Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 86, No. 1, 2022, pp. 149–161

MACROPARTISANSHIP WITH INDEPENDENTS

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Abstract MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson's classic article "Macropartisanship" extended the study of political behavior from static analyses of American elections to the dynamics of partisanship between elections. This launched new frontiers of research, such as studying the effects of presidential approval and economic indices on aggregate party identification. However, the Macropartisanship literature made an important oversight: changes in partisanship between elections are usually from one partisan group to identification as an independent, or vice versa. A single measure of aggregate partisanship, like the original Macropartisanship measure, leaves out independents altogether. This has important theoretical and empirical consequences that are evident in an era of increasingly strong partisanship. We conceive of Macropartisanship as a compositional variable and study how its components are affected by changes in economic sentiment and presidential approval.

Partisanship is a dominant explanation for many factors in American politics. The relative balance of how many Americans identify as Republican, Democrat, or independent is crucial both to understanding the movement of aggregate public opinion (Smidt 2018) and to predicting and explaining election outcomes (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). At the same time, the divide between Democratic and Republican identifiers is too wide to expect

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https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab073 Advance Access publication February 15, 2022

many people to cross it, even if their policy differences are not as deep (Mason 2016).

Recent work on independent voters demonstrates that many have partisan leanings, but are nevertheless reluctant to identify with one of the two major parties (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). This implies that few voters flip back and forth between Democratic and Republican self-identification. More likely, what changes occur are movements into and out of independent self-identification. Extant research that studies partisanship at the aggregate level has typically ignored the dynamics of independent voters. Indeed, the literature's key measure—MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson's (MES) Macropartisanship—leaves them out entirely.

In this note we develop dynamic compositional models of partisanship in the United States that include independents. Using data and models that map more precisely where changes in aggregate partisanship are occurring allows deeper insights into the effects of presidential and economic evaluations. We proceed as follows: we first discuss the origins of macro-polity research and the traditional measure of Macropartisanship, with a focus on how it fails to capture the compositional nature of partisanship and the importance of independent voters. We then discuss the implications for testing theories of partisan dynamics and outline some theoretical expectations for its movement over time. We then describe our data and the "dynamic pie" approach to analyzing compositional variables over time and present our results.

Problems in Studying Aggregate Partisanship

The work of MES (1989, 1992, 2002) opened a new field of research: the Macropolity. MES marshaled a wealth of public opinion time series on the economy, institutions, policy, and political parties to analyze the movement of America's electorate over long arcs of history. As a first step, "Macropartisanship" (1989) defined the balance of Democrats to Republicans in the mass public and traced its movement over time.

This new avenue of research had its roots in earlier voting literature. In particular, V. O. Key's *The Responsible Electorate* (1966) studied voters' loyalty across consecutive elections. This put vote choice as the central phenomenon of interest. This practice echoed through the voting literature as Zaller (2004) described "floating voters" as those (usually poorly informed) who switch between parties. Smidt (2017) investigated the evolution of vote choice across a period of American polarization.

Presidential elections are, of course, infrequent, but the electorate's movements, reactions, and moods in between those events are worthy of attention. MES's 1989 "Macropartisanship" expanded electoral behavior research by adding a new method of analysis. Using aggregated partisanship data, MES extended Key's pocketbook voting to time-series models *between* elections

and found that quarterly partisanship data respond systematically to presidential approval and consumer sentiment.

But there is a disconnect between theories and models of choices in the voting booth versus the attachments that voters feel (or don't feel) toward political parties between elections. Models like Key's are about the dichotomous decision between the two major parties—it is mostly safe to ignore independents because they rarely get much consideration for the vote. When turning to questions of partisan identification over time, however, independents are crucial in understanding the electorate's movement. That is, it is easier to identify as an independent in between elections than it is to vote for an independent candidate. Clarke and McCutcheon (2009) find that approximately 30 percent of respondents in panel surveys switch between partisan and independent identification, whereas only around 5 percent switch parties.

As such, the theory and measurement of Macropartisanship are imprecise because they ignore independents. In an era of hyper-partisanship in which people rarely switch their identification between the two major parties, the movement from being a partisan to calling oneself an independent (or vice versa) is where the action is. While MES's Macropartisanship has been critiqued from many angles—some used different aggregation levels (Weisberg and Smith 1991; Abramson and Ostrom 1994), some challenged MES on the magnitude and causes of variation (Abramson and Ostrom 1991, 1994; MacKuen et al. 1992; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998), and some investigated the properties of the time series (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1996)—the debate has firmly accepted MES's construction of a variable that explicitly ignores self-identified independents.

