

# Book Review Symposium

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*Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction.* By Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

As the number of people self-identifying as independent has grown over the years, so too has scholars' interest in explaining this development and its consequences for American politics. All too often, the media focus on independents as the crucial players in elections, depicting them as free of party ties and open to persuasion. Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov's *Independent Politics* impressively demonstrates that independents in fact have partisan preferences but often misrepresent their partisanship by going undercover.

The book's central argument is that political bickering has led citizens to dissemble. That is, instead of revealing partisanship, a growing number of people self-report as independents in an attempt to hide their preferences. But concealing partisanship does not stop at self-reporting identification; such individuals also disengage from social and political actions that could reveal their partisan leaning. Klar and Krupnikov contend that people go undercover because the partisan label is associated with negativity, disagreement, and gridlock. Since people want to make a positive impression on others, they are reluctant to take on a label the public condemns, and instead opt for one viewed more favorably. Two factors shape this result—the presence of partisan disagreement and an individual's level of concern with how others perceive him or her. The higher is each one, the more we are likely to see partisanship masked.

*Independent Politics* is well organized and well written. The book relies on an impressive amount of experimental and survey data to support its argument. Klar and Krupnikov present convincing evidence that people concerned with making a good impression on others (high self-monitors), particularly in an environment in which partisan disagreement is high, are more likely to identify as independent and less likely to make

public displays of partisanship or persuade others that they should vote for one of the parties or candidates. This partisan inaction does not mean they are less engaged in politics but simply guarded about publicly revealing their partisan preferences. It also does not mean that they have a favorable view of compromise. In fact, Klar and Krupnikov demonstrate that in private, high self-monitors prefer their party not to make concessions to the other side.

Klar and Krupnikov's theory is meant to be general in scope. But their research prompts an urgent question, particularly since American society is so divided along identity lines. Do some social groups have greater latitude in hiding their partisanship than others, indeed perhaps even more flexibility in how others perceive them? African Americans make up one of the strongholds of the Democratic Party. Since the 1964 presidential election, African American voters have been consistently loyal to Democrats. As a consequence, this publicly known loyalty may make it harder for African Americans to avoid a partisan label. Although an African American may wish to present herself as above the partisan fray, she may nevertheless resort to revealing her partisanship because it would be more difficult for her to successfully hide behind the label of independent than it would be for a non-African American to do so. From whom individuals hide might matter as well. Whites are more likely to have friends and family members of all partisan stripes than are African Americans, whose social networks tend to be more politically homogeneous. As a result, whites may face more social pressure to avoid a partisan label. Empirically, then, particularly controlling for the extent to which individuals are self-monitors and the level of partisanship disagreement in a given context, are African Americans able to go undercover to the same extent as whites?

All in all, *Independent Politics* is a must-read for anyone wanting to understand the motivation behind the growing number of Americans who identify as independent and how this phenomenon affects party politics. Klar and Krupnikov make their case persuasively. The statistical analysis is straight-

forward, so that any student of politics—academic or practical—can understand its contribution and implications. The results throughout the book are remarkably consistent and informative. It will be a must-read in graduate and undergraduate seminars across the country.

**ANTOINE J. BANKS**, University of Maryland

One of the curious facts of contemporary American politics is that partisanship serves simultaneously as a core pillar of our political culture and a potential source of social ostracism. Party identities fundamentally shape many aspects of political behavior, but many American voters shy away from claiming a partisan label, instead styling themselves as political independents. Political scientists have long known that at the ballot box, “undercover partisans” who label themselves as independents but lean toward one of the two major parties are essentially indistinguishable from those who openly affiliate with a political party. But this insight—that partisans and independent leaners vote the same way and believe many of the same things—has caused political scientists to overlook the ways in which the choice to retreat to the partisan “underground” matters. In their extraordinary new book, Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov offer a needed remedy to this oversight by asking why independent voters misrepresent themselves and how such misrepresentations affect the functioning of democracy.

