

NONWHITE, NONPARTISAN, & NONRESPONSE BY YOUNG AMERICANS

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INTRODUCTION

A perplexing phenomenon in public-opinion research is the existence of the *no answer* and *don't know* responses to simple survey questions. Public-opinion researchers must interpret these responses and identify what, if anything, they mean (Converse 1976). With adult samples and some kinds of questions, nonresponse is unlikely. Partisan, self-identification questions usually elicit less than 5 percent of *no answer* or *apolitical* responses. Adults do not hesitate to label themselves *independent* rather than to choose one of the main party labels. But for younger people, even the label *independent* may connote political involvement or system attachment which they do not wish to express. Thus, the nonpartisan's choice between *independent* and *no answer* may not be entirely random. Further, we should find larger proportions of *no answers* among young people as a result of their low levels of awareness and interest in politics.

The research findings on adolescent alienation are many and varied. Here we focus on one object for the expression of adolescent alienation: *partisanship*. Does it make a difference if a person chooses *independent* as opposed to *no preference* to describe nonpartisanship? We hypothesize that young people who refuse to choose the label *independent* are in fact expressing alienation from politics and lack of involvement. An alternative possibility is that the choice of *no preference* is totally random, reflecting no political attitude. We also hypothesize that this relation will be stronger among nonwhites. For minority groups, their distance from the political regime exaggerates the extent to which even the term *independent* represents some minimal attachment to the political establishment (Long 1978).

METHODS

We distributed a self-administered questionnaire to 1,637 high school students in central Florida in the fall of 1978. The sample was 84 percent white and 52 percent male. They were asked questions tapping interest, awareness, and involvement in politics and their personal sense of control over their lives. Responses to the partisan-

ship question were 24 percent Democratic, 27 percent Republican, 12 percent Independent, and 37 percent no answer or no preference. We suspected that, for a high school sample, the concepts of political and personal efficacy were not yet differentiated and that notions of government relevance and political interest might be confused with feelings of political efficacy. We factor analyzed 12 related-involvement items: four on political efficacy, four on personal efficacy, political interest, relevance of government, political information (sum of 3 items), and frequency of media use for political purposes. The results in Table 1 indicate that the one factor explains 48 percent of the variance which represents political involvement. We then created a summated scale of involvement using the 10 items with factor loadings higher than .40.

FINDINGS

The results in Table 2, comparing partisanship with involvement, demonstrate that those low on involvement overwhelmingly refused to indicate a party-preference label. The middle-level involvement group also chose "no preference" more often (39%) than did the high-involvement students (25%). Clearly, *no preference* does reflect lack of political involvement. The choice of *independent* does not indicate the same lack of involvement. The proportion of independents is about the same regardless of the level of involvement.

We then isolated the nonpartisans who chose *no preference* as opposed to *independent*, and 87 percent of the nonpartisan students who were low in involvement avoided the *independent* label; 76 percent of the moderately involved and only 70 percent of the highly involved responded the same way. For the total sample, the gamma coefficient was $-.34$.

We also added controls for relevance of government, level of media use, sex, race, grade, and social class. Only control variables for which there were significant differences are listed in Table 3. Controlling for race, we find the tendency for the less involved to choose *no preference* on the partisanship question. The pattern is concentrated among nonwhites. Of nonwhites

TABLE 1: FACTOR ANALYSIS OF INVOLVEMENT QUESTIONS

Questions	Factor Loadings
Political efficacy	
Public officials don't care	.67
Voting is only influence	.69
Politics are too complicated	.55
No say in government	.59
Personal efficacy	
Can plan life/ mostly luck	.50
Can carry out plans	.56
Sure life would work out	.56
Problems of life too big	.41
Information scale	.53
Political interest	.40
Government relevance	.25
Frequency of media use	.04

TABLE 2: PARTISANSHIP BY LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT
(Percents; Gamma = -.40)

Involvement	Range	Republican	Democrat	Independent	No Preference
Low	0-3	10.8%	11.6%	10.1%	67.5%
Middle	3-5	24.7	24.0	12.3	39.0
High	6-10	35.8	28.7	10.5	24.9
(N)		(443)	(407)	(215)	(872)

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF NONPARTISANS
CHOOSING NO PREFERENCE

Category	N	Involvement Level			Gamma
		Low	Middle	High	
Total	1087	87.0	76.0	70.3	-.34
White	648	72.8	76.4	71.3	-.02
Nonwhite	439	92.8	73.6	64.0	-.65
Government:					
Nonrelevant	648	89.3	75.7	72.1	-.43
Relevant	439	75.0	76.2	69.2	-.10

who avoided the party label and were low in involvement, 92 percent chose *no preference*, while 73 percent of the comparable white group chose *no preference*. The relevance-of-government variable also has some impact on the relation. The finding of a gamma of $-.43$ between involvement and choice of *no preference* reflects racial differences. When race is controlled, the gamma drops to $-.21$ for whites who saw no

relevance of government but $-.91$ for similar nonwhites. Thus, 79 percent of the nonwhites saw the government as not relevant compared to 39 percent of the whites.

DISCUSSION

Our results may have regional bias. Similar studies outside Florida might reach different conclusions. Within that limit we can

conclude that the choice of *no preference* over *independent* is a random one for young whites. Among young blacks, however, the choice of *no preference* is apparently part of a complex of attitudes including lack of political involvement and low perceptions of government relevance. Those who do research dealing with partisanship among the young should remember that blacks may be expressing a degree of alienation and distance from the system by the *no preference* response—a response which is dissimilar in implication from that of whites. We certainly should not collapse the independents and no-preference groups into one category without first performing tests for racial and involvement differences. These results have several added implications. More than a decade after the Civil Rights movement reached its peak, and after almost two years of the “friendly” Carter Administration, we still find young blacks substantially below whites in involvement with the political system. Moreover, they project those attitudes into their responses to the general political-party system. Even the label *independent* represents more attachment to politics than the young blacks can accept. This distance from politics also reflects more than alienation or lack of influence on the system. These young blacks fail to see that the government has much to do with the way they live their lives. Such feelings are not likely to kindle an activist spirit for social or political change. It is more likely that they lay the groundwork for continued adult cynicism and withdrawal from politics.

REFERENCES

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(MacNair, from p 155)

Rather, they come from society and belong to society. It is the broad mass of people which generates the image of *scientist*, and it is only due to the support of that broad mass that the term carries its specific and honorific meaning. When one takes pride in being a scientist, one is taking a bow before society as audience and authenticator. Although only a select company of colleagues can evaluate the scientist’s work and stature, it is a far larger group of lay persons who gives the image of scientist its substance and sanctity.

Generally, standards of esthetic integrity, logical consistency, factual veracity, and practical realism, applied within their relevant context, depend on aristocratism in this sense. The lament or the ambivalence about modern society by men like Ortega is that aristocracy in this sense has weakened or disappeared. Modern mass humanity has thrown off many shackles, including those of special status. For this reason, people who ought to be leaders have become followers. They participate in the low-level thought of the select. Good thinking receives little honor or recognition. The mediocre reflections of the group parade as wisdom and get all the applause. Even in high places—government, universities, and others—people strive more to be “with it” and to reflect the majority than to be right. This is institutionalized stupidity.

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