As the aggregate balance of partisan identifiers in the US electorate at any given point in time, MES calculate Macropartisanship as:

$$\frac{\%Dem_t}{\%Dem_t + \%Rep_t}$$

Figure 1a plots the traditional series from 1978 to 2016 using quarterly data. The measure is imprecise for at least two reasons. First, by construction, it ignores the movement into and out of the independent category. Second, it cannot discern where changes are coming from—for example, a movement in a Republican direction (as happened in the early 1980s in the figure) cannot be safely attributed to a growth in Republican identification, a decline in Democratic identification, or both. In short, by trying to squeeze too much into a single index, it is difficult to extract key details when studying the measure. This is theoretically and methodologically unsatisfying, and limits our ability to explore aggregate partisanship, its causes, and its consequences.

Macropartisanship as a Compositional Variable

We propose that aggregate partisanship is better studied as a compositional dependent variable (Philips, Rutherford, and Whitten 2016). By recognizing that the component series—the percent in each time period that are Democrats, Republicans, and independents—must add up to 100 percent, we explicitly recognize that gains in one category must come at the expense of one or both of the other categories. This allows a deeper investigation of aggregate partisanship. For example, if we want to study how partisans come to identify as independent in response to performance indicators (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), then a measure that can account for this possible movement from either party is necessary to accurately capture the macrodynamics of the processes at work.

Figure 1b presents aggregate partisanship as a compositional dependent variable. A comparison to the original measure highlights how our conceptualization allows so much more information to be considered. Critically, the percentage of self-identified independents varies over time as much as Republican and Democratic identifiers do and, in recent years, describes a plurality of voters. This portion of the American electorate—an average of 38 percent from 1978 to 2016, including partisan leaners—is left out of the traditional measure of Macropartisanship. To get a concrete sense of this, compare the dynamics in figure 1a to those in figure 1b for the years since roughly 2010. In figure 1a there is minimal movement, and the analyst's temptation is to conclude "little to no change." But compare the same period in figure 1b, where we see parallel declines in *both* Republican and Democratic identification and a concomitant growth in independent identification. In short, modeling the aggregate series as part of a "dynamic pie" allows us to estimate the movements between categories. Before elaborating on our methods and data, we explore the new ways the measure allows us to test relationships at the macro level.

What Drives Aggregate Partisanship?

The study of aggregate partisanship must be recast in light of recent work showing that, at the individual level, most independents are undercover partisans (Keith et al. 1992; Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Concurrently, Macropartisanship theory—that systematic change in party identification stems from changes in presidential approval and consumer sentiment—can aid our understanding of what drives aggregate-level independent identification. With our compositional approach, we aim to integrate these two literatures.

A key insight of Klar and Krupnikov (2016) is that, while most voters consistently prefer one party, many often self-identify as independents based on their disillusionment with that party. Satisfaction with a party at the

