

WHAT DOES “POST-PARTISAN” MEAN?

By Phillip Longman*

One might well have imagined over the last few years that we were headed toward an era of deeply partisan politics. Under the tutelage of Karl Rove, the Bush Administration “played to the base.” Most of the energy on the other end of the spectrum came from “netroots” bloggers who flamed Hillary Clinton, Joe Lieberman, and the centrist Democratic Leadership Conference with nearly the same contempt they showed for George W. Bush and Karl Rove. Yet here we find ourselves at a moment many describe a “post-partisan”—with the two front-running Presidential candidates, McCain and Obama, best known for their ability work with and show respect for members of the opposite party.

How did we get here, and where exactly is here? Some insight is provided by looking at the career of that term, “post-partisan,” in public life. Its earliest use appears to date to 1993. That year, in his “On Language” column, William Safire took note (somewhat derisively) of what he described as a new phrase, attributing it to a group called Third Millennium. The group, now defunct, was part of a small but influential movement that, beginning in the 1980s, advocated for deficit reduction and entitlement reform using a language of “post-partisanship,” as well as “generational equity.”

Many of the movement’s leaders were moderate Republicans (Former U.S. Senator David Durenberger, and former Nixon Commerce Secretary Pete Peterson), Independents (Ross Perot), or conservative Democrats (Representatives Tim Penny, Jim Cooper). Through institutions such as the Concord Coalition, The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, and Third Millennium, members of this movement often stressed the inability of conventional broker-style partisan politics to deal with long-term common needs. The examples they dwelt most on were saving Social Security, controlling health care spending, investing adequately in infrastructure and human capital, and opposing perpetually increased debt-financed consumption, whether in the form of government borrowing or credit cards and shaky S&L mortgages.

This was post-partisanship before post-partisanship was cool. Then, in the 1990s, “post-partisan” also became a favorite phrase of people like John F. Kennedy, Jr. and those around him at the magazine *George*, who were very cool. Here the association seems to have been with a politics of charisma that rose above the humdrum business of party and governance. Sen. Ted Kennedy’s attraction to Obama may in part lie in the Kennedy family’s vision of leadership as inspiration that moves people beyond narrow self-interest (“Ask not what...”)

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Still, the term remained obscure until early 2007, when it began to appear in the mainstream media in connection New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The California Governor first used it in his State of the State address early that year, declaring: “I believe that we have an opportunity to move past partisanship...to move past bi-partisanship...to move to post-partisanship,” which he defined as “Republicans and Democrats actively giving birth to new ideas together.”

According to David Lesher, former director of the California Program of the New America Foundation, which at the time was describing itself as a “post-partisan” think tank,” this language was the result of a lunch he had with the governor’s speech writer shortly before. By June of 2007, David Broder would write in his Washington Post column: “What [Schwarzenegger]...calls ‘post-partisan’ politics has become the dominant culture in this capital—a shiny contrast to the continuing political warfare of Washington.” Then in January 2008, came the front-page Post headline: “GOP Doubts, Fears ‘Post-Partisan’ Obama.”

Many imagine that post-partisanship, whatever it is, must have something to do with declining party loyalty. Yet here’s a riddle. While Obama may have nice things to say about Ronald Reagan, and while McCain may be famous for crossing his party’s leadership, there is no indication that voters themselves are becoming any less partisan. According to the American National Election Studies series, the number of Americans describing themselves as Independents, for example, has slowly declined since the 1980s.

Claims, such as that made Douglas Schoen in a recently published book, that Independent voters now constitute the largest segment of the American electorate, rest on the shaky foundation of including people who describe themselves as Independent Republicans or Independent Democrats. In California, the percent of Independents is rising. But if current registration trends continue, it won’t be until 2025 before Independents outnumber either Republican or Democratic voters.

Partisanship is rising among the young as well. The latest UCLA Freshman Survey, which is a closely followed and long-established barometer of youth trends, finds a striking decline in percentage of students identifying themselves “middle of the road.” At the same time, the survey finds that self-identified liberals are now up to 31.2%, which is the highest since the mid-1970s, while self-identified conservatives are now up to 25.6%, which is the highest ever. Nationally, there are widening gaps between Republicans and Democrats on many crucial issues. Partisan differences over whether global warming should be a national priority have grown, for example, from 25 points to 35 points over the last year.

