

Gallup: Americans abandoning political parties

Gallup released a [poll](#) on January 11, 2016 reporting that the percentage of Americans identifying with political parties is near historical lows.

Here's what Gallup had to say:

“In 2015, for the fifth consecutive year, at least four in 10 U.S. adults identified as political independents. The 42% identifying as independents in 2015 was down slightly from the record 43% in 2014. This elevated percentage of political independents leaves Democratic (29%) and Republican (26%) identification at or near recent low points, with the modest Democratic advantage roughly where it has been over the past five years.”

And the polling data for the visual folks out there:



From the looks of it, a lot of Americans stopped identifying as Republicans after 2004, an indictment of President Bush. But before Democrats celebrate, there has also been a brutal abandonment of the Democratic Party since 2008, an indictment of President Obama.

In other words, a lot of Americans aren't happy with the country's leadership, as nominated and supported by the two major political parties. That could explain the sudden rise of seemingly populist candidates such as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump.

Now, a lot of folks may be celebrating the abandonment of political parties as a good thing. It may be that we are simply in a period of transition, a sort of populist

reshuffling of identity, and that once the new “battle lines” are drawn Americans’ loyalty to parties will return. But they may not. And if that is the case, does it actually point to deeper problems?

Robert Nisbet, a 20th-century sociologist took what would likely be perceived today as a contrarian position on the decline of political parties in his book *Twilight of Authority* (1975). His great concern is with “political atomism”. If society came to such a state, he feared that the individual would not be able to stand alone against a Caesar or Napoleon, without political parties there would actually be a stronger chance of despotism.

“Let me turn now to another, and in certain respects an even more fundamental, indication of the waning of the political community in the West. This is the rapid decay of political party. Few if any of the eighteenth-century architects of the political community foresaw the vital importance of party in modern liberal democracy; some indeed, as the famous tenth *Federalist Paper* suggests, actually feared parties, or factions as they were called. In fact, as history has shown, the all-important element of *participation* in the political community would never have become what it has become had it not been for the institutionalizations of ideology, the structurings of popular sentiment, which are what parties about.

No matter how skeptical the Founding Fathers may have been about ‘factions’ in politics, it was not long in the history of democracy in the West before the importance of parties was realized for what it was – the development of intermediate organizations of an unofficial kind which could serve as barriers against atomization of popular opinion and also against the coming-into-being of some form of plebiscitary mass democracy with its inevitable attractions to the would-be Napoleon, the man on horseback...”

Having argued that political parties may actually have proven to be a barrier between the individual and the state, Nisbet turned his attention to the state of things as he saw them in 1975. They seem eerily prescient forty years later. Here are a few highlights:

- “Whereas for a century and a half the party was a proving ground for issues and candidates, it is evident that parties today are attacked by the same forces of distrust, disillusion, boredom, and intimations in the electorate of corruption which attack the idea of the political community.”
- “In contemporary political life, being an independent is less likely to bespeak personal autonomy of personal interest than personal disaffection and personal indifference.”
- “No such [new] party or beginning of party is to be seen at the present time; probably the first time in American history that such a statement can be made. All we see are enlarging aggregates of atom-like individuals whose disenchantment with politics and party has become translated into massive indifference...”
- “No lesson seems to me clearer in Western history than that which tells us that political parties – or analogous organizations such as those existing in the medieval period when modern representative institutions were coming into existence – are powerful buffers to despotism and individual centralization of government, and that if such despotism or centralization be the objective, prior weakening and destruction of strong political parties is absolutely vital.”

Nisbet ends the section on political parties and community with this warning from Tocqueville:

“When great political parties begin to cool in their attachments without softening their hatreds, and at last reach the point of wishing less to succeed than to prevent the success of their opponents, one should prepare for servitude – the master is near.”

Something to think about.