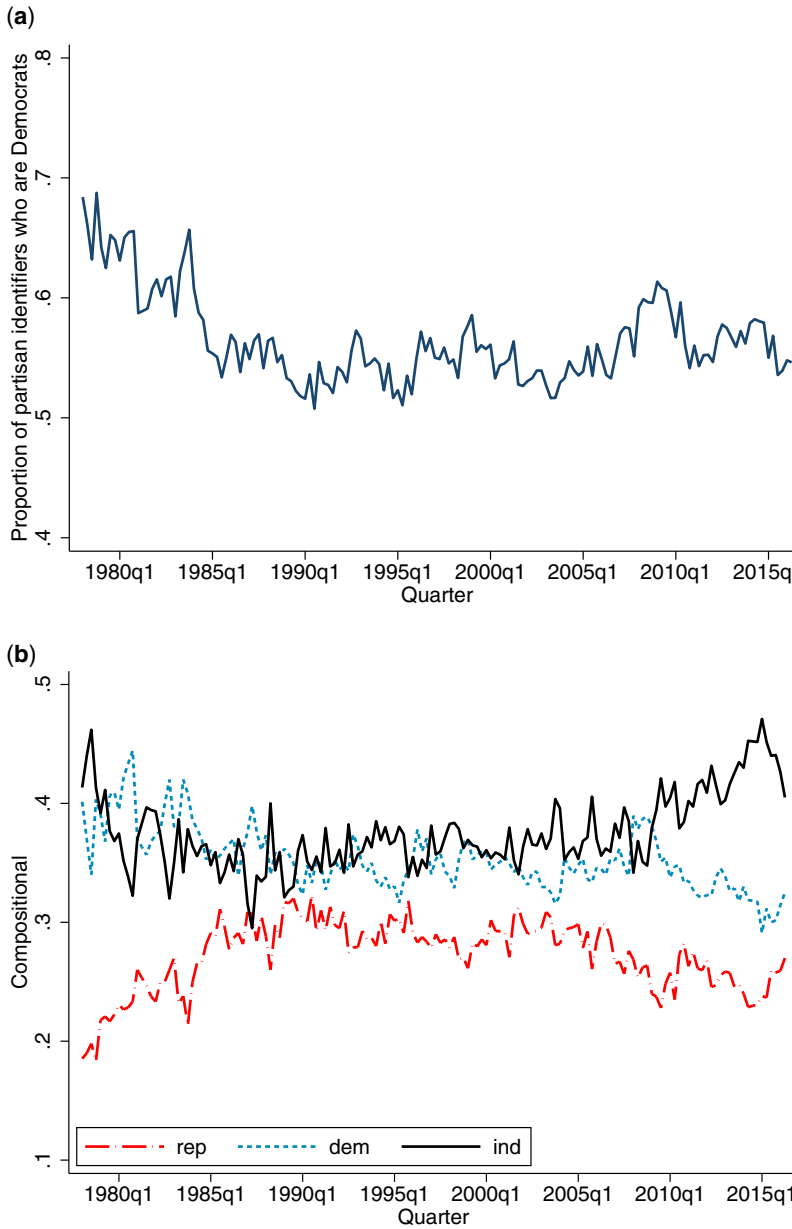

Figure 1. a. Traditional macropartisanship. b. Compositional macropartisanship.

individual level should map well onto presidential approval at the aggregate level, which (along with consumer sentiment) MES (1989) find to be a key predictor of Macropartisanship. Thus, as opinions about the president improve (decline), voters should be more (less) likely to identify with the president's party and less (more) likely to identify as an independent. We should see trade-offs between in-party and independent identification.

One might also expect that a popular president could move voters away from the out-party and into the independent category. However, changes in presidential approval are unlikely to have as strong effects on the level of disillusionment toward the out-party, which implies that improvements in the president's standing are not likely to move out-party partisans to call themselves independents. That is, identification with the out-party will not change in response to changes in presidential approval. Similarly, changes in consumer sentiment should lead to shifts between in-party and independent identification. Our analysis should clarify the nature of these relationships. As a result of both presidential approval and consumer sentiment, partisans will de-identify when their party underperforms, and independents will re-identify when their (leaned-toward) party experiences success. Thus, the trade-off is likely between in-party and independent identification.

The proposed theory, if empirically supported, affirms MES's finding that aggregate partisan identification varies significantly and systematically. It would also provide a more detailed explanation of where that variation occurs—through independents. Simultaneously, such findings would reinforce the current understanding of independent identification by showing how partisans de- and reidentify in response to presidential approval and consumer sentiment, and show that aggregate measures move similarly to individual-level data. Together, these additions should bridge the gap between two literatures and create an updated theory of Macropartisanship with greater explanatory power that matches individual-level theories of behavior.

Methodological Approach and Data

Since we are attempting to explain movements and trade-offs in partisan identification over time, our compositional dependent variable is aggregate-level party identification by quarter. We use CBS News and *New York Times* party identification polls from Cornell's Roper Center to create our quarterly partisanship measure. Our data begin in the first quarter of 1978—the first quarter available for the Index of Consumer Sentiment—and end with the second quarter of 2016 when the CBS News and *New York Times* surveys become too infrequent to comprise a quarterly measure. There are 581 individual CBS News and *New York Times* surveys from 1978 to 2016. Six of the 155 quarters have no surveys and we linearly interpolated those data points. The average sample size per quarter is over 4,500 respondents. We

follow MES in using a quarterly measure; per their theory, more temporally aggregated units of time hide meaningful variation in party identification (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989).

