Social Desirability Bias in Measures of Partisanship

Samara Klar
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Arizona
klar@email.arizona.edu

Yanna Krupnikov
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Northwestern University
yanna.krupnikov@northwestern.edu

Please note: This paper is part of a much larger project that is currently in progress; therefore, this manuscript is likely to be updated and revised. Please do not cite without permission.

Abstract: Scholars have long suggested that as a particular view or perspective becomes the social norm, we run the risk of overestimating the prevalence of this perspective due to social desirability bias. In this manuscript we address this possibility of this effect in one of the most fundamental measures in American politics: the measure of partisanship. In particular, we argue that social desirability pressures may lead individuals to misrepresent their partisan affiliations, and instead report that they are independent. Further, we suggest that this tendency to eschew partisanship is most likely to happen when individuals are reminded of elite partisan disagreement and can be further exacerbated by question-wording in measures of partisanship. We make our case through two survey experiments. The first study traces the presence of social desirability in measures of partisanship and shows that individuals believe that identifying as an independent makes a better impression. This effect is particularly likely when individuals are reminded of partisan disagreement. The second study relies on a national sample and considers this social desirability effect under different lead-ins to the partisanship question. At a time when surveys show record rates of individuals identifying as independent, our results have critical implications for the way scholars measure partisanship, particularly during points when elite partisan disagreement is highly prevalent.
As a particular perspective becomes the social norm, we run a risk of overestimating public opinion due to social desirability bias (Berinsky 2002). Psychological (Schlenker and Weingold 1989) and sociological (Goffman 1959) theories of self-construction suggest that individuals aim to portray themselves in such a manner that will be pleasing to others (Holbrook and Krosnick 2010). When asked matters of opinion, we are thus susceptible to answering in a manner that will be most pleasing – and least controversial – for the sake of optimal self-presentation (Presser 1990). Indeed, social desirability repeatedly proves itself as a persistent obstacle for measuring opinions and behaviors (Belli et al. 2001; Karp and Brockington 2005; Streb et al 2008; Tourangeau and Yan 2007). In this study, we consider the potential for social desirability bias in the measurement of one of the most fundamental questions in American politics: partisanship.

The origins of partisanship are subject to considerable debate, with some arguing that it is the sum of a running tally of political evaluations (Bartels 2002), others demonstrating that it is a social identity group (Green et al. 2002), and still others pointing to ideological roots (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). All agree, however, that partisanship is influential, persistent, and resistant to change (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 146). It is not our goal to cast doubt on the stability of partisanship, but rather we examine the potential for social desirability bias in measurement of partisan affiliation. We argue that certain categories of partisanship may be viewed as particularly socially desirable, thus introducing social desirability bias into this measurement. Specifically, we argue and show that political independence is viewed as an aspirational ideal. With an experimental study, we demonstrate that this effect is exacerbated by
exposure to partisan disagreement. Furthermore, we find that certain forms of survey question wording play a key role in stimulating social desirability bias.

**The Social Desirability of Independence**

Why might political independence be viewed as socially desirable? The effect lies in political context. In recent decades, negative political news coverage has nearly tripled (Patterson 2010) and evidence suggests that we have reached a point of unprecedented vitriol in politics (Wagner et al. 2011). In particular, American media casts partisan politics with a disproportionately negative light (e.g. Patterson 1994; Lichter and Noyes 1997; Hallin and Mancini 2004). Even if people avoid news coverage all-together, they are often exposed to disagreement incidentally via Internet discussion (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009).

In turn, media coverage often has significant influence over people’s political priorities and impressions (Zaller 1992; Bartels 1993). McQuail (1979) explains: “We can expect the mass media to tell us about different kinds of social roles and the accompanying expectations …” (p. 14). Taken together, negative coverage of politics, and in particular partisan politics, can lead individuals to view partisan identification as socially undesirable, motivating them to shy away from reporting an allegiance to a party and instead opting toward a politically “independent” category (self-categorizing as either a “pure” or “leaning” independent). We do not suggest exposure to partisan disagreement will necessarily weaken actual party identification – though it may do that for certain individuals – rather we suggest that exposure to partisan disagreement sullies the perceived desirability of partisanship.

