

Why everyone is rushing to label themselves an ‘independent’

Independents are so hot right now — and will be for the foreseeable future. According to a major survey commissioned by CNN, nearly half of all Americans — 44% — call themselves independents while only 28% and 27%, respectively, identify as Republicans or Democrats.

I have a theory as to why. But I have to throw some fancy terms to explain it. “Independent” is what students of semiotics call an “empty signifier,” a term that has very little, if any, substantive content. If you describe yourself as an independent, I still have to ask you additional questions about what you actually believe. All you’ve told me to that point is that you reject a party label (believe me, I sympathize). It’s hard for young people to believe today, but Republican and Democrat labels used to work much the same way. A little more than a generation ago if you claimed to be on one side or the other, I’d have to ask a follow-up question to figure out if you were conservative or liberal, pro-life or pro-choice, for gun rights or against, etc. Today, the same goes for independents, which used to



be code for “swing voters” or “centrists.” Not anymore. According to the survey, some are “Democratic Lookalikes” (24%) and others are “Republican Lookalikes” (12%). They reject the label but ultimately vote like they don’t. The rest are among “The Checked Out” (27%), “The Disappointed Middle” (16%) and the “Upbeat Outsiders” (22%). The demographics and ideologies of these groups vary widely. In short, calling yourself an independent says something — that you don’t like the party labels — but it isn’t a one-size-fits all ideological or political signifier. That brings me to an even more pretentious term: “institutional isomorphism.” This one describes the process by which seemingly different organizations become similar to each other. Fast food chains that once had a very specific niche now routinely expand their offerings to capture market share

out of their lane. These days you can get espresso with your breakfast wrap from Dunkin’ and get doughnuts from Starbucks. The History Channel, A&E and MTV once had very specific programming, now they all peddle reality shows and generic entertainment. The reason why independent became an empty signifier is that the Republican and Democratic parties — and the broader right and left — succumbed to institutional isomorphism. Consider the vast constellation of institutions associated with the right — Fox News and its cable imitators, as well as most right-wing radio and websites, groups like the NRA, CPAC, Turning Point USA, Club for Growth, the Heritage Foundation, Young America’s Foundation, ISI et al.: Virtually all of them simply became, for want of a fancier term, “Trumpy.” Indeed, it’s easier to list the ones that didn’t. If you love President Trump, you wouldn’t have it any other way. But if you don’t, and you lean right, you probably call yourself an independent. The Democrats, meanwhile, are in a cul-de-sac these days because progressive foundations, activist groups, universities and “mainstream” news

outlets converged into an undifferentiated ideological blob. Consider the American Civil Liberties Union. It once kept to a very narrow lane, vigorously defending 1st Amendment rights regardless of how unpopular it made them. Over the last few decades, it has become largely indistinguishable from other generic progressive lobbying outfits, prioritizing conventional “social justice” goals even at the expense of 1st Amendment rights. The ideological, financial and cultural pressure to conform on the right and left is intense. In a competitive marketplace, you’d think that some Ivy League schools would have resisted the “woke” tide, but they pretty much all went with the flow. The reasons for ideological convergence on the right and left are economically and sociologically complex, but politically the main driver is our primary system. Why is it that nearly every major presidential primary candidate sounds almost identical to their competitors, at least on major issues? Why do Republican congressional primary candidates compete over who

would be more supportive of Trump? The short answer is that primary voters, and party donors, and ideological media enforcers have very narrow and concentrated conformist demands, and absent their support, candidates cannot move on to the general election. The pressure to conform doesn’t end with the nomination. In the GOP, support for Trump is the sole litmus test for being a “good” Republican. For Democrats, it’s a tight bundle of issues, but “resistance” to Trump is the most important. The result is that general election voters are stuck with picking the least objectionable candidate, who was chosen by a process that discourages deviation from the intraparty consensus. I don’t see this dynamic ending anytime soon, which is why I expect a future where nearly everyone calls themselves an independent — regardless of what they mean by that.

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AMERICAN OPINION

Google’s admission of censorship shows jawboning cuts both ways

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
In recent weeks, Americans have grown increasingly anxious over mounting threats to free expression. New revelations about government influence during COVID show this is not new. Google and YouTube’s parent company, Alphabet, disclosed on Sept. 23 that the Biden administration pressured the company to suppress content that went against the accepted narrative during the pandemic — even when it didn’t violate company policy. The federal government interfered with how the nation’s dominant search engine and its most widely used online video platform moderated speech. Alphabet admitted Biden officials leaned on the company to remove posts

questioning pandemic policy — even when they didn’t break its rules. In a letter to the House Committee on the Judiciary, Alphabet’s attorneys wrote: “While the Company continued to develop and enforce its policies independently, Biden Administration officials continued to press the Company to remove non-violative user-generated content.” This comes after Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg shared much the same story last year. In a letter to the House Judiciary Committee on Aug. 26, 2024, Zuckerberg said senior Biden administration officials “pressured” Meta during the pandemic to remove or demote some COVID-19 posts, including humor and satire, called that pressure “wrong,” and said Meta took actions it “shouldn’t have.”