The CBS News and *New York Times* surveys consistently ask the American National Election Studies' seminal question: "Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, independent, or what?" This question wording produces less volatile responses than the one that MES used, Gallup's "... in politics, as of today ..." (Abramson and Ostrom 1994). We use the CBS/*Times* adoption of the ANES wording to minimize the likelihood that question wording is affecting party identification variability. We count those who do not choose a party, but subsequently answer "Republican" or "Democrat" in the follow-up question—that is, so-called "leaners"—as independents. The inclusion of leaners in the independent category is consistent with MES's (1989) original analysis, in the sense that the Gallup question that MES use does not probe for "leaner" status.[1] For each category, the weighted average of the surveys is taken to get a quarterly measure. Last, since the components of our compositional variable must sum to one, the "don't know" and "no answer" category is included in the proportion of independents. Treating these as a separate category from independents changes neither our substantive nor our statistical findings (see Supplementary Material, figure SM1). Likewise, completely removing these respondents from the analyses is benign (see Supplementary Material, figure SM2).

We use a "dynamic pie" lagged dependent variable model (Philips, Rutherford, and Whitten 2016) to analyze Macropartisanship as a compositional time series.[2] Macropartisanship fits this framework since its parts sum to one and any change within a single component part is bounded by one and negative one. Using the dynsimpie package in Stata (Jung et al. 2020), we create two time series as the ratios of categories (Democratic and Republican) over a baseline category (independent) and log-transform them.[3] Each of the two dependent variables is then regressed on our independent variables—presidential approval and consumer sentiment—as well as two lags of the dependent variable in a seemingly unrelated regression model, as

1. There are also practical considerations: the CBS/*Times* surveys ask the follow-up question—do independents have a preferred party—in only 138 of the 581 surveys. This would leave 93 of the 155 quarters with missing data if we tried to separate out leaners from true independents.

2. Inferences could be problematic if the dependent variables contain unit roots. Fortunately, Dickey-Fuller and Philips-Perron tests (shown in Supplementary Material table SM3) reject the unit root null for each of our dependent variables. The series are long enough to have confidence in these tests (Lebo and Kraft 2017). Stationary dependent variables regressed on differenced independent variables ensure that our equations are balanced (Grant and Lebo 2016; Pickup and Kellstedt forthcoming).

3. The baseline category is arbitrary, and the results are not affected by which baseline is chosen.

shown in equations 1 and 2.[4] Then, parameter estimates are obtained and used in 1,000 simulations to estimate the effect of a shock in a specified independent variable—presidential approval or consumer sentiment. After undoing the initial log transformation to ease interpretation, our findings reveal the effect of a one-standard-deviation shock in an independent variable on the constituent parts of Macropartisanship.

$$ln\left(\frac{Dem}{Ind}\right)_t = \varphi_{1d}\, ln\left(\frac{Dem}{Ind}\right)_{t-1} + \varphi_{2d}\, ln\left(\frac{Dem}{Ind}\right)_{t-2} + \beta_{1d}\, \Delta Approval_t + \beta_{2d}\, \Delta Sentiment_t + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (1)$$

$$ln\left(\frac{Rep}{Ind}\right)_t = \varphi_{1r}\, ln\left(\frac{Rep}{Ind}\right)_{t-1} + \varphi_{2r}\, ln\left(\frac{Rep}{Ind}\right)_{t-2} + \beta_{1r}\, \Delta Approval_t + \beta_{2r}\, \Delta Sentiment_t + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (2)$$

MES (1989) found variation in Macropartisanship to occur systematically as a result of changes in consumer sentiment and presidential approval. We are interested in discovering how the same independent variables might affect party identification when modeled as a dynamic pie. Thus, we use the same sources as MES—quarterly data from Michigan's Survey of Consumers and Gallup's presidential approval measure.[5]

We span the tenure of six presidents—three from each party—but multiply change in presidential approval and consumer sentiment by -1 for quarters during Republican presidencies. This ensures that both increases in approval and consumer sentiment during Democratic presidencies and decreases in approval and consumer sentiment during Republican presidencies should lead to positive changes in a Democratic direction. For example, a one-SD decrease in approval under a Republican is the same as a SD increase under a Democrat.

4. We conduct a series of tests for autocorrelation in the residuals. Both the Portmanteau (Q) test ($p = 0.15$) and the Breusch-Godfrey test ($p = 0.46$) fail to reject the null of no autocorrelation. Following Philips, Souza, and Whitten (2020), we conduct the Harvey test for global autocorrelation. The Harvey test fails to reject the null of no autocorrelation for both equations ($p = 0.46$ and $p = 0.79$, respectively) and the system of equations ($p = 0.74$).

