

## **The Neo-Independent: The Politics of Becoming**

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### **Can Independents Reform America?**

*by Jackie Salit*

How fitting and fortunate that this conference on bringing political reform and non-partisan democracy to our country takes place as the people of Egypt are making a democracy revolution in theirs.

Let's begin with a look at the American story: Independent voters are now 38% of the national electorate, a growing constituency of Americans who want an alternative to partisan politics and partisan government. In 2008, independents voted for Barack Obama in huge numbers – 19 million – because we wanted a post-partisan president: someone who could move us beyond politics-as-usual; an independent who could bring change to America.

The excitement and the national pride over Obama's election was historic, but it was also short-lived. Obama found himself face to face with a devastating crisis. The American economy and the banking system – its lifeblood – were unraveling at an alarming rate. The auto industry stood on the brink of bankruptcy. And Wall Street took a plunge that was nearly fatal. How did the government respond? And what choices did Obama have?

The scenario presented by Wall Street was dire: The end of the world. Obama had to act. But, in acting to save the financial system, giving hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts to the banks, the president and his

new government aroused deep conflicts and suspicions within the American public and created an opening for his political opposition.

The independent who had been elected to change the country's priorities in favor of the American people, found himself taking extreme steps to save the country's elite. As Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner said, *"It put the government of the United States in the position of helping the same institutions that were perceived to cause the crisis."*

Americans were confused and angry. Some of that anger surfaced as a media fascination called the "Tea Party movement." It was part grassroots protest and part rebirth of the conservative wing of the GOP. The Tea Parties launched a series of anti-government protests only three months after Obama took office, arguing to politicians *"you are spending money we don't have, on social programs we don't need, to solve problems that you have caused."*

The Republican establishment decided to ride the Tea Party momentum, with a two-part strategy. First, use the Tea Parties to energize the despondent Republican base. And second, channel their anti-establishment anger into a magnet for independent voters who had supported Obama, but who were upset about the path the president – and the partisan Congress – were taking.

Republican leaders understood that winning the 2010 midterms meant breaking up the Independent and Democrat coalition that swept Obama into office. They gambled that if Republicans said NO to everything, Democrats would move ahead without them, using their congressional majority to pass legislation when no bipartisan consensus could be reached. The most dramatic example of this was broadcast on national television, when House

Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi led the passage of health care reform with a straight party line vote.

This display of partisan muscle was unpopular with many independents. And Obama seemed either unable or unwilling to resist it. Republicans and their Tea Party allies were actively working to divide the Obama coalition. But the Democratic Party was remarkably passive. Maybe they believed independents would stand by them or stand down while they flexed their partisan muscle. More likely, they believed that the Democratic base was solid – it was up 5 points after 2008 – and independents, once so crucial, were no longer needed.

At IndependentVoting.org we were alarmed by this. Obama had been elected by independents to govern as an independent. But the most partisan Democrats were calling the shots. We'd seen the early warning signs of this eclipse when his team decided to fold their independent campaign organization – Obama for America – into the Democratic National Committee.

It was as if the Obama team had forgotten that independent voters fueled his primary challenge to the Democratic Party machine, carried him to the nomination, and enabled him to win the Presidency. In the 2008 campaign, 33 states allowed independents to vote in their primaries and caucuses. Most of IndependentVoting.org networks supported Obama in those contests. Without the backing of independent voters, Hillary Clinton would have been the Democratic Party nominee. But now, Obama had only Democratic strategists and congressional leaders talking in his ear. Maybe they wanted that history swept under the rug, but we didn't.

We wanted that history told and understood, and so 111 leaders of our networks from 35 states wrote personal letters to the president urging that he

reconnect with independent voters. One, by Ginni Treadwell of Vermont, was presented directly to the president as part of his morning briefing.

*Dear President Obama,*

*I am a crabby old lady that has sunk so low in hope that I damn near stayed home from voting for the first time in almost 50 years. So much has changed in the last two short years since I joined thousands of independents to cast a vote for your message of hope and change. We did not expect miracles. We knew you needed time.*

*We were nervous when you kept on the “old guard” – many who have been more a part of the problem than the solution. We were shocked when Wall Street reform was a slap and did nothing to prevent the monstrous greed that has nearly taken this country down. When you had no interest in keeping the public option in the health care bill, we were just plain scared. But we calmed our nerves and watched and waited...only to be sooo disappointed when you gave so little attention to open primaries that offer a beginning to end the partisanship.*

*Ginni Treadwell, Troy, Vermont*

Obama had lost his connection to independent voters and we tried to intervene to repair the damage. I wrote “Obama Can Win Independents Back,” published in dozens of papers across the country which spelled out what the president could do to keep his connection to independent voters, including learning the history of the independent movement; we appealed to the president on national television with Omar Ali, IndependentVoting.org spokesman, delivering the message of independents on CNN:

*“If President Obama wants to do something about picking up his numbers, especially among independents, he’s got to find out more about what animates independents. The bottom line for independents is opening up the process and*

*dealing with the bi-partisan and partisan nature of our electoral system.”*

But the White House wasn't listening. Then came the midterm elections. The Democrats lost 63 seats in the House and 4 in the Senate. After election night, the GOP controlled the House with a 49 seat margin.