So how does it square that “maverick” McCain and “post-partisan” Obama are on top of their respective primary races? What helps make sense of the phenomenon is to realize that post-partisanship isn’t about transcending left-right partisan loyalty. Instead, in both its original, and its evolving new meaning, it’s substantially about generational change and generational equity.

The generational change comes from so-called Millennials, defined as Americans born since the early 1980s. Members of this generation have lived through a era in which out-of control individuals (the shooters at Columbine, Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois, the suicide bombers, Saddam Hussein, Bin-Laden, and some would say George W. Bush) have caused profound threats and changes to society. As Neil Howe and the late Bill Strauss have also pointed out in describing this generation, most of its members have been formed by parents and teachers who put great emphasis on cooperation, teamwork and “zero tolerance” of risky, offensive, intolerant, or violent behavior. These features help to explain why, as members of this generation come of age, many voice political values that stress teamwork, tolerance, and civility. For example, at a recent conference of Party for the Presidency, a group of ethnically and regionally diverse Millennials, the following platform emerged:

1. Work towards developing mutual trust and respect.
2. Be open-minded.
3. Take an active role and ‘speak your mind.’
4. Keep focused on the big picture.
5. Listen and pay attention to each other.
6. Act with honesty and empathy.

This sensibility helps explain the fate of John Edwards. By his stance on the issues, Edwards should have attracted a large liberal youth vote, yet he did not. Why? Though it’s difficult for some Boomers to understand, it’s because of the unique political sensibility of the rising new generation of voters. Today’s post-partisanship is reducible in part to a new generational “politics of niceness.” This is consistent with the contrast many observers see in the generational style of Baby Boomers (strident, moralistic, individualistic, committed to culture war), Gen-Xers (disengaged from public life, libertarian, committed to free agency) and the generational style of emerging Millennials,” who are more likely than older Americans be strong liberals or conservatives, but who also insist on comity and respect. This new political generation fears and dislikes displays of anger such as they saw in Edwards’ stump speech, and his progressive platform fell on deaf ears.

Another factor figuring into the new currency of post-partisanship is one that also helps to explain its continuing association with generational change. Throughout American history, partisanship has often declined, at least temporarily, during eras of crisis. During the first year of the New Deal, FDR famously expressed his willingness to set aside ideology and simply “experiment” to see what worked. Arguably, we are entering a period when long festering problems—health care, energy crisis, global warming, exploding debt, America’s fallen stature in the world—have assumed such proportions that they can no longer be kicked down the road.

In such a Zeitgeist, a feeling of common vulnerability often discredits the political actors who allowed the crisis to occur and partisan divides narrow or become redrawn. In such a moment, also, the public often rallies around those who speak in broad, reassuring, generational terms that smooth over long-standing cultural or partisan differences. (FDR: “This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.” JFK: “The torch has been passed to a new generation.” Obama: “Let’s be the generation that wins back America!”) Details become less important in politics; unifying vision paramount. Obama embodies post-partisanship in this sense.

McCain is too old to speak about generational change, and too smart to distance himself from movement conservatives during the Republican primary season, but G.O.P partisans fear him for good reason. He is, or aspires to be, as much of a change agent—as post-partisan, if you will—as Teddy Roosevelt was when T.R. denounced the conservative Republicans of his day and became a Bull Moose. McCain’s opposition to the first Bush tax cuts also shows his roots in the original post-partisan movement of the 1980s, with its emphasis on fiscal stewardship and rejection of supply-side economics. In keeping with the Millennials’ fear of militancy, however, he is also in danger of losing young voters, including the record numbers who identify themselves as conservatives, if he loses his famous temper in any public way or comes to be seen as another out-of-control individual.

That leaves Hillary Clinton, the erstwhile liberal now describing herself as a progressive. “I prefer the word ‘progressive,’” she announced in 2007, “which has a real American meaning, going back to the progressive era at the beginning of the 20th century. I consider myself a modern progressive.” Are today’s self-styled “progressives” also “post-partisan”?

