



NATIONAL CONFERENCE CALL PRESENTATION

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BY: Jacqueline Salit

Hello all. Every day I get up and like many of you, I read the newspapers and watch the TV news, and I hear about the fierce political campaigns going on around the country. Some of them make me laugh. Some of them make me yawn. A few of them make me angry. But the main point is that these campaigns seem to me to have less and less to do with the American people and only to do with which party is in power. That, of course, is the bottom line of American politics and why so many have become independents like us.

But there are other rumblings out there, too, part of a response to the fact that 40% of Americans are independents and to the fact that our government is having difficulty solving problems, no matter who is in power. Every day I wake up and there is somebody else promoting a form of independent and reform politics. I read editorials in major newspapers calling for a “third party of the center.” I hear TV commentators saying the independents have moved right because they’re voting Republican in November. I see Democrats and liberals advocating that campaign finance reform is the way to take on the corporations and empower the people. In other words, there are multiple attempts at independent or reform politics out there that are attached – one way or another – to an ideological perspective.

Our challenge, as a bottom-up movement of independents, is to keep growing and building without attaching ourselves to a partisan, ideological perspective. And here’s why. What is changing in America today is the whole construct that says that parties, and their ideologies, are the building blocks of American self-government. Independents are challenging that – we’re challenging the idea of “partyism” altogether. Politics in America is a party-driven, highly ideological environment. We are impacting on that – without a party, without an ideology, but with a commitment to building ourselves into a force for radical, non-partisan, pro-independent reform.

So, that’s our challenge, or dilemma – meaning, how hard we have to work to sustain that. But, we’re not the only ones with challenges or dilemmas. Others have them too. And tonight, I thought it would be useful to look at the dilemma of one other in particular, President Barack Obama. First, some history. In 2008, Obama was elected by a coalition of a majority of independents and Democrats, with some portion of Republicans who joined with the rest of the country in getting rid of George Bush and the neo-conservatives. When Obama won he was heralded as the country’s first independent President.

Once elected though, real life and real politics kicked in and Obama had to make a choice. He could choose to consolidate his political relationship with the Democratic Party—which demanded his full allegiance. Or he could decide to consolidate his relationship to the independent movement—a force that is very fluid, very new, and in some ways, very fragile. Faced with that choice, Obama chose the former; he decided to consolidate his political relationship with the Democratic Party and back-burner his relationship to the independents.

Now, before you get worked up about his having made this choice (because I know some of you are), let me remind you about the basic realities that govern electoral politics in this country. The name of the game is that you do what you need to do to hold on to your base. Then, and only then, you figure out how to win the support of independents.

Since this is the name of the game, Obama did what most everyone else in the game does, especially in the context he inherited, namely, a collapsed economy which seemed—and still seems—very resistant to stimulus, bailout and interventions. He had to address the political realities of governing, which meant he turned to his home base—the Democratic Party, which controls Congress and has the power to enact legislative changes.

There were, of course, significant consequences as a result of this choice, because in making that choice, Obama made himself vulnerable to the impact of independents' dislike of partisanship. And so the Republican Party, which smells vulnerability sooner even than it smells coffee in the morning, set out to court independent voters and to persuade independents that the Republicans, and not Obama and the Democrats, have their best interests at heart.

Of course, as independents, we understand very well that neither the Republicans nor the Democrats have the independents interests at heart, as my friend Larry Reinsch of *Independent Voters of Iowa* always points out. Independents are an oppositional force. We have an intuitive and fundamental distrust of the political establishment—whatever its leanings. Thus, it's no surprise that the Republican right has had success in attracting independents to support its candidates this season. Of course, they try to interpret this as an ideological swing to the right on the part of independents. But it isn't. Independents do not have a defined ideology – nor do they want one.

I received a note recently from a colleague in the independent movement who I've worked with on various issues over the years. He was all happy and delighted about the influence of the Republican Right among independents. I asked him why he would celebrate the idea that independents were allying with a political party – the GOP – which is, like the Democrats, a champion of partisan politics. In my opinion, every day that passes where partisanship rules, is a day where damage is done to the American people and the future of our country.

That damage is what concerns us, and that is why what we do is to concentrate on building the independent movement as an engine for non-partisan, even anti-partisan political reform. And there is much to report on that front. Let me give you just a few examples.

Our work to promote open primaries, for example, gains ground every day. Kim Wright, founder of South Dakota Voice of Independents, has been pressing the cause of open primaries in South Dakota, where a Democratic Party candidate for Secretary of State, responded to Kim's work on this and recently called for reform legislation to open that state's closed primaries. Kim has written op-eds and letters to the editor on the subject, held meetings for independents to learn about these issues, and has reached out to leaders on Indian reservations to build public support for including independent voters. Because of her work, we're seeing voices from inside the establishment speaking out for the outsider reforms we want.

