wave voters in ANES data, 1972–2000

Year of 1st wave	Year of 2nd wave	Total respondents	Voted in both waves	Total votes in Wave 1	Total votes in Wave 2
1972	1974	2705	658	1644	701
1974	1976	475	83	189	131
1990	1992	1980	582	902	916
1992	1994	1126	444	763	463
1994	1996	1036	367	560	500
2000	2002	1807	604	1171	673
2016	2020	4270	2032	2858	2298
Grand total		13,399	4770	8087	5682

> Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, or what?

VCF0301 is party identification on a Seven-Point Scale and is constructed by combining the VCF0302 question with one of two follow-up questions. Respondents who identify as either Republicans or Democrats in their initial response are asked a follow-up question:

> Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat/Republican] or a not very strong [Democrat/Republican]?

These responses form the two ends of the Seven-Point Scale, with *Strong Democrats* coded as 1, *Weak Democrats* coded as 2, *Weak Republicans* coded as 6, and *Strong Republicans* as 7. A small number (92) of those who expressed partisan affiliation in VCF0302 were coded as *DK, NA, Other* at this point in the survey.

Those who did not identify as either Democrats or Republicans are given this follow-up question:

> Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?

These responses are used to construct the middle three categories of the Seven-Point Scale. Those answering "Democratic" are assigned to *Independent-Democrats* (3), with "Republican" coded as *Independent-Republican* (5). Respondents who choose "Neither" are *Independent-Independents* at scale point 4. Note that although the above question is asked in the ANES time series surveys, it does not appear in the CDF data. The results of this question are captured in CDF item VCF0301. Also note that a small number of respondents answered "do not know" or refused to answer VCF0302 but indicated a party preference in the follow-up. These were moved to the *Independent-Republican* and *Independent-Democrat* categories for VCF0301.

Finally, the Seven-Point Scale of VCF0301 is collapsed to three categories for VCF0303. This is done by combining the strong and weak Democrats with Independent-Democrats under *Democrats (including leaners)* and ANES political identification data on 43,423 respondents from 1972 through 2020 is shown on these three scales in Table 3. Independents make up 36% of the total respondents over these surveys, with 13% identified as having no party leaning or *Independent-Independents*.

RESULTS

Change in political identification over time—voters

We now use ANES data from multiple waves to look at how political identification changes for voters over time. Between 1972 and 2020, ANES has data on 4770 respondents who voted in two consecutive waves of the survey (Table 2). The following section looks at how these voters changed their party identification from one survey cycle to the next. A small portion of this number did not report party identification on one of the three scales analyzed below.

Initial Party ID Response (VCF0302)

Of the 4745 respondents shown in Figure 1, 22% changed their initial-response party ID from one wave to another. Independents were more fluid on this metric than party-affiliated respondents: 16% of both Democrats and Republicans were changed at the second survey wave, while 36% of Independents changed.

In each major party, 13% of the wave-one respondents changed their position and identified as independents at wave two, while 3% went to the opposite party. Independents saw 17% of the wave-one respondents move to Democrat and 19% move to Republican. The absolute number of voters switching from party-affiliated to independent (426) and from independent to party-affiliated (520) are similar, but the percentage of independents becoming party-affiliated

TABLE 3 Three political ID scales: 1972–2020 ANES data

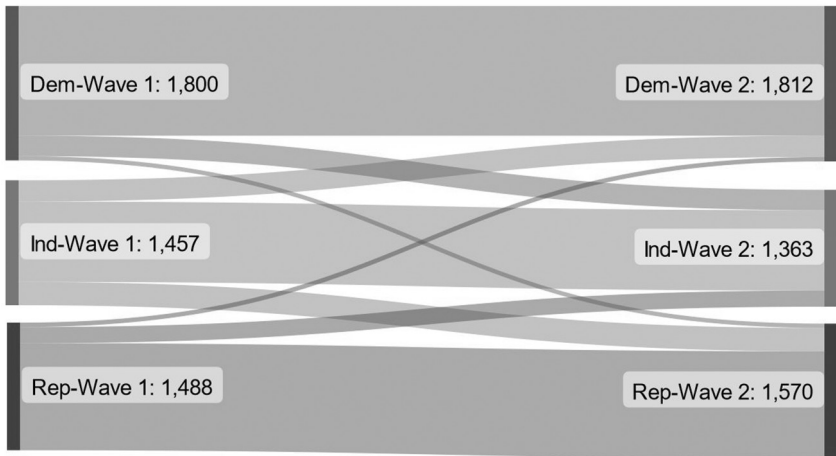| VCF0302 (initial response)	Democrat		Republican		Independent		Other	DK/NA	Total
	16,263		10,976		12,772		3085	327	43,423
Percent	37%		25%		29%		7%	1%	
VCF0301 (7-Point Scale)	Strong Dem	Weak Dem	Weak Rep	Strong Rep	Ind-Dem	Ind-Ind	Ind-Rep	DK/NA	Total
	8523	7677	5354	5592	5515	5677	4726	359	43,423
Percent	20%	18%	12%	13%	13%	13%	11%	1%	100%
VCF0303 (Summary 3-Category)	Democrat (incl. leaners)		Republican (incl. leaners)		Independent			DK/NA	Total
	21,715		15,672		5677			359	43,423
Percent	50%		36%		13%			1%	100%

FIGURE 1 Change in initial response (VCF0302) voters, 1972–2020

is nearly three times that of party-affiliates becoming independent. Respondents coded as *Independent, No Preference*, and *Other* are included in the independent category. This flow is illustrated in Figure 1.