The original Progressives did not abandon parties; indeed, they invented new ones. But they had broad agreement on the purpose of American life and on the broad new means necessary to preserve it under radically changing conditions, many of which are eerily repeating themselves today. In the presidential election of 1912, all three major candidates, Wilson, Taft, and Roosevelt, called themselves Progressives and spent their time debating not over whether, but how best to contain monopoly and preserve the yeoman ideal of broad, small-scale ownership in American life. Neither socialists nor laissez-faire, they were truly post-partisan.

But the same cannot be said of many of today's self-styled progressives. Also taking up the progressive banner these days are folks who rallied for Howard Dean in 2004, joined Moveon.org, and who now post on the Daily Kos, Huffington Post, or MyDD.com. Most are stridently partisan and are sure that neither Clinton nor her husband is one of them. After characterizing her as "viscously opportunistic," Huffington Post blogger Norman Solomon asked in 2007: "In the interests of truth-in-labeling, shouldn't Hillary Clinton be described as anti-progressive?" Many like-minded bloggers and "progressive" activists are equally contemptuous of George W. Bush and the Democratic Leadership Council, once chaired by Bill Clinton, and its think tank, the pointedly named Progressive Policy Institute. If Hillary Clinton is a progressive, does that mean she repudiates the DLC or is it just that she adheres to a liberalism that dares not speak its name? This is her dilemma.

Many other folks who describe themselves as progressives hold an admixture of views that, if not related in any obvious way, often seem to go together as part of a mindset. In modern usage, it's variously "progressive" to be for gay marriage and against restrictions on divorce; for the troops and against the war; for multiculturalism and against patriarchy; for bans on "hate speech" and against encroachments on "free speech;" for tobacco smoking bans and against the criminalization of marijuana; for stem cell research and against the use of lab animals; for science warning of the dangers of global warming and against science questioning the dangers of genetically modified food or nuclear power; for tolerance but intolerant of intolerance, etc.

By all rights, this should be the Second Progressive Era, and perhaps one day it will known as such. But for now, most self-styled progressives are so partisan, and so innocent of the actual traditions of progressive thought, that the word has become useless in political discourse. Thus we are stuck with "post-partisan" as the only term to describe what's really changing in American politics.

Appendix: Further Statistical Evidence

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The most reliable polling data to date do *not* tend to bear out claims of a secular decrease in partisanship or increase in Independents among voters over time, as seen by tables 1 and 2. Those who claim that Independent voters now constitute the largest segment of the American electorate rely on the somewhat shaky foundation of including people who describe themselves as Independent Republicans or Independent Democrats.

Table 1: Partisanship, 1980-2004

	'80	'82	'84	'86	'88	'90	'92	'94	'96	'98	'00	'02	'04
Independent or Apolitical:	15	13	13	14	12	12	13	12	10	12	13	9	10
Leaning Independent :	22	19	23	21	25	24	27	25	26	24	28	28	29
Weak Partisan :	37	38	35	37	32	34	32	33	34	34	27	33	28
Strong Partisan :	26	30	29	28	31	30	29	30	30	29	31	31	33

Source: The American National Election Studies

Table 2: Party Identification, 1980-2004

	'80	'82	'84	'86	'88	'90	'92	'94	'96	'98	'00	'02	'04
Democrat (incl leaners) :	52	55	48	51	47	52	50	47	52	51	50	49	49
Independent :	13	11	11	12	11	10	12	11	9	11	12	8	10
Republican (incl leaners):	33	32	39	36	41	36	38	41	38	37	37	43	41
Apolitical :	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	0	0

Source: The American National Election Studies

While the number of respondents who identify as either Independent or leaning Independent remains around 40 percent, the number in the first category has substantially declined. Table 3 further demonstrates that a growing number of self-identified “Independents” are nonetheless reliable partisans. Trends in the self-identification of Democrats, in particular, are telling. The percentage of respondents who identify as “Weak Democrats” has fallen from 23 percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 2004, a 7 percent decline that roughly matches the 6 percent increase in “Independent Democrats” from 1980 to 2004. While the share of respondents who are Democratic partisans remains roughly constant, a different measure of who counts as an “Independent” might show a marked increase.

