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Partisan Identification Is ‘Sticky,’ but About 10% Switched Parties Over the Past Year

Nearly a quarter of young Republicans left the GOP

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Partisan Identification Is ‘Sticky,’ but About 10% Switched Parties Over the Past Year

Nearly a quarter of young Republicans left the GOP

Those who study politics have long known that a person’s party affiliation is a strong predictor of how they will vote and what their opinions will be on most political issues. Some of the power of partisanship comes from its relative immutability: Most people remain loyal to a political party.

But over a 15-month period encompassing the 2016 presidential campaign, about 10% of Republicans and Democrats “defected” from their parties to the opposing party.

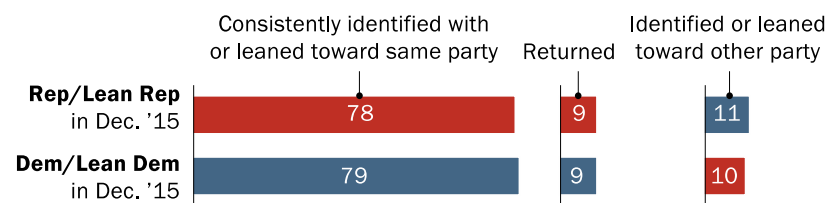
Those who switched parties were less politically engaged than people who stayed with their parties. And among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, young people were far more likely than older adults to leave the GOP.

A new study, based on Pew Research Center’s nationally representative [American Trends Panel](#), tracked respondents’ partisan identification over the course of five separate surveys, from December 2015 through March of this year.

Large majorities stayed with their parties throughout this period. Among those who identified as Republicans or leaned Republican in December 2015, 78% remained with the GOP over four subsequent surveys. Another 9% moved away from the Republican Party at some point, but returned by March 2017.

Most stay with their party, but some leave and return, while others ‘defect’

% who identified with/leaned toward a party in December 2015 who as of March 2017 ...



Note: Refusals not shown.

Source: Five American Trends Panel surveys conducted Dec. 2015 through Mar. 2017.

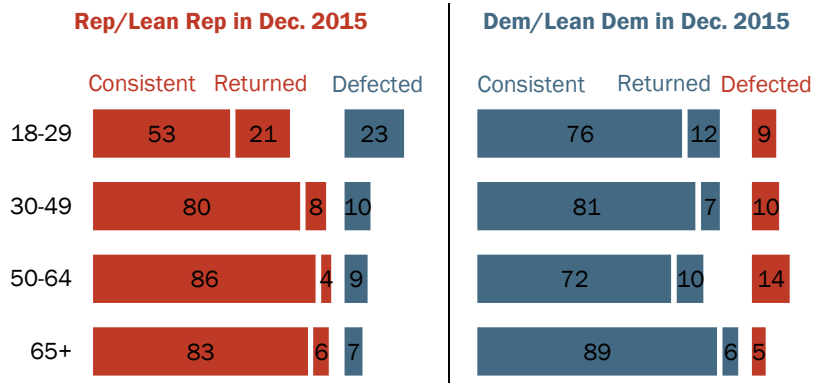
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The numbers are very similar among those who were Democrats in 2015: 79% consistently identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic in all five surveys, while 9% switched parties at some point but came back to the Democratic Party by March.

However, about one-in-ten in both parties changed their partisan leanings. Among those who had identified as Republicans or leaned Republican in the December 2015 survey, 11% either identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic nearly a year and a half later. About the same share of those who had initially aligned with the Democratic Party (10%) identified as Republicans or leaned Republican in March of this year.

Young Republicans more likely than older Republicans – and young Democrats – to switch parties

Among partisans and leaners in December 2015 who as of March 2017 ...



Note: Refusals not shown.

Source: Five American Trends Panel surveys conducted between Dec. 2015 and Mar. 2017.

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Among Republicans, there were wide age disparities in party-switching, while the differences were more modest among Democrats.

Only about half (53%) of those under 30 who initially identified as Republicans or leaned Republican consistently remained with the party over four subsequent surveys. Among older Republicans, 80% or more consistently identified as Republicans or leaned Republican.

To be sure, 21% of young Republicans left the GOP at some point after December 2015, but returned by March. But nearly a quarter aligned with the Democrats in March: Among those under 30 who initially identified as Republicans or leaned Republican in December 2015, 23% shifted to the Democratic Party (they identified or leaned Democratic).

That is much greater than the share of older Republicans – or Democrats across all age groups – who left their party during this period.

Overall, party-switching is more commonplace among people who are not very engaged by politics than among those who are politically engaged. Just 5% of politically engaged adults – those who are registered to vote and say they “always” vote and also say that they follow what is going on in government and politics “most of the time” – who initially called themselves Republicans leaned Democratic (or identified as Democrats) in the March 2017 survey. Among engaged Democrats, about as many shifted to the GOP (4%).

However, 15% of less engaged adults who initially identified as Republicans or leaned Republican became Democrats, while 12% of less engaged Democrats moved to the GOP.