And it's not only in South Dakota, it's happening in South Carolina, too. Wayne Griffin, Chairman of the South Carolina Independence Party, is spearheading a campaign to stop the Republican Party from closing primaries there. In the earliest stages of this effort, we've gotten support from black elected officials in the state legislature and from a cross section of third parties—including the SC Progressive Network made up of the Labor Party, Green Party, and United Citizen's Party on the left, and the Constitution Party on the right.

In Massachusetts, Evelyn Dougherty and our affiliate there, the Mass. Coalition of Independent Voters, persuaded the leading independent candidate for Governor, Tim Cahill, currently the State Treasurer (having been elected as a Democrat) to send a letter to President Obama calling on him to appoint an independent to the Federal Election Commission. Evelyn and Diane Whitehouse set up a table this past weekend at Oktoberfest in Harvard Square and signed up 18 independents on a petition to change the official wording of how Massachusetts describes us from "unenrolled" to "independent."

In Rhode Island, a former Republican Senator, Lincoln Chaffee, responded to our call to go on the record in support of open primaries by signing our candidate pledge. In Florida, a network of Coffee Party activists led by Ray Hudkins are considering joining Linda Ricke's petitioning campaign—under the auspices of Sunshine Independents—calling for open primaries in that closed primary state. And in California, Jason Olson, Joyce Dattner and the Independent Voice network just held a press conference where they endorsed Abel Maldonado for Lt. Governor in what is shaping up to be a very tight race where independent voters could make all the difference. Maldonado was the state legislator who traded his vote on the budget to put Prop 14 – the open primary initiative – on the ballot and he campaigned vigorously with us for its passage.

Ohio Independents for Effective Government—a new committee that formed last month—has begun a grassroots petitioning drive for "top two" open primaries. Joelle Riddle, an elected county commissioner in La Plata, Colorado, recently formed Independent Voters for Colorado. Wolf von Baumgart and Glenn Miller of the Independent Party of Delaware (IPoD) are championing the cause of open primaries in the ideological pressure cooker of Delaware. Michael Lewis of Independent Kentucky, who is running for State Representative, goes to court tomorrow to defend his right to be on the ballot. Michael made such a splash in support of open primaries last year, that his opponent, a 22 year incumbent Democrat, is worried about losing the election, so he is trying to throw Michael off the ballot.

And as we speak, our general counsel, Harry Kresky, is in Boise, Idaho with Mitch Campbell, the head of the American Independent Movement, where we are presenting arguments in a trial in federal court in response to Republicans who want to close the state's open primary system to give party leaders control over party nominees. In Louisiana, Deborah Allen who came within a 100 votes of the runoff for city council, invited her campaign workers on this call, and in Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Alabama, Washington State, Virginia, Georgia and other states, independents are organizing independent reform campaigns and building local committees.

These are just some of the activities you are bringing to life across the country and they are so vitally important. I like to think about it in this way. In each of these situations, you are taking a bite out of the two party apple, you're poking a hole in the fabric of the two party universe, and shoving a new mass movement through that tear. We are not a movement which places itself at the "center," where the intelligentsia tells us change occurs. That's wrong. Change doesn't occur at the center. Compromise does. Change, developmental change, occurs from the outside in, and we are a movement of outsiders disturbed and frustrated by what the insiders are doing to our country. We are movement determined to bring the outsiders into the political process in a meaningful way. We understand that if we don't make these changes, we will not be able to move forward as a country.

And here, we return to Obama's dilemma. We understand that if we don't make these changes, we will not be able to move forward as a country. I believe that even Obama agrees, because he has seen the damage and constraints of partisanship first hand, from the inside, as it were. Meaningful reform of education, Wall Street, energy policy, immigration, can't happen under the present political circumstances.

There was a huge setback for the education reform movement recently which is trying to tackle the problem of low achievement in the poor inner city communities of our nation and the extent to which American public school students overall have fallen behind in math and science, compared with the rest of the developed world. The reformers asked for \$200 million in federal funds for pilot programs that have a good record in educating underperforming poor kids using models that succeed because they take those kids seriously as potential learners. But the Senate cut the funding from \$200 million to \$12 million. Why does that happen? Presumably some Senators voted to slash the appropriation because they believe America as a whole doesn't want to spend more money on educating our poor kids. I'm not so sure that is the reason. I think the resistance to funding that kind of innovation and infrastructure development has more to do with a deep distrust of government, a deep distrust of its ability to solve problems.