Seven-Point Scale (VCF0301)

When the Seven-Point Scale of variable VCF0301 is analyzed across two survey waves, more fluidity in political identification becomes apparent. Of the 4735 respondents who voted in two waves of the survey and recorded scores on this scale in both waves, 43% changed their identification at the second wave. This is nearly double the 22% rate seen in the initial response variable above.

Partisan respondents at the extremes of the scale were more consistent in their identification, with 21% of Strong Democrats and 22% of Strong Republicans changing at the second wave. Fifty-seven percent of Weak Democrats and 55% of Weak Republicans changed their identification at wave two. Overall, 36% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans changed their party identification by at least one point on this scale between wave one and wave two; this is substantially higher than the 36% of party-identified respondents who changed their position.
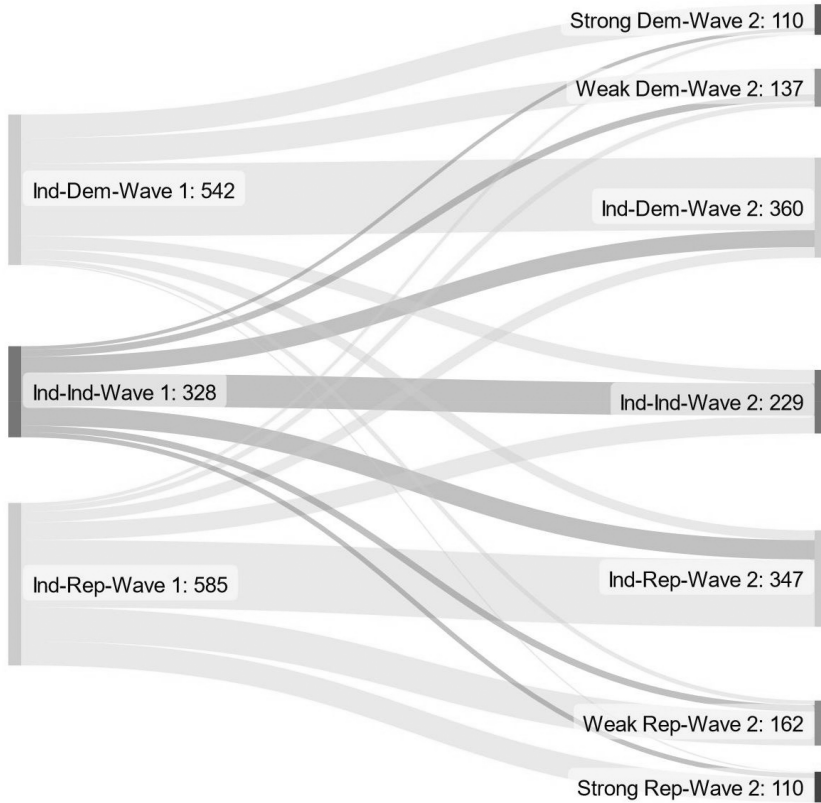
FIGURE 2 Change in 7-point scale (VCF0301) voters, 1972–2020

The complex flow of the three independent classifications is shown in Figure 2. As noted above, 36% of those reporting to be independent at the first wave interview were identifying with one of the two parties at the second wave. In addition, another 22% of independents remained independent at wave two, but shifted their position within the three independent categories on this scale. Overall, 57% of those in one of the three independent categories of the Seven-Point Scale changed their identification at wave two. This flow is illustrated in Figure 2.

Summary 3-Category Scale (VCF0303)