5. For 1978 to 2008, we use Roper's Gallup surveys to create a quarterly measure of approval. For the 712 surveys within this time period, we find the averages for each quarter and weight them by sample size. This creates the first 125 quarters of our dataset. For the remaining 30 quarters, we use Gallup Analytics quarterly data with an average sample size per quarter of approximately 44,000. Gallup's presidential poll is preferred because of the frequency of the survey and the consistent question wording over time. The *NYT*/CBS and Gallup surveys we use from the Roper Center are listed by survey date and study number in the Supplementary Material, tables SM10 and SM11.

A Reanalysis of Macropartisanship

The purpose of analyzing Macropartisanship as a compositional time series is to identify the trade-off relationships between Republicans, Democrats, and independents under Republican and Democratic administrations. Given the nature of a compositional variable, an increase in one category necessitates a decrease in at least one other category. The resulting ladderplots present how these relationships are affected instantaneously and cumulatively by changes in presidential approval and consumer sentiment. The instantaneous effect is the effect estimated in the period of the shock, while the cumulative effect is the full effect of the shock as it is felt through the lags of the dependent variable.[6]

First, the ladderplot in figure 2a shows that a standard-deviation shock in a pro-Democratic direction in presidential approval (approximately 6.38 percent) leads to a small instantaneous change, and a larger cumulative change, in Republican identification, of more than two and a half percent.[7] But when Republicans lose, who gains? Our analysis helps shed light on this as well. When Republican identification changes as a product of a shock in presidential approval, independent and Democratic identification move in the opposite direction by more than one percent each, cumulatively. Thus, our proposition—that changes in presidential approval affect in-party and, inversely, independent identification—is supported by the evidence here.

From figure 2a, we also see that aggregate Democratic identification is more resistant to changes in presidential approval than is Republican identification. Presidential approval moving in a pro-Democratic direction leads to a small increase in Democratic identification, and a similarly sized increase in independent identification. This suggests most of the movement in Macropartisanship that occurs as a result of Approval dynamics is between Republican and independent/Democratic identification. When Republican identification dips, independent and Democratic identification rises. The traditional Macropartisanship measure is incapable of capturing this trade-off in identification because it fails to account for independent identification. In addition, it would show an increase in Democratic identification relative to Republican identification, obscuring the fact that Democratic identification increases to a far lesser degree than Republican identification decreases.[8]

The effect of a standard-deviation shock in consumer sentiment (approximately 5.00 percent) on Macropartisanship is shown in figure 2b. Contrary to our proposition, consumer sentiment has no substantial effect on party

6. In lagged dependent variable models, the cumulative effect is estimated using the following formula: $\beta/(1 - \varphi)$.

7. See Supplementary Material table SM5, for full results.

8. For comparison, Supplementary Material table SM4 shows the results of a similar model with traditional Macropartisanship as the dependent variable.