Party switching and Trump job approval

Those who consistently stayed with their parties expressed strong views of Trump, both positive and negative. In April 2017, 84% of those who consistently identified with or leaned toward the Republican Party approved of Trump’s job performance – with 66% approving strongly.

Trump drew lower approval ratings (and fewer strongly approved) among those who left the Republican Party after December 2015 but later returned.

Those who left the Republican Party, by contrast, expressed sharply negative views of Trump: 84% disapproved (57% strongly).

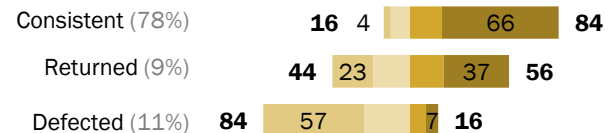
Democrats who stayed with their party – or left and returned – overwhelmingly disapproved of Trump’s job performance. Most who defected from the party gave Trump positive job ratings, but just 32% strongly approved of his job performance.

In April, most Republican defectors strongly disapproved of Trump

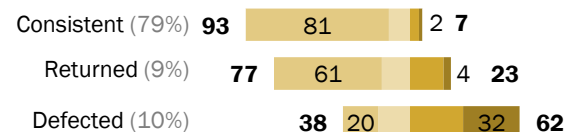
% who _____ of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as President



Among Rep/Lean Rep in Dec. 2015



Among Dem/Lean Dem in Dec. 2015



Note: Refusals not shown. Partisanship based on five surveys conducted between Dec. 2015 and Mar. 2017. Trump job approval from April 2017.

Source: American Trends Panel surveys conducted between Dec. 2015 and Apr. 2017.

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Party switching among ‘true’ partisans and independents

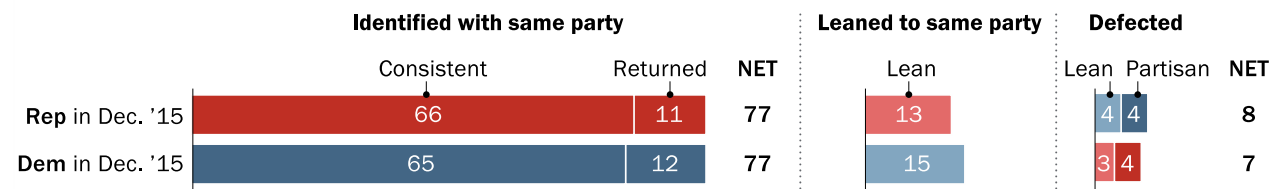
The analysis above is based on those who identify with a party, as well as those who lean toward a party. The overall patterns are similar when looking just at those who affiliate with the Republican and Democratic parties.

Large majorities of those who initially identified as Republicans and Democrats stayed with their parties from December 2015 through March 2017. In both parties, comparable shares (13% of Republicans, 15% of Democrats) moved from identifying as firm partisans to leaning. Thus some of the stability in leaned partisanship seen above reflects individuals who moved from being partisans to leaners (and vice versa), maintaining a connection to their original party throughout.

Just 8% of those who initially identified as Republicans aligned with the Democrats in March (4% identified as Democrats, 4% leaned Democratic). Similarly, 7% of those who identified as Democrats defected to the GOP (4% identified as Republicans, 3% leaned Republican).

Among former partisans, many still lean toward their former party

*% of those who **identified** as ___ who as of March 2017 ...*



Note: Refusals not shown. Based on partisan identifiers; does not include those who said they leaned toward one of the major parties in Dec. 2015.

Source: Five American Trends Panel surveys conducted between Dec. 2015 and Mar. 2017.

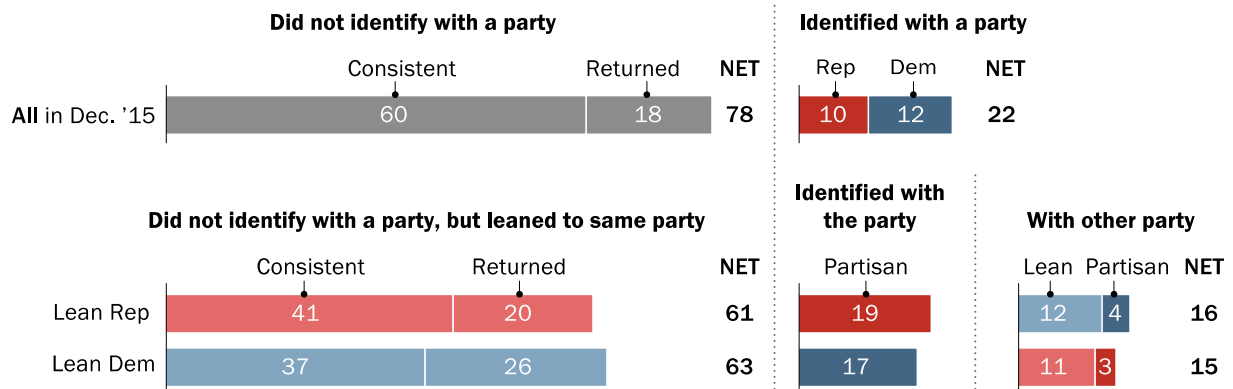
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There is somewhat more change among political independents than among partisans. However, 78% of those who did not identify as Republicans or Democrats in December 2015 also did not affiliate with either party in March 2017. Among the remaining 22%, nearly equal shares ended up identifying as Democrats (12%) and Republicans (10%).