The collapsed categories of the Summary 3-Category Scale presented in VCF0303 necessarily suppress much of the change in party identification seen in the previous two scales. By this measure, 10% of Democrats (including leaners) and 12% of Republicans (including leaners) changed their identification between the two survey waves. The independents represent just 7% of respondents on this scale, as those who identify as independent but leaning toward a party are grouped with their respective parties. The 328 remaining "true" independents fractured nearly in thirds when queried at the second wave: 36% remained Independent while 30% switched to Democrat and 34% to Republican. A total of 64% of the Independents from wave one were classified as partisans at wave two. Among those classified as either Democrats or Republicans at wave one, just 11% changed their identification on this scale at wave two (Figure 3).
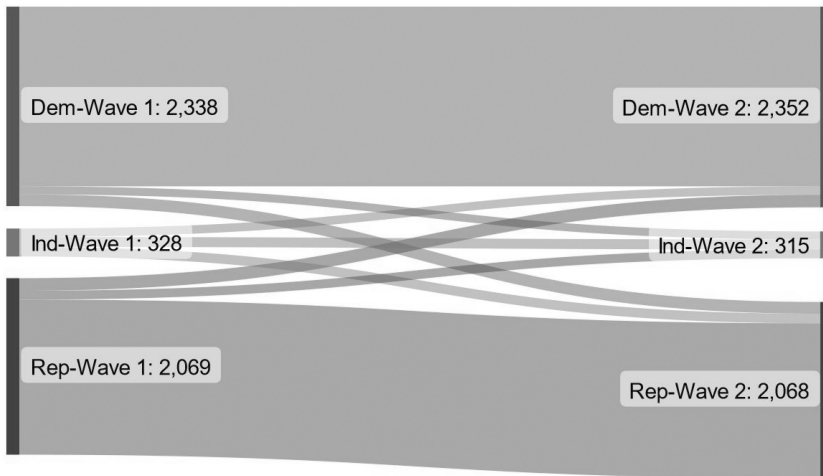
F I G U R E 3   Change in Summary 3-Category Scale (VCF0303) voters, 1972–2020
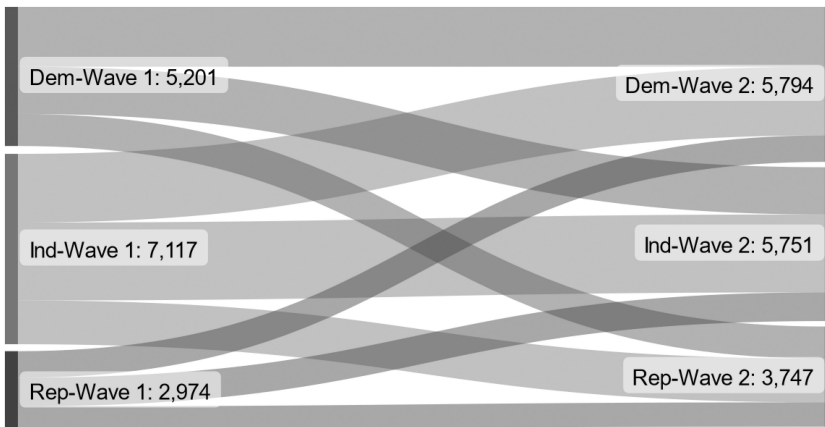

F I G U R E 4   Change in initial response (VCF0302) non-voters, 1972–2020

Change in political identification over time—Non-voters

ANES data 1972–2020 also contain information on political identification for respondents who did not vote. In this section we examine changes in political identification in the 15,292 respondents who answered two consecutive waves of the survey but voted in neither election. For the purposes of this article, we use the term non-voters to identify those respondents who did not vote in either wave of this analysis. It is unknown what portion of this population votes on occasion.

Initial party response (VCF0302)

Of the 15,592 respondents shown in Figure 4, 60% changed their initial response party identification from one wave to the next. This is nearly three times the 22% rate seen among those who voted in both waves. Fifty-seven percent of the non-voting Democrat-identified respondents and

69% of Republicans changed their identification. Taken together, 62% of the party-identified non-voters changed their identification at wave two. This compares with 59% of the independents who changed.[1]

Of the 5201 who identified with Democrats at wave one, just 43% identified as such at wave two, with 34% now seeing themselves as independents, and 23% crossing over to be Republicans. This contrasts with just three percent of voting Democrats crossing over to the other party at wave two. Non-voting Republicans showed even more fluidity between the two survey waves. Just 31% of those who said they were Republican at wave one maintained that identification at wave two, with a third of the respondents switching to Democratic identification and 36% now calling themselves Independent. Non-voting independents switched to Democrat in 36% of the cases, and to Republican 23%, with 41% remaining independent. This flow is illustrated in Figure 4.

Seven-Point Scale (VCF0301)

Non-voting respondents to ANES changed their political identification on the Seven-Point Scale between wave one and wave two in 81% of the cases. This fluidity was relatively consistent across the scale, ranging from 76% of Strong Democrats changing identification by at least one scale point to 87% of Independent-Republicans.

Changes in party identification for the three independent categories are shown in Figure 5. A total of 5923 (83%) of those who identified as one of the three independent categories at wave one had moved by at least one scale point at wave two. Of this amount, 1722 (29%) remained within the independent domain while 4201 (81%) moved to one of the parties. Changes in independent non-voter identification are shown in Figure 5.

Summary 3-Category Scale (VCF0303)

When non-voting ANES respondents are examined on the summary 3-category scale of VCF0303, 58% are seen to change categories. Democrats (including leaners) moved to another point on the scale 46% of the time, with 32% identifying as Republicans at wave 2 and 13% as independents. Well over half (60%) of the non-voters identified as Republicans at wave one changed identification at wave two, with 47% later identifying as Democrat and 13% as independent. Independent non-voters changed identification 81% of the time, with 48% moving to Democrat at wave two and 33% to Republican. These flows are illustrated in Figure 6.

Voting patterns: Straight and split-ticket voters

ANES asks respondents to state how they voted in four contests: president, Congress, Senate7, and governor. Respondents may not have the opportunity to vote in each of these races, depending on the timing of the election cycle. There are 27,832 respondents in the ANES data that said they voted in at least one election, and these respondents give us information on a total of 77,729 races.