COVID was chaotic, and officials were trying to keep people safe. But that doesn’t excuse overreach. Government pressure on media and speech isn’t unique to the digital age, and administrations from both parties have tried to influence how Americans receive information. What’s new is the scale and speed of influence when the government leans on online platforms used by billions. We wrote with great concern about evidence that Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr pressured Jimmy Kimmel’s ABC bosses to take action after his lousy bit in the wake of Charlie Kirk’s assassination. Kimmel has since returned to the air. Free speech must be

defended consistently, no matter which party is in power. Today’s majority will someday be the minority — and when the government leans on companies to silence dissent, everyone eventually loses. Indeed, the Biden administration’s actions have emboldened retaliatory efforts from the Trump administration. This is a terrifying precedent for American politics that needs to stop. When lawful content is suppressed under government pressure, it doesn’t eliminate misinformation — it fuels distrust. Many Americans who suspected authorities were hiding uncomfortable truths during COVID feel vindicated by these disclosures, and that erosion of trust makes it harder to govern in future crises. Especially because some of

the ideas flagged as “misinformation” later proved credible: the lab-leak theory is now considered plausible by intelligence agencies, and studies confirmed natural immunity offered real protection. Ironically, removing lawful posts may have worsened public health outcomes. By driving skepticism underground rather than confronting it openly, officials created fertile ground for conspiracy theories that then were harder to debunk. If Americans want to protect free expression, we must demand consistency from leaders of both parties. No U.S. government has the right to dictate what lawful ideas can be expressed by the people. ©2025 Chicago Tribune. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

AMERICAN OPINION

Sudden Ukraine support is worth capitalizing on

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
Now that Donald Trump has finally come around to publicly stating that besieged Ukraine could use military support from the U.S. and the European Union to fully recover all of the territory taken over by Russia, the world should lock in the president’s U-turn, which stunned policymakers everywhere. Trump has clearly had enough with his old pal Vladimir Putin over his grueling invasion and is praising Ukraine’s fighting spirit under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. This from the same man who mere months ago berated Zelenskyy in an Oval Office meeting where he minimized the global threat of Russia’s

war machine and sat by as Vice President JD Vance whined about Zelenskyy’s supposed lack of gratitude. Going into peace negotiations led by envoy Steve Witkoff, Trump himself had suggested that Ukraine should be ready to part with some of its sovereign territory to reach a deal. We wish we could freeze this current opinion in time and have it now be Trump’s controlling view, but unfortunately, we are all aware that that’s not how it works. It’s hard to say what exactly led Trump to adopt this position now, or more accurately who he spoke to lately that swayed him, but we know that there will be something or someone else who will come in and probably steer him back in the Russia-friendly direction, if not his

own personal admiration for Putin. That means it’s the right time now for a couple of practical steps: one, Ukraine and its allies in the United States, including lawmakers, should capitalize on this moment of Trump foreign policy clarity to secure concrete results like weapons shipments and specific commitments on factors like the security guarantees that Trump had at some point raised. Two, Trump should take the next logical steps and formally make clear to Putin that the U.S., as the facilitator of the peace process, will not accept an outcome that involves Ukraine giving up its territorial integrity. It also means, unfortunately but inevitably, that European leaders should treat this as a

reprieve, not a final declaration of the United States’ commitment to a joint front against Russian aggression. There are already some high-level European officials that understand this, tragic as it is that after eight decades of a relatively stable post-war consensus the U.S. is no longer a reliable partner and ally. Might that change in four years, or eight? It’s possible, but the continent does not have that long to wait for credible reassurances, which means that European leaders and allies must stay on the path of trying to develop the continent’s own security capabilities, with steps ranging from building up hardware to beefing up their militaries, as the Danes have done with the expansion of the draft to women.

Trump is undeniably right about one thing, and that is that the Ukrainian people have shown incredible force of will in this long conflict to avoid being subsumed into Putin’s imperial designs. Even after nearly four years of grueling warfare, including Putin’s intentional attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, that will remains unbroken, with the Ukrainian public no less committed to retaining their liberty and sovereignty even if they have to win it on the battlefield. Their victory will be a victory for everyone’s security. ©2025 New York Daily News. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

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