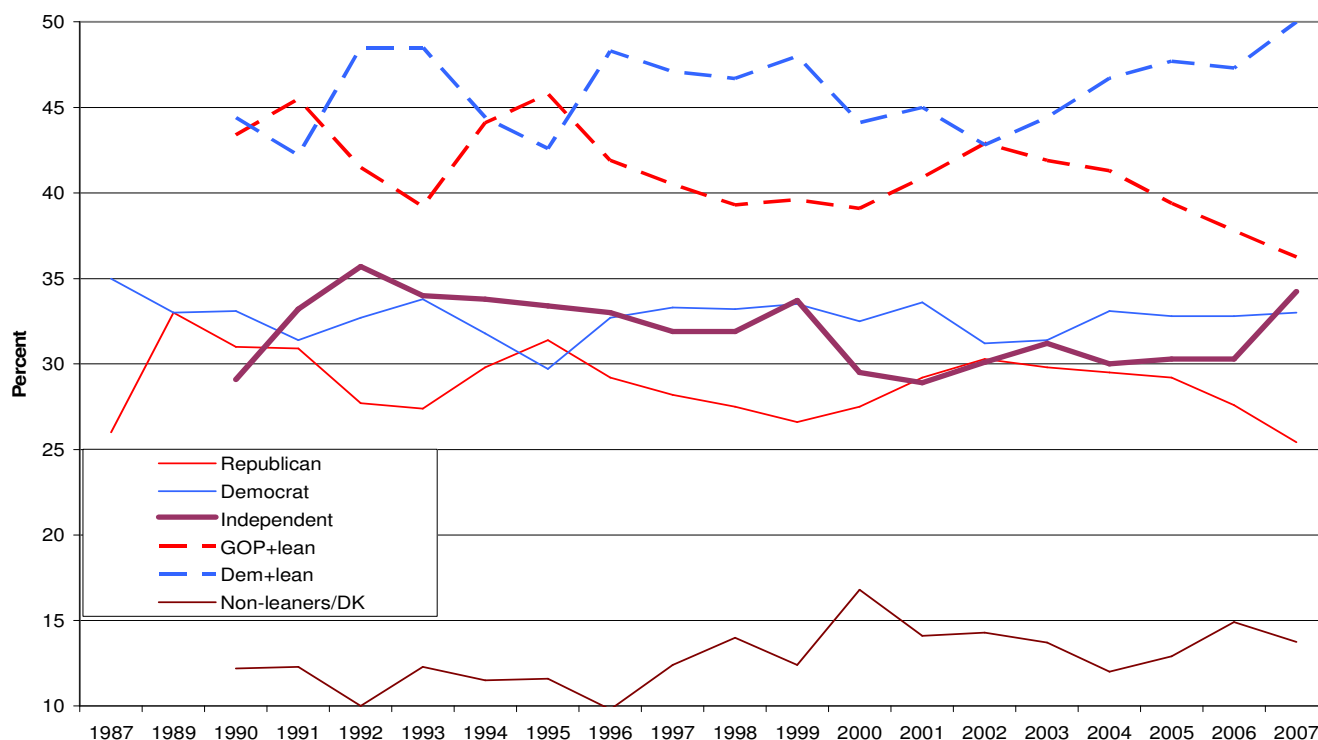
Table 3: Party Identification by Strength of Identification, 1980-2004

	'80	'82	'84	'86	'88	'90	'92	'94	'96	'98	'00	'02	'04
Strong Democrat :	18	20	17	18	17	20	18	15	18	19	19	17	17
Weak Democrat :	23	24	20	22	18	19	18	19	19	18	15	17	16
Independent Democrat :	11	11	11	10	12	12	14	13	14	14	15	15	17
Independent Independent:	13	11	11	12	11	10	12	11	9	11	12	8	10
Independent Republican :	10	8	12	11	13	12	12	12	12	11	13	13	12
Weak Republican :	14	14	15	15	14	15	14	15	15	16	12	16	12
Strong Republican :	9	10	12	10	14	10	11	15	12	10	12	14	16
Apolitical :	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	0