Of the ANES respondents who reported voting from 1972 to 2010, Figure 7 shows that 20,521 (73.7%) always voted a straight ticket for either Democrats (11,638 respondents) or Republicans (8883). Conversely, 9316 respondents never voted for a Democrat and 12,201 never voted Repub-

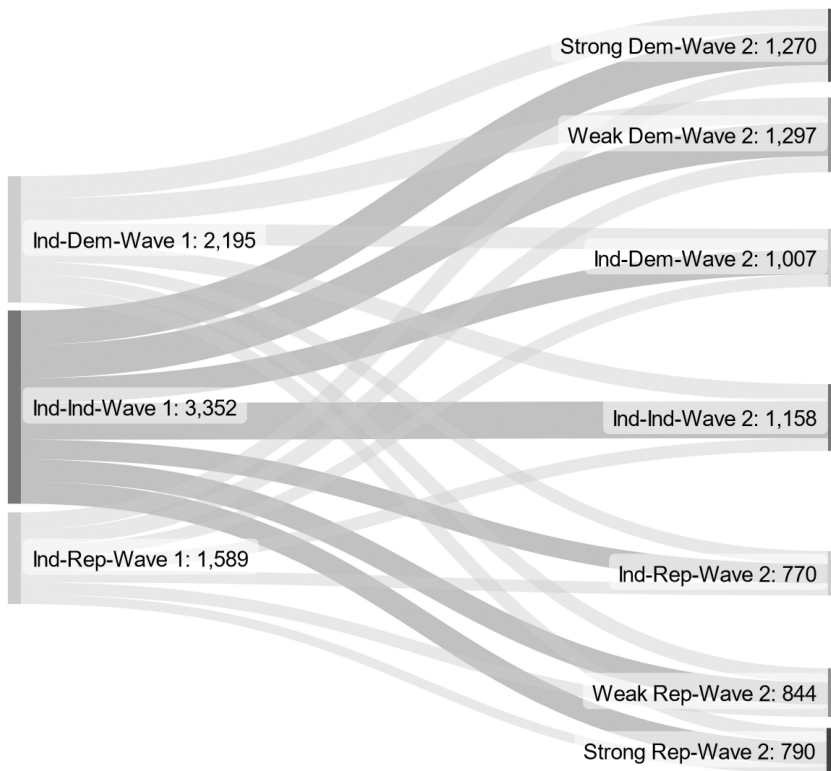[1]Z-test for proportions <.01.

FIGURE 5   Change in 7-Point Scale (VCF0301) non-voters, 1972–2020

lican (Figure 7) in the races surveyed. Note that the 0% and 100% columns do not exactly mirror each other due to the number of votes for minor parties.

The great majority of voters surveyed by ANES exclusively vote for one of the major parties, with only a small percentage splitting their votes between Republicans and Democrats. The 40%–59% bracket in Figure 7 shows that 4655 people (16.7%) divided their votes evenly between the two parties. Considering both the small number of election contests available for analysis and the polarized nature of voting noted above, further analysis divides voters into three groups: those who voted for Democrats in 100% of the contests, those who voted for Republicans in 100% of the contests, and those who voted for some mix of Democrats and Republicans. With this information, we can see what portion of the sample consistently vote for one party and what portion switch their votes between parties (Figure 7).

Initial Party ID Response (VCF0302)

As expected, Democrats generally vote a straight ticket for Democrats, at a rate of 74% while 71% of Republicans, 5678 of the total 7990 Republican voters, always vote Republican (Figure 8). Incongruously, 5% of Democrats and 5% of Republicans report that they always vote for the opposite party.

Independents are much more evenly divided in their vote choices. A significant portion still vote straight tickets for one party or the other, with 34.8% always voting for Democrats and 30% always voting Republican. A plurality of independents (35.2%) split their votes between Democrats and Republicans at least occasionally. This compares with the combined figures for
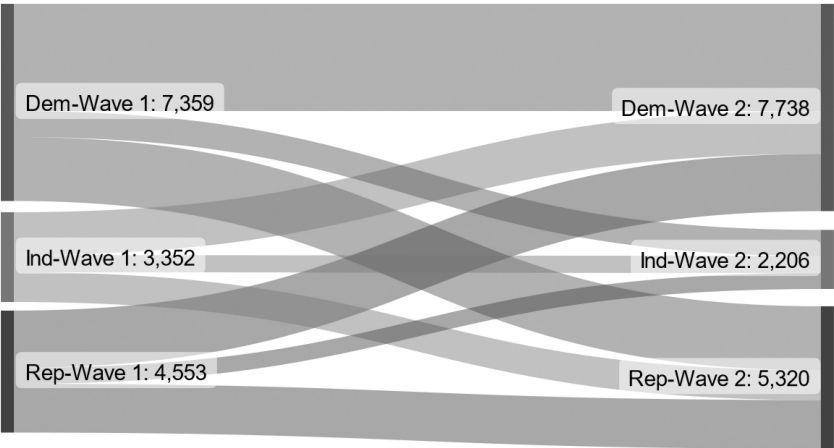
FIGURE 6   Change in Summary 3-Category Scale (VCF0303) non-voters, 1972–2020
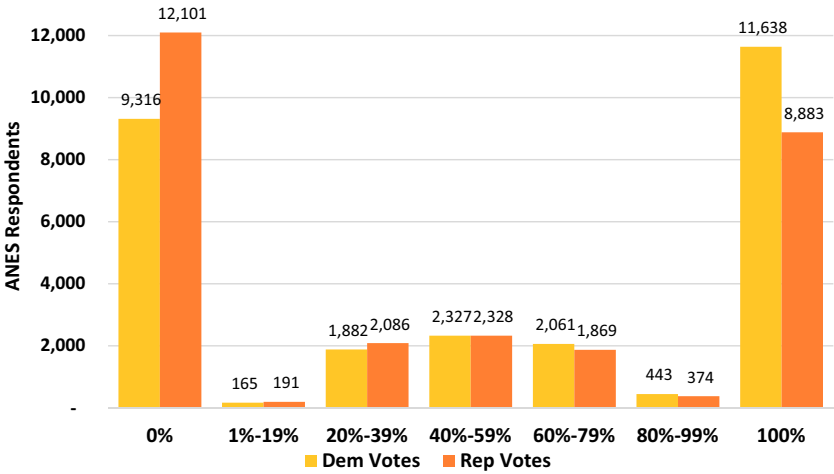