**Question Wording**
A rich body of research demonstrates significant consequences of question wording on responses (Smith 1987), and even party identification falls prey to such influence. In particular, Borrelli et al. (1987) demonstrate that a party identification question beginning with “as of today,” known as the Gallup item (Green and Schickler 1993) – as opposed to something broader like “generally speaking,” known as the Michigan scale (Green and Schickler 1993) – results in over-reports of support for the party with the best current standing in a race. “As of today,” explain the authors, taps “short-term feelings” rather than focusing attention away from contemporary political circumstances (Borrelli et al. 1987, p. 116). Others have found substantial support for the notion that responses to the Gallup item are unduly influenced by recent considerations (Abramson and Ostrom 1994; Clarke and Stewart 1998; MacKuen et al. 1992).

The Michigan (and ANES) wording of “generally speaking” has, on the other hand, been described as measuring “enduring group identification rather than transitory feelings of partisan preferences” (Miller and Shanks 1996, 125) that leads individuals to weigh long-term partisan loyalties more heavily. We thus expect that the Gallup item, as opposed to the Michigan/ANES item, will exacerbate the effects of contemporary social desirability norms.

**Social Desirability Effects and Question Wording**

**Study 1**

Our first study considers the possibility that political independence is seen as socially desirable. We follow a test for social desirability described by Holbrook, Green and Krosnick (2003) in which respondents are randomly assigned to one of two groups. In one group (“Fake Good”), respondents are instructed to answer a question as if they are trying to make the best possible impression on another person. In the other group (“Fake Bad”), respondents are
instructed to answer the same question as if they are trying to make the worst possible impression. Given that social desirability pressures arise because individuals want to make the most positive impression possible, significant differences in response patterns between these groups indicate social desirability of a particular response category. Relying on a sample of undergraduate students, Holbrook et al. (2003) use this approach to show social desirability effects in questions dealing with race.

While the main study in this manuscript relies on a nationally-representative sample, we use the “Fake Good”/“Fake Bad” approach in a preliminary study which relied on a sample recruited via the Amazon Mechanical Turk (see Berinsky et al. 2012 for discussion of the sample; for examples of research that uses this sample see Kriner and Shen 2012, Doherty 2013 and Huber and Paris 2013, among others). In Table 1, we present the demographics of our sample and, for purpose of comparison, include demographics for the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES), the US Census, and a recent Pew survey.  

**Baseline Social Desirability: Result 1**

As a first step, we consider whether the “Fake Good” or “Fake Bad” instructions produce differences in partisan response patterns. We conducted the study in two waves. First, respondents answered a series of questions about their political preferences – including partisanship (conducted September 30 – October 5, 2012). Respondents were later re-contacted and randomly assigned to either the Fake Good/Fake Bad manipulation (October 10, 2012 –

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1 Study N=149 (accounts for both result 1 and result 2).
2 For additional information on the use of Mechanical Turk samples see Kriner and Shen 2013
October 18, 2012). We use the first wave to show that there are no pre-treatment differences in partisanship between the experimental conditions in the second wave.

When discussing the studies, we use the term “identify” merely to denote which category a subject selected in the partisanship question. Given that subjects were asked to intentionally make either a good or bad impression on someone, we do not mean to suggest that they changed their partisan identifications.

INITIAL FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Initial results show that the Fake Good/Fake Bad manipulation produces significant differences in partisan patterns (Figure 1). In the Fake Good condition, nearly 60% more individuals identify as pure, non-leaning independents than in the Fake Bad condition. These effects grow once we consider individuals who report that they lean toward one party or the other. In this case, the percentage of respondents identifying as either leaning or pure independents nearly double from those who are instructed to give a “bad” impression (26.3%) to those instructed to give a “good” impression (50%). In sum, these results suggest a social desirability effect: when asked to respond in a way that makes the most positive impression, respondents were more likely to select as “independent”.