Source: The American National Election Studies

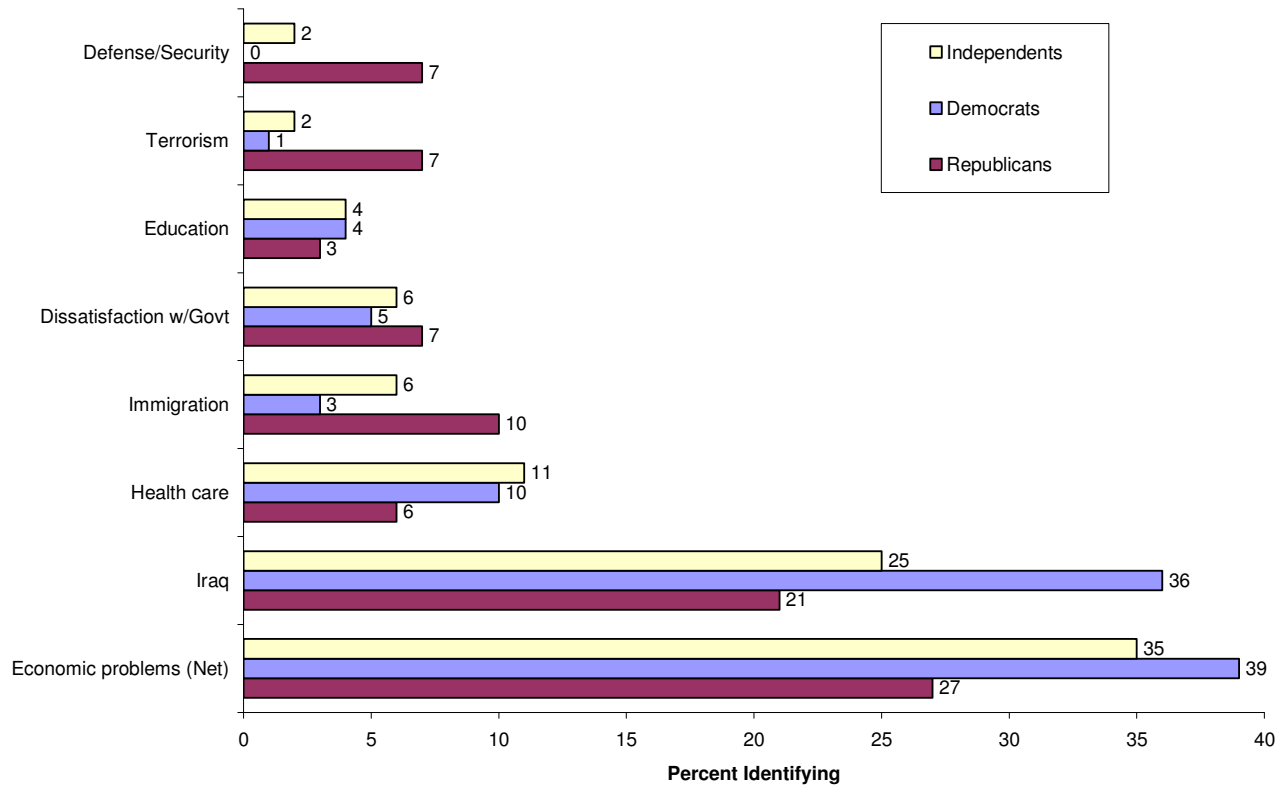
More recent data from Pew demonstrate that, while the number of Independents has grown since 2004, it is no higher than in the mid-1990's (see Figure 1 below). Furthermore, the data support the conclusion that a rise in "Independents" does not imply a decline in partisanship. Not only is the number of respondents who do not lean towards either party consistently below 20 percent, but it moves *inversely* with the number of self-styled Independents.