FIGURE 7   Percent of each respondent's votes by party, 1972–2020

Democrats and Republicans showing that 22% of the party-identified voters voted a mixed ticket at least once.[2] Respondents coded as *Independent, No Preference*, and *Other* are included in the Independent category (Figure 8).

Seven-Point Scale (VCF0301)

With the Independent-Democrats and Independent-Republicans broken out on the 7-Point Scale of VCF0301, we see a steady progression from left-to-right, with decreasing Democratic straight-ticket voting and increasing Republican support (Figure 9). The Independent-Independents at the middle of the scale have truly mixed voting choices: 31% only voting for Democrats, 27% on voting for Republicans, and 43% choosing a mixture of Democrat and Republican candidates. The votes reported by Independent-Independents represent 8% of the 27,704 reported to ANES by respondents (Figure 9).
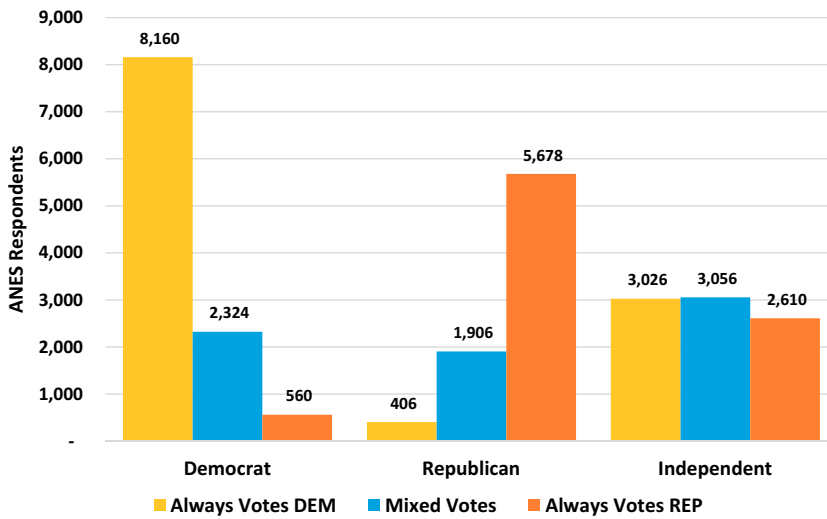
[2]*Z*-test for proportions <.01.

FIGURE 8 Straight-ticket and mixed voting by Initial Party ID Response, 1972–2020
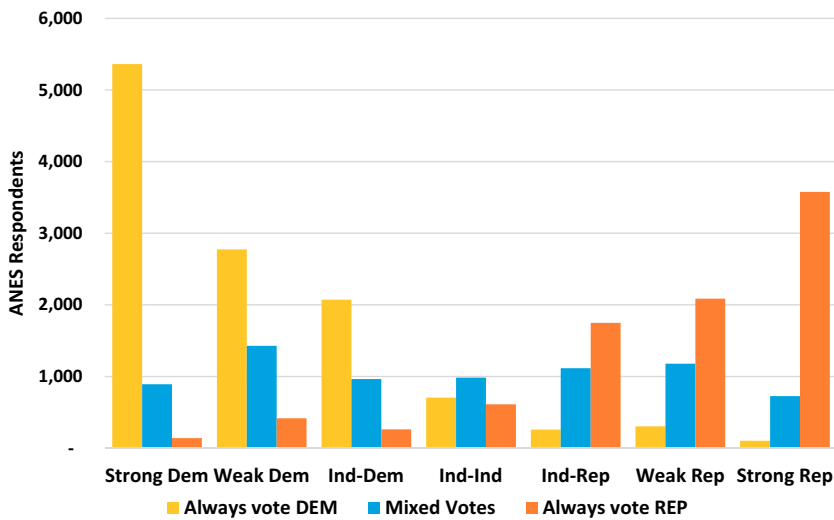
FIGURE 9 Straight-ticket and mixed voting by 7-point scale, 1972–2010

Interestingly, Independent-Democrats show a higher percentage of straight-ticket support of Democratic candidates (63%) than the Weak Democrats who explicitly declare support for the party (60%).[3]

Summary 3-Category Scale (VCF0303)

With the Independent-Democrats and Independent-Republicans of VCF0301 included as "leaners" in their respective partisan buckets for VCF0303, the Independent-Independents are highlighted (Figure 10). Combining the straight-ticket Democrat and Republican votes shows that