Social Desirability and Partisan Information: Result 2

While this effect suggests social desirability, we also want to consider whether political context exacerbates this effect. To do so, we again turn to the Fake Good/Fake Bad approach, this time introducing an additional component. Specifically, we exposed a different group of

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3 In total, 66% of subjects from the initial wave of the study completed the second wave. Given that we have political preferences from that initial first wave we were able to consider whether there are any systematic patterns to predict second wave participation – we did not identify any such patterns. N in wave 2 is 140.

4 Group difference is significant at p<0.05, two tailed.
subjects to a news article about partisan disagreement and then randomly assigned them to either the Fake Good or Fake Bad group. If the results follow predictions, then social desirability effects will be exacerbated among those who read the news article. Given that this was done parallel to our first analysis, we can use our initial results as a helpful baseline.\(^5\)

Figure 2 compares our partisan disagreement group to our original baseline results demonstrating the differences between those who identify as independent in the Fake Good versus Fake Bad condition along the x-axis. On the left side of the figure, we show that when respondents do not read about partisan disagreement, the increase of pure independents among those instructed to provide the Fake Good as opposed to Fake Bad response is, as we report above, 9.2%. The grey bar on the left-hand side shows that this difference increases dramatically from 9.2% to 25.8% among those respondents who read about partisan disagreement before answering the partisanship question.\(^6\)

This effect further grows when we consider subjects who identify as leaning independents. After exposure to an article about partisan disagreement, nearly 47% more subjects identify as either a pure or leaning independent in the Fake Good condition as opposed to an increase of 23.6% among those who did not read the news article.\(^7\)

Overall, our results indicate a social desirability component to partisanship -- a tendency that is exacerbated by information about partisan disagreement. As a next step, we consider whether question-wording affects this social desirability bias.

\(^5\) Subjects in the study were assigned randomly to either a partisan disagreement or no information condition, and then within the informational conditions to either a fake bad/fake good group.
\(^6\) Difference significant at \(p<0.05\), two tailed.
\(^7\) Difference significant at \(p<0.001\), two tailed.
Study 2

Our next study relies on subjects recruited via YouGov, a panel of over two million Americans who are randomly invited to participate in studies. Using a process of “sample matching,” YouGov obtains nationally-representative samples from this panel (see Rivers (2006) for details). Numerous scholars (Barabas and Jerit 2010, Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012, Huber et al 2013; Jessee and Malhotra 2013) and surveys such as the Cooperative Congressional Election Study and the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (Jackman and Vavreck 2009) have relied on YouGov. Research shows that this technique produces samples of similar or higher quality to traditional telephone surveys (Berrens, Bohara et al. 2003, Sanders, Clarke et al. 2007). Our study was conducted February 18-23, 2013; Response Rate 3 is 41.2%. We show the demographics of our sample in Table 1.

We first randomly assigned individuals to receive information about partisan disagreement, partisan unity, or to a non-political control condition (all stimuli in Appendix 1). We then randomly assigned subjects to a particular type of partisanship question: either the Michigan/ANES partisanship question with the “Generally speaking…” lead-in, or the Gallup version of the partisan question, using “as of today…” This produces six experimental groups (Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Differences in Partisan Identification: Results

We consider our results in two ways. First, we consider the patterns across different types of information within a particular question wording. Second, we consider patterns within a particular type of information across question wording.
We first note that the informational manipulation produces different results depending on question wording. When we rely on the question beginning with “Generally speaking…,” we see that exposure to different types of information has relatively little substantive effect on the percentage of individuals who identify as either a pure or leaning independent.