It was, in some respects, ironic. The Tea Parties, which built their momentum in closed primary states where independents couldn't vote to choose the Republican nominee – like Kentucky, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Nevada and Florida, successfully divided the Obama coalition. How? By popularizing an anti-establishment message among independents.

Everything we'd said to Obama was on point. But, if we are to be honest, we have to acknowledge that in spite of what we said, we could not be heard. We were too small. We were too under-funded. We were too outside-the-box for the White House to hear us.

Nonetheless, independents were determined to make a statement. The core change that Obama had built his presidential campaign around, and that independents had supported, was eliminating partisanship. But on this, he did not deliver. So, independents gave control of Congress to the Republicans – making it impossible for Obama to govern as a partisan. It's fair to say that independents liberated Obama from the partisanship of his own party. However, the swing by independents, while dramatic, wasn't an endorsement of the Republican Party or of a conservative “Tea Party” vision. Gerry Seib of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote the day after the election: “*The very fickleness that independents demonstrated in these two midterm elections means there's no guarantee they'll remain loyal to the GOP, any more than they stuck with President Obama and his Democrats.*”

The latest polling numbers bear this out. Gallup shows 29% of Americans identify as Republicans, 31% as Democrats, and 38% as independents. Independents are not only the largest bloc of voters in America. They have been the change agent in American politics for the last 20 years.

Let's briefly consider that history: In 1992, a major national independent political movement took shape in the presidential campaign of Ross Perot. In the spring of 1992, in a three-way race for the presidency, Perot stood at 40% in the polls. The country was poised to send an independent to the White House. But eight years later the Perot movement, and the Reform Party it gave rise to, were on the brink of non-existence.

In the early days of the Reform Party, our base in the black, Latino, gay and progressive communities – known as CUIP, the Committee for a Unified Independent Party – organized a coalition with Perot's "radical white center." This coalition for grassroots democracy became so powerful inside the Reform Party that in 1999 the ruling Perot clique was overthrown and a new national leadership team – backed by America's leading black independent, Lenora Fulani and Jesse Ventura, Minnesota's independent Governor – was elected.

But before the newly-elected Democracy Coalition could consolidate its position, the Perot group brought a well-oiled social conservative machine into the Reform Party, led by Republican Patrick Buchanan, to supply the ground troops needed to overthrow us. Perot's inner circle wanted control of the movement back in their hands. But Buchanan and the conservatives wanted more. Having been rejected by their own (the battle for conservative control of the Republican Party did not start with the Tea

Parties), they wanted to turn the Reform Party and the independent movement into leverage for a right-wing agenda. Two things prevented that from happening. After a brief effort at a coalition with Buchanan, the party's progressive wing – that's us – marginalized him.

CUIP Founder Jim Mangia, the National Secretary of the Reform Party, spoke out at the split nominating convention in Long Beach, California against the right-wing effort to take over the party in 2000: *The Buchanan campaign is attempting to squash democracy in the Reform Party. They are coming here with brute force, attempting to take over the party, and we're not going to allow that to happen. This is not the Republican Party. This is not some right wing social conservative organization. This is the Party of Reform. This is the party of 20 million Americans who broke with the Democrats and Republicans in order to have a choice.*"

The defeat of the Buchanan juggernaut was completed by the millions of independents and others who had voted for the populist Perot but rejected Buchanan's conservative alternative. Buchanan got less than half a million votes for president.

With the collapse of the Buchanan bid, which took the Reform Party down along with it, the independent movement was, for all intents and purposes, dead. But the deep mistrust of the political parties was not.

Thirty-five percent of the country were still independents on the day the movement died. So we went out to rebuild – not as a party, but as a response to the third of the country that was disillusioned with traditional partisan politics, yet as a practical matter, had no way to express it.

We reached out, cold calling lists of registered independents, standing on street corners, going to county fairs and surfing the net, looking for independent voters who wanted change in a system that had become

addicted to partisanship. That effort became known as IndependentVoting.org. And for a decade, we have been the only force in the country organizing independents to challenge the parties for the right to a nonpartisan political process.

Defining the independent movement – defining its principles – is a crucial part of building the movement. The battle inside the Reform Party defined our wing of the independent movement. It also set in motion a series of attacks and counterattacks that led to the Reform Party's demise.