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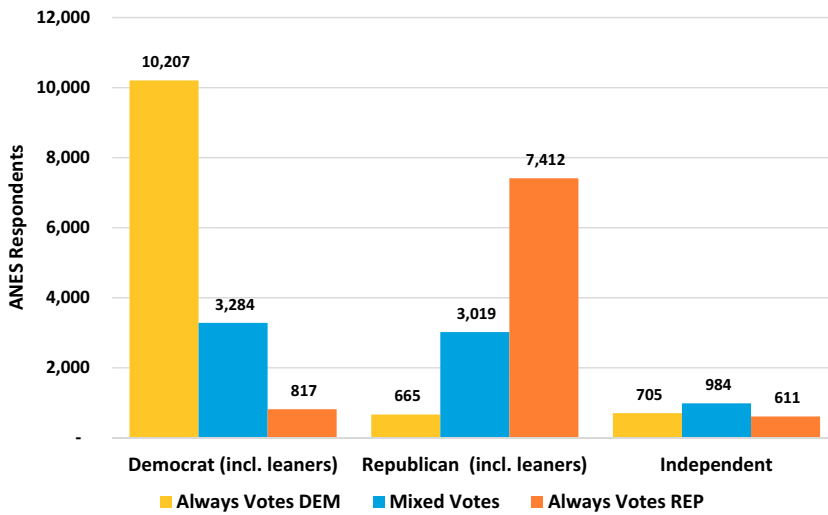[3]Z-test for proportions $p < .05$.

FIGURE 10 Straight-ticket and mixed voting by Summary 3-Category scale, 1972–2010

77% of the Democrat (including leaners) category always votes a straight ticket, 73% of Republicans (including leaners), and 57% of independents (Figure 10).

Voting change over time

Changes in voting behavior for ANES two-wave voters are summarized in Table 4. The 1464 respondents reported voting a straight Democrat ticket both the first and second time they were interviewed, with 1239 voting straight Republican both times, and 434 casting mixed votes at each wave. This total of 3137 represents 66% of the total 4770 who voted in two waves of the survey. This leaves 34% who altered their behavior across the election cycles.

The 4754 respondents who voted in two waves of the ANES survey and stated their political identification are summarized in Table 5.[4] Respondents who identified as Republicans or Democrats as their Initial Party ID Response for VCF0302 are grouped together as Party Affiliated in this table, for comparison to independent voters. Respondents coded as *Independent, No Preference*, and *Other* are included in the independent category.

Party-affiliated voters exhibited the same voting behavior, either straight-ticket or mixed voting in each wave, in 70% of the cases. For Independents, this percentage drops to 57%. Conversely, 30% of party affiliates changed their voting patterns across two elections, while 43% of Independents changed.

Party-affiliated voters voted a straight ticket for the same party at a rate of 62%. Independents, while still voting consistently for a single party at a significant rate (44%), were still more likely to change their voting behavior at the second wave of the survey. A small number of voters voted a straight ticket for one party at Wave 1 and then switched to the other party at Wave 2. Here we see that independents were twice as likely to make this large shift than party affiliates. There is a small difference between the two groups on percentages that went from straight ticket at Wave 1 to mixed at Wave 2. Independents were more likely to go from mixed to straight voting and much more likely to vote for a mix of the two parties in both waves.

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[4]Sixteen of the 4770 ANES respondents who reported voting in two waves of the survey are coded as DK or NA, refused in VCF0302, leaving 4754 who could have their political identification classified.

TABLE 4 Changes in voting behavior, all respondents

Wave 1	Wave 2			Total
	Straight REP	Mixed Vote	Straight DEM	
Straight REP	1239	285	123	1647
Mixed vote	399	434	507	1340
Straight DEM	55	264	1464	1783
Total	1693	983	2094	4770

TABLE 5 Voting changes over two waves of ANES data

Initial Party ID Response (VCF0302)	Party affiliated		Independent	
	n	%	n	%
Straight ticket Wave 1 & Wave 2: same party both waves*	2056	62%	640	44%
Mixed ticket, both Wave 1 & Wave 2*	237	7%	196	13%
Subtotal: Same voting behavior in Wave 1 & 2*	**2293**	**70%**	**836**	**57%**
Straight ticket Wave 1 & Wave 2: switched parties*	96	3%	81	6%
Straight ticket in Wave 1, mixed ticket in Wave 2**	355	11%	191	13%
Mixed ticket in Wave 1, straight ticket in Wave 2*	547	17%	355	24%
Subtotal: Different voting behavior in Wave 1 & 2*	**998**	**30%**	**627**	**43%**
Total	**3291**	**100%**	**1463**	**100%**

*Z-test for proportions $p < .01$.

**Z-test for proportions $p < .05$.

Initial Party ID Response (VCF0302)

When the party-affiliated category shown in Table 5 is broken out to show the two parties, we see the results are largely the same. Democrats continued their pattern from Wave 1, either voting a straight ticket for a particular party or voting a mixed ticket, in 71% of the cases. This left 29% of self-identified Democrats changing their voting behavior in some fashion, with 32% of Republicans exhibiting changed behavior. The *p*-value for a comparison of these percentages is .176, suggesting that there is little meaningful difference between Democrats and Republicans on this measure.

As noted above, 43% of independents showed changed behavior between Wave 1 and Wave 2, with a *p*-value of <.01 compared to party-affiliated respondents (Table 6).