In contrast, when we rely on the question using “as of today…” the percentage of individuals identifying as either pure or leaning independents substantially grows in the partisan disagreement condition. When asked for their party identification, the number of individuals identifying as independent in the partisan disagreement group increases by 10 percentage points relative to the control condition.

Even more important, however, are comparisons within informational type. In Figure 3, we demonstrate the difference in the percentage of independents among the “as of today” versus “generally speaking” conditions, subtracting those in the “generally speaking” group from those in the “as of today” group. Looking at the control group on the left, -4 indicates that there is an increase of 4 percentage points in the percent identifying as “independent” in the “as of today” group. For those who read the news article about partisan unity, there is a 3.4 percentage point increase in independents for the “as of today” group. Neither of these differences is substantively large, nor is either one statistically significant.

In contrast, in the partisan disagreement condition we see a 7.7 percentage point increase in independents among those asked the “as of today” versus “generally speaking” party identification question. This is both substantively and statistically significant. The data thus suggest that social desirability bias exists in the measurement of party identification and is
moreover exacerbated by question wording, such as “as of today” lead-ins, which emphasize short-term considerations.

Finally, we consider this effect more rigorously by relying on a model that predicts the likelihood of identifying as either a pure or leaning independent. Here we can also control for various covariates that might influence our result. Although our conditions are not imbalanced (and thus do not necessitate this approach), a model provides a helpful check on our findings. In this model, we interact each condition with question type and control for respondent demographics, including ideology as measured a year prior.8 We also control for self-monitoring – or the extent to which a person is conscious of the image they project to the outside world (Berinsky and Lavine 2012).

Our results (Table 3) show a critical relationship between exposure to partisan disagreement information and question wording. In our model, the “generally speaking” question is coded as 1, while the “as of today” question is coded as 0. First, we see that the positive coefficient on the partisan disagreement condition alone highlights that, when presented with the “as of today” question, exposure to disagreement generally increases the likelihood of identifying as independent. In contrast, the negative, significant coefficient on the interaction between partisan disagreement and question type shows that the “generally speaking” lead-in significantly decreases the likelihood that an individual will identify as some type of independent, as compared with “as of today.” We see a similar effect when we consider only individuals who identify as pure Independents – excluding those who identified as leaning.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

8 We have these measures of ideology due to the panel structure of YouGov
As we rely on interactions to consider the joint effects of question wording and informational exposure, we also calculate the marginal effect of question type. Our results show that question wording has the strongest effect when individuals are exposed to information about partisan disagreement. Under exposure to information about partisan unity, a shift from the “as of today” to the “generally speaking” item decreases the likelihood of identifying as either a leaning or pure independent by 0.0006 – a decline that is neither substantively important nor statistically significant.

In contrast, we see that under exposure to partisan disagreement, shifting from the “as of today” to the “generally speaking” item decreases the likelihood of identifying as either a leaning or pure independent decreases by 0.12 – an effect that is both statistically significant and substantively important.\(^9\) In sum, our marginal results reinforce our bivariate results: under exposure to information about partisan disagreement – a condition that exacerbates the social desirability of independence -- question wording is particularly critical.

**Conclusion**

In this manuscript, we argue and show that measures of partisanship are susceptible to social desirability, with messages regarding partisan disagreement increasing this effect. Moreover, we find that this social desirability bias toward identifying as independent is exacerbated when questions regarding party identification emphasize short-term considerations over general partisan preferences.

The likelihood that individuals may encounter information regarding partisan disagreement before answering questions of party identification is quite strong given that

\(^9\) Significant at \(p<0.1\), on tailed, \(p<0.05\) two tailed.
questions regarding partisan disagreement often appear in surveys before respondents are asked for their party identification. For example, in September of 2013, Gallup asked respondents: “Which of the following statements comes closer to your view about the budget debate between Barack Obama and the Republicans in Congress -- it is an important battle over principles and the future direction of government (or) it is mostly an attempt by both sides to gain political advantage?” The findings we present in this research note suggest that questions of this nature – when combined with “as of today” question lead-ins – may lead to greater reports of independents (both leaning and pure) than we might find otherwise.