But if public policy innovation is stalled because of public distrust in government, then we must be prepared to reform our entire electoral system so that the American people can be in control of our government rather than the other way around. That means having to re-engineer the process so that the people and not the parties and the special interests are in control. Many very smart people these days talk about how government is broken. As I mentioned, they write columns in the fancy newspapers calling for "third parties" to be an alternative to partisan gridlock. Now, I know how to type. And I know it's easy to type those words. But if you type

them, you better know what that means, and why past efforts have failed or why the American people are sick of parties and “partyism” altogether. It’s one thing to call for a third party on the pages of the *NY Times*. It’s another thing to be willing to do the hard work of rebuilding our democracy—that is the project that the independent movement is working on.

I want to say a word here about the impact of all of this on Black America, since it is fundamental to our vision of independent politics that all people—black, Latino, Asian, and white—be included as part of the independent movement. With respect to the issues of poverty and lack of quality education for black America, historically the belief has been that the Democratic Party would fix these things and black voters have been loyal to the Democrats on that basis. But it has become increasingly clear, hasn’t it, that the Democratic Party cannot fix these things. It does not have the credibility to mobilize the country behind new models for reform, and, we are starting to see incidents where the Democrats are losing the confidence of the black community. We are, of course, very involved in this part of the political story. Dr. Lenora Fulani, at the national level, Wayne Griffin in South Carolina, David Cherry in Illinois, Dr. Jessie Fields in NYC—have been creating new independent options for black voters for many years, meeting with greater success along the way. 30% of African-Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 now consider themselves independents, not Democrats.

In NYC, half of black voters abandoned the Democratic Party to vote for the independent mayoral campaign of Mike Bloomberg in 2005. I know what a shock to the system that was, because I ran that campaign.

In NYC right now, Dr. Fulani and the NYC Independence Party is helping a black City Councilman, Charles Barron, establish a new ballot-status party geared to the black community called the Freedom Party, even while it secures ballot status for itself. Barron, who was elected to the City Council as a Democrat, now says that the black community must go independent because the Democratic Party cannot deliver. David Cherry in Illinois reports to us that he is reaching out to independent candidates there, several of whom are African-American, polling at 5-8% in the polls – at 20% among black voters – where the message is that the black community has to go independent to be politically powerful.

And so, as we hammer away at open primaries, at redistricting, at putting independents on the FEC, at building a black and independent alliance, at giving independents the status and power we need to act as a counterweight to partisan politics, as usual, there are new interests who are relating to the independent movement. There are the Republicans—who want to peel independents away from any kind of coalition with or support for Obama and instill a right-wing ideology in our non-ideological movement. And there are new black leaders—former Democrats—who have lost faith in the Democratic Party and are now looking to realign the black vote along independent lines.

This overall situation places President Obama in a bind and intensifies his dilemma. As a Democrat, he feels he must trust in the Democratic Party to hold on to the black vote. But at the same time, the independents—whose non-partisan philosophy he is in many ways sympathetic to and whose support he needs for the long term—are being influenced against him by the Republicans on the one side, and

on the other by the growing strength of black independents trying to cut into the Democratic Party's control of the black vote. That is a difficult place for him to be and there is no easy way out.

So now, to the title of this call: *What do independents have to say to Obama?* Well, that's a good question, because there are many things to say. For one thing, we might want to say to him – WE ARE HERE. But he knows that. We might want to say to him, President Obama, WE MEAN YOU NO HARM BUT WE WILL PRESS AHEAD TO BUILD OUR MOVEMENT AND PURSUE THE STRUCTURAL REFORMS THAT WILL CREATE MORE UNCERTAINTY FOR YOUR PARTY AND FOR THE REPUBLICAN PARTY AND YOU MAY NOT LIKE THAT. And/or we might want to let him know that many Americans have come to believe that reform of any kind – education reform, Wall Street reform, energy reform, immigration reform—is not possible without political reform and that is what we, the independents, are doing.

I want to encourage everyone to write to President Obama and let him know any of the above, all of the above, none of the above. Right at this moment, we need to let him know that there is a movement growing from the bottom up that does not equate bi-partisanship with non-partisanship, and that we want independents to be included in the process at every level and at every step along the way. We are Americans concerned not with party control, but with the development of our country.

Here's how you send your letter:

It's addressed to **President Barack Obama, The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Northwest, Washington, DC 20500**

Send me a copy of what you send. It will be most helpful to me. You can e-mail it to me at national@cuip.org or fax it to 212-609-2801.

And one more thing: Mark down **Saturday, February 12th, 2011**, in your calendar. That is the date of our national conference of independents in New York City. I want to personally ask each and every one of you to be there.

And thanks for being on this call. Send me a copy of your letters, and most of all, take care of yourselves and take care of our movement. We are the future of our country.

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