Seven-Point Scale (VCF0301)

When this same measure of voting change over time is applied to the Seven-Point Scale of VCF0301, we see that, unsurprisingly, the Strong Democrats and Strong Republicans are most consistent in their behavior, with less than a quarter of these groups changing their voting profile from one wave to the next (Table 7). Independent-Independents were the most likely to change their voting profile at 48%, followed by Independent-Republicans at 45%. Independent-Democrats again seem to be as committed to Democratic candidates as the Weak Democrats with the party in the question posed in VCF0301. Weak Democrats voted for a straight Democratic ticked at a

TABLE 6   Changes in voting behavior by Initial Party ID Response

VCF0302	Voted in two waves	Percent that changed voting behavior	Percent that did not change
Democrat	1803	29%	71%
Republican	1488	32%	68%
Subtotal: Party-identified	3291	30%	70%
Independent, Other, No Pref.	1463	43%	57%
Total	4754	34%	66%

TABLE 7   Changes in voting behavior by 7-Point Scale

VCF0301	Voted in two waves	Percent that changed voting behavior	Percent that did not change
Strong Democrat	1045	22%	78%
Weak Democrat	757	40%	60%
Independent-Democrat	547	38%	62%
Independent-Independent	332	48%	52%
Independent-Republican	588	45%	55%
Weak Republican	637	42%	58%
Strong Republican	850	24%	76%
Total	4756	34%	66%

rate of 45%, while Independent-Democrats did so at a rate of 47% with a *p*-value of .472 between the two rates, indicating little actual difference between the two groups.

Summary 3-Category Scale (VCF0303)

The Summary 3-Category Scale once again shrinks the size of the independent category but maximizes its difference from the enlarged party-identified categories. Democrats (including leaners) were slightly less likely to change their behavior (31%) than Republicans (including leaners) at 35%.[5] True independents, as above, changed their voting profile 48% of the time between the first and second survey waves (Table 8).

DISCUSSION

Analyzing each of the three ANES measures of party affiliation (Initial Party ID, Seven-Point Scale, and Summary 3 Category) over multiple elections provides some important findings on the voting patterns of independents. We find evidence that, when tracking independent voting behavior over more than one election, there is a significant volatility in voting loyalty and as a group, independents are distinct from partisans. The research also confirms that a sizeable number of independents move in and out of independent status from one election to another.

In the first analysis on how political identification of voters changes over multiple survey waves, we explored how these respondents changed their party identification from one survey cycle to the next. The Initial Party ID scale found that independents were more fluid on this metric than party-affiliated respondents with the percent of independents changing at the second wave

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[5]*Z*-test for proportions <.01.

T A B L E 8   Changes in voting behavior by Summary 3-Category Scale

VCF0303	Voted in two waves	Percent that changed voting behavior	Percent that did not change
Democrat (including leaners)	2349	31%	69%
Republican (including leaners)	2075	35%	65%
Subtotal: Party-Identified	4424	33%	67%
Independent	332	48%	52%
Total	4756	34%	66%

by more than double that of partisans. Additionally, the percentage of independents becoming party affiliated was nearly three times that of party affiliates becoming independent. Moving to the analysis of the Seven-Point Scale, even more fluidity was found with an overall 57% of those in one of the three independent categories of the Seven-Point Scale changing their identification at wave two. The last analysis collapsed categories of the Summary 3-Category Scale in party identification seen in the previous two scales and resulted in a significantly reduced (7%) number of independent respondents. Despite this small percentage of independent respondents, almost two-thirds or 64% of the independents changed classification to partisans at Wave 2.

ANES participants who responded to two consecutive waves of the survey but voted in neither of the corresponding elections showed much greater fluidity in their political identification between waves. Overall, 60% of respondents changed their Initial Party Identification. In contrast with the voting respondents, non-voting Independents were substantially the same as party affiliates, 59% making a switch to party affiliation. Non-voting independents were more likely to move by at least one point on the Seven-Point Scale (64%) than either Democrats (50%) or Republicans (49%). Thirty-nine percent of non-voters who identified as Independent in the first survey wave chose party affiliation at wave two. When the Summary 3-Category Scale is analyzed, we see that 81% of the non-voting independents identified with one of the major parties at wave two, compared with 58% of all respondents.

Our analysis on how independent voters and non-voters changed their party identification from one cycle to the next showed a significant amount of fluidity with non-voters being especially unpredictable. On all three political identification scales, independent respondents changed their political identification over time more often than partisans (ranging from 36% to 64% for voters and 59% to 83% for non-voters) with the exception of non-voting Republicans on the Initial Party ID Scale. These findings suggest that independent voters and non-voters who identify in one political classification in one election are less likely to identify themselves in the same manner in the next election. Their identification may depend on specific candidates or issues on the ballot (Reilly et al., 2023) or may derive from short-term interest rather than a long-standing loyalty (Miller, 1991). This finding supports Fiorina's (2016) assertion about independent voting behavior: "whatever they are, they are an important component of the electoral instability that characterizes the contemporary era. Their critical contribution to contemporary elections lies in their volatility" (p. 10).

We next investigated how frequently respondents to the ANES scales vote "straight tickets," always choosing candidates from the same party or "mixed tickets" where some Republican and some Democrat candidates are chosen. Our expectation that those identifying as Democrat or Republican would mostly choose candidates from their own party was confirmed, while independents demonstrated more variety in their choices. For the Initial Party ID scale, over 70% of partisans voted straight ticket, while 65% of independent respondents did, with the independent straight-ticket voters divided; 35% voting for Democrats and 30% for Republicans. While the Seven-Point Scale showed similar results, Independent-Democrats showed a

higher percentage of straight-ticket support of Democratic candidates than the Weak Democrats, while Independent Republicans were slightly less likely to vote a straight ticket than Weak Republicans.