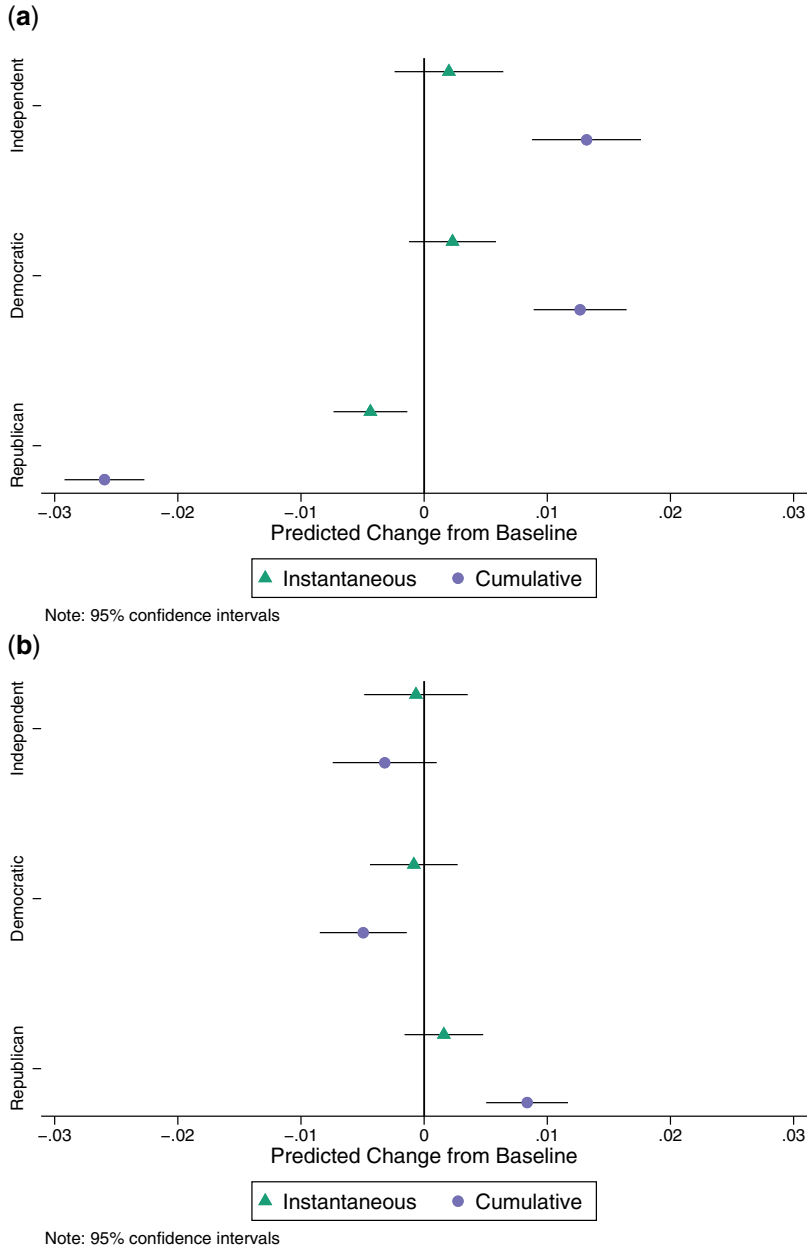

Figure 2. a. The partisan effects of a 6.38 percent shock in approval. b. The partisan effects of a 5.00 percent shock in consumer sentiment.

identification, and the effect it does have is in the opposite direction than expected. Unexpectedly, a standard-deviation increase in consumer sentiment in a pro-Democratic direction leads to a statistically significant increase in Republican identification and decrease in Democratic identification of less than one percent. The magnitude is not substantial; however, there still exists a trade-off relationship between Republican and Democratic identification. Independent identification is unmoved by a standard-deviation shock in consumer sentiment.[9]

Conclusion

In our compositional time series, presidential approval has an effect similar to original Macropartisanship research; yet, our analysis also reveals the necessity of analyzing Macropartisanship as a compositional variable. In our model, in-party identification has a positive relationship with presidential approval. As approval changes favorably for Democrats, Democratic identification increases, and vice versa for Republican identification. However, the traditional measure would fail to show that Democratic identification moves less than Republican identification, as Republican identification decreases (increases) lead to split increases (decreases) in Democratic and independent identification. By analyzing Macropartisanship as a compositional variable, we get a better and more precise look at the trade-offs.

Consumer sentiment has an unexpected effect on Macropartisanship in our series—the results, while modest, are the opposite of our initial expectations.[10] Two recent studies can potentially shed light on this finding. Consumer sentiment has been a predictor of presidential approval in the past, but in recent years this relationship has weakened (Donovan et al. 2019). If perceptions of the economy are increasingly conditional on partisan identity, then the direction of the causal arrow between consumer sentiment and Macropartisanship becomes blurry. In addition, Dancey, Tarpey, and Woon (2019) find party perceptions are informed most by presidential approval. Party perceptions are surely highly correlated with partisan identity. Conservatively, we conclude that consumer sentiment has a small effect on Macropartisanship outside of the effect of presidential approval; any consumer sentiment effect is filtered through presidential approval. Although

9. Of course, while investigating these relationships, we must be careful to avoid the ecological fallacy. We are looking at the aggregate level for changes in the balance between overall identification with parties and independents, but the inferences we draw about individual-level behavior must be cautious. For example, "no change" among independents might be due to a 2 percent influx from Democrats and a 2 percent exodus to Republicans.

10. Supplementary Material tables SM6–SM9 include various model specifications. The consumer sentiment results are robust across specifications—including the exclusion of presidential approval.

our consumer sentiment proposition was not supported by the results, the presidential approval results demonstrate the usefulness of viewing Macropartisanship as a compositional variable. Failing to account for the constituent categories risks an analysis incapable of parsing out the trade-offs inherent in Macropartisanship. Even if the conclusions do not vary drastically or yield unexpected outcomes, a compositional time series can ensure trade-offs are precisely illustrated—the effects on Democratic, Republican, and independent identification are concurrently estimated and we gain a better understanding of movements in the mass electorate.

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/J4N8WX.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab073.

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