Apparently, when push came to shove, no one in the establishment really wanted an independent movement for political reform, led by progressives, which crossed ideological and racial lines.

But if one episode of outside intervention to disrupt the independent movement isn't enough to convince you of this, take a look at the New York Independence Party, where this same pattern was repeated, but with different results. The New York Independence Party was founded in 1994. It became a ballot status party off of the votes a billionaire, Tom Golisano, polled for governor. Our New York operation was a part of that campaign.

Not unlike the Reform Party, where Perot and his lieutenants wanted tight-fisted control from the top, Golisano and his team wanted complete dominance over the Independence Party. But, the rank and file had a different idea. We wanted a system of local control where power was disbursed to local chapters, rather than concentrated in the hands of a party boss.

And so in 1999 and 2000 we joined with other independents from around the state to vote out the Golisano forces and rewrite the party rules to install local control. We elected Frank MacKay chairman of the party.

MacKay's job was to guide the party to become an influential reform force

in New York politics. But as the New York City branch of the party became that force, playing the pivotal role in electing Mike Bloomberg mayor in two consecutive elections, top New York State Democrats – and I mean top – began to object. The New York City Independence Party was developing strength in traditional Democratic constituencies. In Bloomberg’s second mayoral run, we persuaded 47% of black voters to go independent, joining with 60% of independents in a black and independent coalition. Hillary Clinton, then in the U.S. Senate, and Attorney General, soon-to-be-Governor, Eliot Spitzer instructed Frank MacKay to take control of the New York City branch of the Party. And the fight – complete with nasty, negative, personal attacks – was on.

Four years and 17 court battles later, the New York City Independence Party is alive and well. Fred Newman and Lenora Fulani (the targets of much of the attacks) are very much in the picture, along with the four thousand party members who serve on local governing committees.

MacKay, who controls the Independence Party everywhere but New York City, is under a cloud of suspicion for financial misdealing. Meanwhile, the city party, which Clinton and Spitzer had tried to make radioactive, was approached by Mike Bloomberg to back his third run for mayor in 2009. When the Bloomberg team came calling to meet with Fred Newman and myself, they said “We can’t win it without you.” And Bloomberg, the independent, made that clear when he spoke at a rally two nights before the election to a packed room of 500 independents. Newman’s remarks that evening emphasized how Mike Bloomberg, unlike other politicians, had not abandoned independent voters:

*“I’ve been involved in independent politics since the very beginning. One thing that’s happened on a national level in Minnesota, in Connecticut, all over the country, one thing that’s happened is that many, many people who think that this is just a bunch of swinging people who go back and forth, they say ‘well I can swing too, I’ll use them, and then I’ll abandon them.’ That’s been the standard pattern, from Minnesota to Texas to California, all over the country. I’ll abandon them after I’ve gotten their votes of course! Then I’ll abandon them. Let me tell you the one person who hasn’t done that. That doesn’t mean we agree on everything. It doesn’t mean we always see it the same way. But I’m in a position to say, and I hope you will trust me on this; Mike Bloomberg has never abandoned independent politics.”*

Bloomberg shook Newman’s hand and then walked to the podium. He said *“Fred, I will never forget what you said. And I hope I’ll live up the standards you have annunciated.”*

Two days later, the Independence Party polled 150,000 votes for Mike Bloomberg, 30 percent of his total vote and the highest independent vote in New York City in 70 years.

When independents are organized, they can act as a mighty force to move beyond partisanship and reform the system. But in most cases, independents are still struggling to make their statement. Politically speaking, the country is still split 50/50. But now – instead of reflecting that 50/50 split, as they had done since the collapse of the Perot movement, independents are swinging. They swing against the party in power because

they want a kind of change that neither party has been able to deliver. They want a kind of change that supersedes any set of issues or ideology. They want a change in how the political process operates and how our government leads the nation.

The Tea Parties say that we have to take our country back. But that doesn't really make sense, because we are the country. We don't have to take it back. But we do need to take control of our democracy. This has been hijacked by the political parties. And it is the mission of IndependentVoting.org to take back our democracy and to revolutionize it into a creative self-governing activity that includes all Americans, with or without a party.

Today the independent voter is a coveted partner. And so the pressures and demands on different forces in the independent movement—on us!—are increasing.

We have carved out – to borrow a business term – an identifiable political brand. We are the progressive wing of the independent movement. We stand for radical structural political reform that enables the American people to regain control of the democratic process. Our issues are open primaries, nonpartisan elections, non-political redistricting, open debates, the right of independents to call themselves independents (not undeclareds, decline to states, or “other”) and that the rights of the people should take precedence over the privileges of the parties.