Finally, we explored the degree to which individuals change their voting choices over time (two-wave voters). Partisan voters exhibited the same voting behavior, either straight-ticket or mixed voting in each wave, in 70% of the cases. For independents, this percentage drops to 57%. The Initial Party ID analysis found that approximately 30% of partisans changed between waves compared to 43% of independents; while the Seven-Point Scale showed Independent-Independents were the most likely to change their voting profile at 48%, followed by Independent-Republicans at 45%. Weak Democrats voted for a straight Democratic ticket at a rate of 45%, while Independent-Democrats did so at a rate of 47%. Independents were more likely to go from mixed to straight voting and much more likely to vote for a mix of the two parties in both waves. For the Summary 3-Category, approximately a third of partisans changed their voting patterns over the two waves compared to 48% of independents.

Our research on independent voting behavior included analyses of voting patterns over time. The findings confirm that independents do indeed move in and out of independent status when tracked over multiple elections. Further, this study lends support to the notion that there is a good deal more fluidity in voting patterns of independents. This was the case when analyzing data across all three ANES scales. Our analysis of the ANES Seven-Point Scale showed that Independent-Republicans and Weak-Republicans resembled each other's voting patterns on straight/split ticket and voting change over time analyses (Mayer, 2008; Petrocik, 2009; Smith et al., 1995); however, this was not the case with Independent-Democrats and Weak-Democrats. Independent-Democrats, who did not affiliate with any party in the Initial Party Response ID question, were more likely to vote only for Democrats than Weak-Democrats that specifically identified as Democrat. Similarly, Independent-Republicans were as likely to vote a straight Republican ticket in both waves than Weak Republicans. Respondents who were coded as either 5 (Independent-Republican) or 6 (Weak Republican) showed essentially the same voting behavior, while those coded as 3 (Independent-Democrat) were more Democratic in their behavior than the supposedly more liberal Weak Democrats at scale point 2. This indicates that caution needs to be exercised when treating the Seven-Point Scale (VCF0301) as a continuous variable.

It may be that traditional ways of measuring voter identification do not capture the independent voter due to voter composition of the electorate and our hyperpolarized political environment. Due to the research of Keith and others (1992), it became most common for researchers with the ANES to utilize a three-point or five-point scale that classified independent-leaning Democrats, or independent-leaning Republicans, as partisans (VCF0302, Initial Party ID response). This resulted in a significant reduction in the number of self-described independents. Reilly and Hedberg (2022) have argued that in light of the more recent work of Klar and Krupnikov (2016) and Zschirnt (2011), which showed the importance of the independent identity, classifying self-identified independents as partisans seems counterproductive in examining their influence on partisans, especially when respondents elected to self-identify as leaners. The authors collapsed three groups—respondents who selected option 3, 4, or 5—as independent, thus treating leaners as Independents (VCF0303, Summary 3-category scale). Similarly, Fiorina (2016) has long been an opponent of classifying leaning independents as partisans and leaving pure independents in the middle ID category arguing that "We can think of no other case in political science where analysts change a respondent's explicit response to a survey item on the basis of information from other items—*especially one generally used as the dependent variable*" (Abrams & Fiorina, 2011, p. 5). Perhaps it is time to develop new explanatory constructs to capture independent voter classification.

CONCLUSION

Our study contributes to previous literature on the independent voter by showing their voting patterns are volatile, unpredictable, and distinct from partisans. Additionally, when analyzing voting behavior over time, our research confirmed that a sizeable number of independents move in and out of independent status from one election to another. This volatility was observed in all three measures of party affiliation used by the ANES survey data. When independents are followed over multiple elections, they have been found to have no firm partisan loyalties.

Despite our contributions, our study has several limitations. First, as with any survey, the voting classification and behavior details are all based on self-reports, which are suspectable to response bias. Second, although ANES is a rich dataset with a long history to draw from, it does have limitations for this sort of analysis. There is limited information about voter choices in the data. The survey asks for party choices on just four races: president, Congress, Senate, and governor. With the survey waves spaced two years apart (except for the 2016–2020 waves), respondents will not be able to provide answers to presidential, senatorial, and most governor's races in both waves, which limits the data available for analysis. These four races, especially at the presidential level, are susceptible to a "celebrity effect" where a high-profile candidate's perceived charm (or repulsiveness) may overwhelm a voter's policy-based preferences when selecting a candidate. Data that included more frequent and down-ballot races would provide a better picture of the relationship between the stated political identification of voters and their voting choices (Bitzer et al., 2021). Finally, it is also difficult to draw solid conclusions about the behavior of non-voters from these data. These non-voters may be latent voters who generally lie dormant but turn out at the polls when there is an issue or candidate that particularly motivates them. Without a very long time-series survey, it is difficult to say with what frequency these latent voters are activated or what motivates changes in their political identification.

There is a lot that still needs to be learned about this emerging group of voters. Future research should explore the fluidity of Black and Latino voters as well as the increasing generational divide. Most importantly, there is a need to continue to track independent voting behavior over time and more analysis on the voting patterns of independents is needed down ballot at the state and local level.

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