Among nonpartisans who leaned toward a party in December 2015, roughly six-in-ten leaned toward the same party in March of this year. There was more movement during this period among leaners than partisans. For instance, 16% of those who initially leaned Republican eventually called themselves Democrats (either identified or leaned Democratic); a comparable share of those who initially leaned Democratic became Republicans or Republican leaners (14%).

Most who initially did not identify as Republicans or Democrats remained unaffiliated

% of those who did not identify with a party in December 2015 who as of March 2017 ...



Notes: Refusals not shown. Based on those who considered themselves independent or “something else” in Dec. 2015. Source: Five American Trends Panel surveys conducted between Dec. 2015 and Mar. 2017.

Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals:

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Methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by the Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults living in households. Respondents who self-identify as internet users and who provided an email address participate in the panel via monthly self-administered Web surveys, and those who do not use the internet or decline to provide an email address participate via the mail. The panel is being managed by Abt SRBI.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from two large, national landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted January 23rd to March 16th, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate¹. The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Survey on Government, conducted August 27th to October 4th, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate².

Participating panelists provided either a mailing address or an email address to which a welcome packet, a monetary incentive and future survey invitations could be sent. Panelists also receive a small monetary incentive after participating in each wave of the survey.

The analyses in this report depend upon six separate surveys (fielded in December 2015, April, August, December 2016, and March and April 2017). The data for 5,154 panelists who completed any of these six waves were weighted to be nationally representative of U.S. adults.

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The third step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and region to parameters from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 American Community Survey. Population density is weighted to match the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census. Telephone service is weighted to estimates of telephone coverage for 2016 that were

¹ When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

² Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after February 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

projected from the January-June 2015 National Health Interview Survey. Volunteerism is weighted to match the 2013 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. It also adjusts for party affiliation using an average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. Internet access is adjusted using a measure from the 2015 Survey on Government. Frequency of internet use is weighted to an estimate of daily internet use projected to 2016 from the 2013 Current Population Survey Computer and Internet Use Supplement.

Panelists who did not respond to all of the surveys used in this report are missing data for their party identification for waves in which they did not participate. These missing values were imputed using the process described below.

Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effects of both weighting and imputation. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

The following table shows the error attributable to sampling, weighting and imputation that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the analysis. The margins of error shown reflect the largest margin of error for any of the shifts in support to or from each candidate at each point in time:

	Unweighted N	Plus or minus...
Rep/Lean Rep in December 2015	1,816	4.0 percentage points
Consistent Rep/Lean Rep	1,556	4.4 percentage points
Returned Rep/Lean Rep	115	16.0 percentage points
Defected Rep/Lean Rep	129	15.1 percentage points
Dem/Lean Dem in December 2015	2,189	3.7 percentage points
Consistent Dem/Lean Dem	1,905	3.9 percentage points
Returned Dem/Lean Dem	122	15.6 percentage points
Defected Dem/Lean Dem	140	14.5 percentage points

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

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About the missing data imputation

The American Trends Panel is composed of individuals who were recruited from two large, representative telephone surveys originally fielded in early 2014 and late 2015. Participants in the panel are sent surveys to complete about monthly. While wave-level response rates are relatively high, not every individual in the panel participates in every survey. The analyses in this report are based on six surveys (fielded in December 2015, April, August, December 2016, and March and April 2017).

Of the more than 5,100 respondents who participated in at least one of the waves in which we collected party affiliation, several hundred respondents (between 9 and 19 percent) did not participate in any given wave. A statistical procedure called multiple imputation by chained equations was used to guard against the analysis being undermined by this wave level nonresponse. In particular, there is some evidence that those who are most likely to participate consistently in the panel are more interested and knowledgeable about politics than those who

only periodically respond. Omitting the individuals who did not participate in every wave of the survey might overstate the amount of stability in individuals' partisanship.

The particular missing data imputation algorithm we used is a method known as multiple imputation by chained equations, or MICE. The MICE algorithm is designed for situations where there are several variables with missing data that need to be imputed at the same time. MICE takes the full survey dataset and iteratively fills in missing data for each question using a statistical model that more closely approximates the overall distribution with each iteration. The process is repeated many times until the distribution of imputed data no longer changes. Although many kinds of statistical models can be used with MICE, this project used a machine learning method called random forests. For more details on the MICE algorithm and the use of random forests for imputation, see the following articles:

Azur, Melissa J., Elizabeth A. Stuart, Constantine Frangakis, and Philip J. Leaf. "Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations: What Is It and How Does It Work?: Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations." *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research* 20, no. 1 (March 2011): 40–49. doi:10.1002/mpr.329.

Doove, L.L., S. Van Buuren, and E. Dusseldorp. "Recursive Partitioning for Missing Data Imputation in the Presence of Interaction Effects." *Computational Statistics & Data Analysis* 72 (April 2014): 92–104. doi:10.1016/j.csda.2013.10.025.