Their answer is that people identify as independents because avoiding partisan labels comes with social rewards. In a world in which partisans are sometimes seen as overly intense or excessively prone to divisive bickering, choosing the label “independent” is an exercise in impression management that allows individuals to depict themselves as free thinkers who float above the partisan fray. For this reason, self-monitoring—a tendency to change behavior in order to make a more favorable impression on others—is an important factor in the choice to identify as independent. But, Klar and Krupnikov argue, choices about the expression of partisanship are not costless, nor are they merely an element of individual psychology that affects only survey responses. Instead, the avoidance of partisan labels simultaneously makes voters less willing to engage in some of the core features of a robust democratic life—participating openly in political campaigns, sharing political opinions with others, and persuading people to vote for a candidate. As the concluding chapters of the book make clear, such political inaction places political parties in a quandary: independent leaners expect parties to

fight hard for their issues and to exercise political leadership without compromising ideological commitments, but the leaners themselves do not want any personal part of the fight and instead retreat underground when parties engage the differences that are a natural part of politics. *Independent Politics* thus shows that identifying as independent is politically consequential even if independents’ voting behavior is indistinguishable from that of partisan identifiers. Impression-managing independents complicate the functioning of our democratic system in important ways.

Klar and Krupnikov provide evidence for their argument with a series of creative experiments buttressed by observational data. In many ways, the book functions as a methodological master class for students of political psychology and political behavior, building a step-by-step case for how their key variables affect both attitudes and behaviors with multiple experiments, and then using observational data to increase external validity by showing evidence for these same dynamics outside the experimental setting. In addition, several critical experiments are replicated with distinct samples, with these replication results mostly presented in the appendix. The experiments themselves are extraordinarily imaginative, ranging from original vignette experiments to studies in online behavior that required building a unique social media website to an on-the-street field experiment that allowed the researchers to observe participants’ willingness to accept and display partisan stickers. Experiments in chapter 4 on perceptions of partisanship illustrate the authors’ methodological creativity. The purpose of these studies is to explore how people visualize the political parties and how such impressions affect social and political judgments. The challenge, of course, is finding meaningful indicators of such internal visualizations. The Klar and Krupnikov solution is ingenious: after randomly assigning internet-savvy participants to read news clippings about partisan unity or about elite or mass partisan disagreement, they asked participants to find actual images online that best represented their perceptions of partisanship; they then coded the content of such images, finding that subjects exposed to political disagreement chose images that contained more negativity, anger, divisiveness, and fighting. In a separate experiment, Klar and Krupnikov demonstrate how exposure to political disagreement affects the desire to live in politically engaged neighborhoods by systematically manipulating the presence or absence of political lawn signs (as opposed to nonpolitical signs or no signs at all) in pretested images of neighborhoods. Throughout the book, the authors test their substantive hypotheses with an innovative and imaginative approach to research design.

Another hallmark of good research is that it prompts additional theoretical and empirical questions, and that is

true of Klar and Krupnikov's book. For example, their key theoretical insight is that revealing oneself to be a partisan can be socially costly, and their primary experimental operationalization of what makes partisan labels unattractive is the presence or absence of partisan bickering. While disagreement is, no doubt, one meaningful mechanism (especially for the conflict averse), people may incur the social costs of openly embracing partisan labels for other reasons as well. For example, in chapter 6, the authors introduce a slightly different explanation that deserves additional attention: that party reputations wax and wane over time and in response to various political events. Other mechanisms are possible, too. The social stigma of partisanship may vary with the local context: a Democratic voter in a highly Republican social setting (or vice versa) could, for example, experience social costs not because he or she is concerned about excessive conflict between the parties but because adopting a social identity at odds with the prevailing local norm identifies him or her as an outsider. In that case, it would be the absence of partisan disagreement that would lead to a fear of social sanctions among those high in self-monitoring. A signal virtue of Klar and Krupnikov's work is that it takes the social context seriously, and the next steps in this research program could involve bringing that context more directly into view, manipulating various features of both the wider and the local context to see how they affect patterns of impression management.

Klar and Krupnikov have written the best and most important book on independent voters since *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Keith et al. 1992). Their work is theoretically rich and methodologically innovative, and it represents the most sustained effort yet to understand the reasons why partisans are driven underground and how an unwillingness to express partisan identities affects democratic life. The book is thus a notable addition to the political science of independents and a needed corrective to both media narratives and political science assumptions about such voters. Scholars will not be able to write about partisanship without grappling directly with this book's argument, its clever experimental tests, and the implications of its findings.

**CHRISTOPHER F. KARPOWITZ**, Brigham Young University

**W**hy do many Americans report to be politically independent when in fact they have clear partisan preferences? This important and hitherto neglected question is the starting point for Klar and Krupnikov

in *Independent Politics*. Through innovative theoretical and empirical work, the authors provide a convincing answer to why people hide their partisan attachments in both surveys and real life, and they show what consequences it has for political participation.