Figure 1: Party Affiliation 1987-2007



Source: Pew Research Center, 2007

Figure 2: Partisanship in Identifying Nation's Principal Problem, 2007

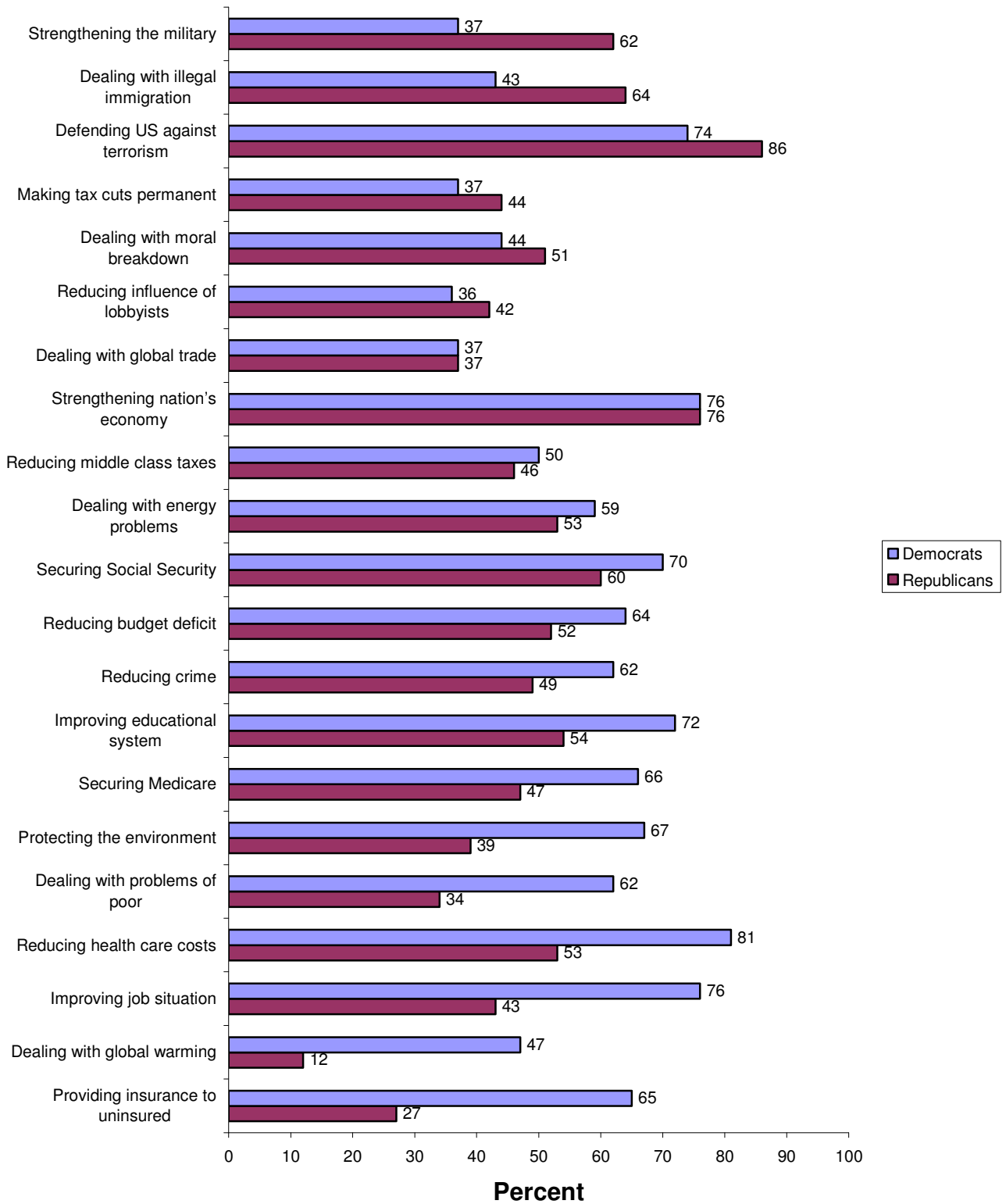


Source: Pew Research Center, 2008

Figure 2 offers a breakdown of independents on particular issues. In a survey asking respondents to name (unprompted) the largest problem facing the nation, these were the top responses, by party identification. Unsurprisingly, independents fall in between Republicans and Democrats on almost every issue – except health care, which they rated higher than identifiers of either party. While Independents are more like Republicans on dissatisfaction with government, immigration, and the war in Iraq, they are more like Democrats when it comes to the economy and health care.

Similarly, Figure 3 sketches partisan attitudes on “top priorities.” Unfortunately, there are no data on independents on this question. We see sharp disagreement over issues like securing jobs, containing health care costs, protecting the environment, strengthening the military, providing health insurance, curing poverty, and dealing with immigration. At the same time, there appears to be substantial cross-partisan consensus on strengthening the economy, fighting terrorism, and addressing challenges in energy policy.

Figure 3: Partisan Gap in "Top Priorities"



Source: Pew Research Center, 2008