It is not our intent to make normative statements regarding the superiority of one question format over another; our findings merely suggest that questions focusing on the short-term will reflect social desirability biases associated with contemporary norms. When comparing trends in political identification over time, one must be cognizant of both real shifts that might be occurring among the American population but also of social desirability biases, which we show can exacerbate independence among otherwise partisan respondents.
REFERENCES


Patterson, Thomas E. 2010. We the People. McGraw-Hill.


APPENDIX

[Control Condition]
Every February, Americans await for Groundhog Phil in the little town of Punxsutawney, Pa. According to folklore, Phil’s sighting of his own shadow means there will be 6 more weeks of winter. If Phil does not see his shadow, it means “there will be an early spring.” The official website of Punxsutawney Phil, perhaps not impartial, claims the Groundhog has issued a correct forecast 100% of the time.

[Partisan Disagreement Condition]
As President Barack Obama begins his second term, the Democrats and Republicans in Washington appear to be as divided as ever. Political experts predict that Americans can expect even more of the partisan bickering that has characterized Washington in recent years. The profound debate that has raged between the two parties has not been settled in the least. The next two years may very well bring a continuous cycle of two parties battling it out in Washington.

[Partisan Unity Condition]
As President Barack Obama begins his second term, the Democrats and Republicans in Washington appear to be more unified than ever. Political experts predict that Americans can expect a new era of bipartisanship in Washington. The profound debate that has raged between the two parties appears to be settling. The next two years may very well bring progress towards two parties cooperating in Washington.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study 1 (Internet Sample)</th>
<th>Study 2 (YouGov)</th>
<th>ANES 2012</th>
<th>Pew 2013</th>
<th>US Census 2010</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat (measured pre-treatment)</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican (measured pre-treatment)</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>23.32%</td>
<td>27.11%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>% with BA</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>50-54*</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>---**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Male</td>
<td>63.64%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
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</table>

* ANES 2012 restricts actual age, 50-54 is the median group.

** A comparison cannot be made here as surveys only include participants over 18.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Type</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Disagreement</th>
<th>Unity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question Type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Generally speaking”</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Group 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As of today”</td>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Group 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Likelihood of identifying as Independent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Leaning and Pure Independents</th>
<th>Pure Independents Only</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question Type (under the control condition)</td>
<td>0.190 (0.286)</td>
<td>0.323 (0.377)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity Condition</td>
<td>0.013 (0.280)</td>
<td>-0.510 (0.366)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity X Question Type</td>
<td>-0.185 (0.397)</td>
<td>0.041 (0.518)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagreement condition</td>
<td>0.270 (0.275)</td>
<td>0.163 (0.360)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement x Question Type</td>
<td>-0.659 (0.397)*</td>
<td>-0.860 (0.526)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.214 (0.065)</td>
<td>0.324 (0.078)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.058 (0.058)</td>
<td>-0.052 (0.072)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-0.038 (0.063)</td>
<td>0.065 (0.089)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.508 (0.167)**</td>
<td>-0.242 (0.221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>0.127 (0.079)</td>
<td>0.374 (0.098)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Monitoring</td>
<td>-0.051 (0.038)</td>
<td>-0.015 (0.068)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered Voter</td>
<td>0.612 (0.260)**</td>
<td>0.430 (0.299)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.415 (0.696)</td>
<td>-3.093 (0.865)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>796</td>
</tr>
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</table>

ITEMIZED LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Percentage Identifying as Independent in “Fake Good” and “Fake Bad” Conditions

Figure 2. Difference in Independents between “Fake Good” and “Fake Bad” Groups Across Control and Partisan Disagreement Conditions

Figure 3. Difference in Independence between “As of Today” and “Generally Speaking” Across Experimental Conditions