

The Neo-Independent: The Politics of Becoming

Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 2010)

Interview with John P. Avlon

By Phyllis Goldberg

John P. Avlon, CNN contributor and author of Independent Nation: How Centrists Can Change American Politics and Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe is Hijacking America, is among the most respected analysts of American politics in the United States. He previously served as chief speechwriter for New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and was a columnist and associate editor of The New York Sun. In addition to his work at CNN, Avlon is currently senior political columnist for The Daily Beast and recently co-founded the non-partisan political group No Labels.

Avlon has been a longtime advocate of non-partisan municipal elections. As chairman of the Charter Task Force established by Citizens Union – New York City’s preeminent good government organization – to make recommendations to the 2010 Charter Revision Commission, Avlon was instrumental in Citizen Union’s decision to support the reform measure that it had previously opposed.

An ardent independent who describes himself as “socially liberal, fiscally conservative” – others have called him a “radical centrist” – Avlon is one of the few journalists on the political scene who views the emerging independent movement not in terms of what it can do for the major parties but as a potent force with the capacity to transform how politics in America is done.

Several weeks ago he took part in a panel at the national conference “Can Independents Reform America?” organized by CUIP/IndependentVoting.org. At the conference he argued that the two major parties have effectively “rigged the system” in their own favor and pointed out that the political dialogue that takes place on most talk shows usually takes the form of a debate between Left and Right, as if independent voters and centrists do not exist.

Earlier this month he paused between meetings to answer some questions put to him by The Neo.

NEO: Were you born an independent? If not, how and when did you get to be one?

JA: One of the problems with our politics is that political affiliation tends to be handed down, as if it were genetic: you’re a Democrat or a Republican because that’s what your parents were. Politics has become like a religion – not just ideological but theological ... it’s not filtered through reason. I’ve always had an independent streak.

What’s driving American politics is a new generation that’s grown up with lots of choices. Yet our politics is still operating on an analog model – the only choice is between A and B. But that doesn’t fit with how people think now, with how they live. The parties don’t want to leave the Industrial Age. They can’t reach out to independent voters because they don’t understand who independents are and what they’re demanding, which is about choice and individuation.

NEO: Now that No Labels has been launched, what role are you playing in taking it on the road?

JA: Before the launch we did a listening tour. We wanted to find out if what we were trying to organize resonated with people. Next week I’m going to the University of Iowa to continue the tour. Our purpose is to help folks in the center make their voices heard. The extremes have done a good job in making *their* voices heard. That’s not good for democracy, and it’s dispiriting. The Founding Fathers recognized this ... Washington, of course, warned against parties, most famously in his Farewell Address. But most of them, including Thomas Jefferson

and John Adams, were wary of parties. James Madison was very concerned about factions.

I always like to say that I'm proud to be a Yankees fan, but I love baseball more. Parties are not the purpose of our democracy. The parties seek to rig the rules in their own favor – as the Republican Party is doing now in South Carolina [where the Republican Party has brought a lawsuit against the state to close the primaries] – but that's not in the interests of democracy.

NEO: In an interview in *The Economist* a few months ago, you noted that “Younger generations have grown up with a multiplicity of choice on every front, which can be tailored to suit their individual beliefs.” Would you say more about why you think young people are politically independent and why it's significant that they are?

JA: Statistically speaking, independents are the largest sector of the electorate, and they're also the youngest. That's part of a conscious trend – a *choice* they're making. Pollsters often act as if it isn't. When someone says they're independent, pollsters will say: *What are you really?* Independence makes sense in the Information Age. Young people now aren't joiners in the way that earlier generations were. Historically, African Americans, for instance, were overwhelmingly Democrats. I think it's a sign of health and historical perspective that young African Americans are becoming independent.

There are ten states where registered independents outnumber Republicans and Democrats – including New Hampshire and Iowa, where the earliest presidential primaries take place. And New Hampshire is an open primary state...that's very important. The growth trends over the past decade in states like Arizona [from 17.8% in 2000 to 31.6% in 2011] and Florida [from 14% to 20%] is something no party can match.

Independents have been on the move over the last few years. Now they're moving back to President Obama. The Republican Party has painted itself into a corner. The further to the right they move, the more they alienate independents.

NEO: At the CUIP conference you said that “The independent movement is one of the most exciting, dynamic things happening in American politics today.” In *The Economist* interview, you imagined a near-future scenario in which vast numbers of fiscally conservative, socially liberal independents would leave the major parties to form a third party at the center. But most independents aren't party animals –

they explicitly dislike parties – and they tend to reject labels – “conservative,” “liberal,” “centrist.” Do you see other ways that independents might organize themselves to give expression to their independence and to have an impact on public policy?

JA: That was a scenario, not a prediction! Social media gives independents a way to aggregate outside parties. The parties would kill for the growth rate that’s taking place among independents. But it isn’t going to happen, because they have no idea how to market themselves to independents. Politicians may use the word – like members of Congress who call themselves “independent” – but they’re not. The parties are polarized, but the American people are not. Even when it comes to issues like abortion, the American people aren’t polarized. That gap between the parties and the people creates distortions in our politics. Independents need to start showing up and pushing for election reforms like open primaries and redistricting reform to create a level playing field.

NEO: Where do you think the fight for open primaries in New York City goes from here? What’s your thinking about strategy and tactics for the next round?

JA: It’s been around twice and didn’t make it – once in 2003, when a referendum on nonpartisan elections was on the ballot, and again in 2010, when the Charter Revision Commission decided against a referendum. But I’m an optimist – like Lincoln, who said he was an optimist because he didn’t see what else there was to be. We have to be persistent and consistent on this fight. I think a referendum for nonpartisan elections needs to be on the ballot in a high turnout cycle, when the people who come out and vote are representative of the whole electorate. Nonpartisan elections isn’t a radical idea – 80% of our cities have them. In 2013, when the next mayor of New York City will be elected by just a handful of voters, it should be a wakeup call for people.

NEO: Thank you, John, for taking the time to talk.

JA: It was my pleasure.