This engagingly written book is a prime example of political psychology research at its best. The authors show how elegantly theory and methods from psychology can be used to advance our understanding of contemporary political life. The portrait of "undercover partisans" as "a nightmare for the American political party" (14) is important reading for academics and political practitioners alike. In the wake of the 2016 elections in the United States and widespread dissatisfaction with established political parties across Europe, the book seems timelier than ever.

In essence, the authors argue that many people, rather than disclosing their partisan attachment, label themselves as independents to look better in the eyes of others. People do so because the constant flow of media reports about conflict and bickering among politicians makes it unattractive to appear partisan—especially for people who score high on the psychological construct self-monitoring and care a lot about the impressions they make on others. Such negative portraits of the political parties also lead people to avoid acts that might appear partisan in real life. As the title of the book indicates, this story goes beyond survey responses and illuminates how disdain for parties can lead to political inaction.

To test their claims, Klar and Krupnikov rely on a variety of highly original experiments and observational data. In their first empirical chapter, they show that when people are instructed to make their best impression on others, they are much less likely to report being strong partisans compared to when they are told to make their worst impression on others. Furthermore, they show that high self-monitors are less likely to report being strong partisans after receiving information about partisan disagreement. This effect is not visible among people low in self-monitoring, which lends support to the idea that people hide their partisanship to avoid looking bad in the eyes of others.

In the following chapters, Klar and Krupnikov show how information about disagreement among the parties not only makes people label themselves differently. It can also have consequences for how people act in the real world. For example, such information makes high self-monitors less likely to wear a political sticker, to share information about their political orientation online, and to be less willing to persuade others to vote for a certain party.

In their final empirical chapter, the authors add a paradox to the story of undercover partisans: While they say they want the parties to compromise, they do not seem to appreciate it when it

actually occurs. In an experiment, the authors show that information about the parties compromising does not in general lead leaning independents to evaluate their party more favorably. And if the debate is acrimonious and one's own party gives the largest concessions, evaluations might even drop.

While *Independent Politics* focuses on partisan politics in the United States, Klar and Krupnikov present arguments, methodological tools, and findings that deserve close attention from researchers studying parties and voters in other countries as well. In what follows, we offer some thoughts on how this book could shape the future research agenda in comparative politics.

One obvious question is whether the argument and findings on undercover partisans can travel to other party systems than the United States, particularly to multiparty systems. In these systems, being an independent takes on a different meaning than in the American context as voters have, sometimes plenty of, alternative parties with which to affiliate or to support. Will citizens in this context feel the same need to go undercover? An important task for future researchers is to examine how disdain for parties can affect partisanship and political participation, especially among high self-monitors, in multiparty systems.

Moreover, the tendency for partisans to go undercover might depend on the party with which they identify. In Europe, populist right-wing parties have traditionally been frowned on by many citizens, leading to beliefs that some voters will hide their support for these parties. The argument about social desirability effects proposed in *Independent Politics* should inspire scholars to examine whether the desire to go undercover is strongest among citizens supporting controversial, extremist parties. Following the argument by Klar and Krupnikov, this could have consequences beyond voters concealing their true preferences in surveys. It might also cause supporters of these parties to engage less

in overtly political behavior and thus be a source of political inaction.

A related question is to what extent this book's insights can help explain current dissatisfaction with established political parties across Europe. Do voters, at least in part, react against the conflictual nature of traditional partisan politics? Or are the main drivers voter dissatisfaction with policies on, for example, immigration and welfare state reform, or a perceived lack of ability to solve policy problems?

Ultimately, whether the book's insights travel well to other contexts also depends on what really drives the results that Klar and Krupnikov find. Throughout the book, the authors write about the "forces" and "motivations" that make partisans go undercover, but it remains somewhat unclear what specifically is the kind of information about the parties to which undercover partisans respond. Is it elite partisan polarization in terms of diverging issue positions that people dislike? Is it lack of cooperation between the parties? Or is it incivility? In their experimental treatments, Klar and Krupnikov mix these different dimensions of conflict. Thus, it is hard to tell what is really making Americans go undercover. Comparative scholars might begin by mapping how partisan conflict is presented to citizens outside the United States.

With *Independent Politics*, Klar and Krupnikov have written a major book that will shape future research in American and comparative politics as well as help anyone interested in democracy to better understand contemporary partisan politics.

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#### REFERENCE

Keith, Bruce E., David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth Orr, Mark C. Westlye, and Raymond E. Wolfinger. 1992. *The Myth of the Independent Voter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.