We believe that all people – regardless of race, religion, ethnicity or economic status – should have the necessary opportunities to grow and to prosper. We believe government has a role to play in that process, but to

play that role it must become less partisan; it cannot remain captive to party interests. It must represent the national interest. It is not enough to demand bipartisanship in government. We must have non-partisanship in government.

The private sector, which is seeking new opportunities for growth, must line up with that nonpartisan direction. The business community must support civic partnerships that foster new forms of democratic participation and new approaches to development for all, including the poor. Here is our simple truth: the calcified and controlling party system is holding back progress. The president spoke in his State of the Union Address about innovation and infrastructure being the key to American strength. That must include innovating our political process and creating a new political infrastructure that can handle the demands of the new politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

That is why we have worked hard to make structural reform of the political process a front burner issue.

We have played key roles in political reform battles over the last several years in California, Oregon, Washington State, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, South Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine. We have won major reform victories, as with the passage in California of Proposition 14, an open primary measure through an alliance between then Lt. Governor Abel Maldonado and our California affiliate, IndependentVoice.org. The measure allows 3.5 million independent voters into the first and critical round of voting.

We won big in California but we also suffered setbacks. Partisan opposition to democratic reform is strong. In 2010, Democrats in the Kentucky State Legislature defeated an open primary bill just as State Senator Julian Carroll told Independent Kentucky's Michael Lewis, "*What you are saying is I don't like the way America runs its political system. Well if you don't like it, move to another country!*"

Kentucky wasn't the only place where inflammatory rhetoric by major party officials was used to halt democratic reform. In New York City a coalition of Black and Latino Democratic elected officials, long opposed to reform, pulled together a last-minute rally to stop the growing momentum for non-partisan elections in 2010. At the rally, City Councilman William Perkins declared "*Non-partisan elections, Anti-American!*" In spite of this opposition, we had shaped a reform coalition which included the city's premier good government group—the Citizen's Union. But we still could not persuade Mayor Bloomberg and a charter commission to put that non-partisan question to the voters last year.

These ups and downs are the nature of the business we are in. We have found a sweet spot that is also a sore spot: Fighting for a nonpartisan election process. This activity attracts both allies and enemies. In California, all political parties, major and minor, opposed Proposition 14 and the third parties called us betrayers of the independent cause. But in South Carolina, the third parties – left and right – are with us in a federal court case to stop the Republican Party from closing the primaries there. But the coalition is even bigger and more unusual than that! Thirteen African-American Democratic Party legislators joined the lawsuit along with a local branch of the Tea Parties, which broke away from their own state Tea Party organization because it was taken over by the Republican Party.

In Kentucky, the Republicans supported us and the Democrats opposed us. In Idaho and South Dakota, it's the reverse. Democrats backed our efforts. Republicans opposed. In New York City, the Democrats fought us tooth and nail and the Republicans were largely silent. As you can see, pushing for nonpartisan political reform creates shifting alliances. And new groups are adding their voices to the reform mix. Americans Elect, the recasting of UNITY 08, is putting together the infrastructure for a national campaign in 2012 that would partner a presidential and vice-presidential unity ticket from opposite sides of the aisle. Another group, No Labels, is an effort to promote bi-partisan cooperation. New York Times columnist David Brooks, at the organization's official launch in December 2010, said:

*“Some people think the problem is basically structural. We need to do some redistricting; we need to do a little campaign finance. I'm a journalist and I cover these people, to me, that's not the main problem. They may be important but the structure is not the main problem...The main problem is good people stuck in bad social relationships... So what do we need? To my mind we probably don't need a third party. I don't think this is about a third party. We need a social movement under the parties.”*

No Labels is highlighting some important concerns. But it is a mistake to think that bad relationships, as they suggest, can be overcome without changing the structures that shape them. The answer is not a third party. And a movement that is underneath the parties but not independent of them, won't put a dent in partisanship. It will only produce a kinder, gentler form of partisanship.

So, we must ask ourselves, why has the battle for partisan control of the American government intensified over the past twenty years—that is, since the brief but dramatic rise and fall of the Reform Party? Is it because a certain fabric of American society that we relied on, as a nation, is unraveling? Is it because the center, the political center, which was anchored by a broad social compact, has fragmented, and political polarization combined with hardening partisan control from the top has come to take its place?

12 years ago, just as the strength of the Reform Party was cresting, Fred Newman and Lenora Fulani discussed these issues on their weekly television show with former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, the progressive economist who had recently served in the Clinton administration. In that remarkably relevant interview, Reich told Newman that the social compact had unraveled for multiple reasons, including the fact that *“We no longer understand that we are in the same boat.”*

We no longer understand that we are in the same boat. But what if the problem is even more acute than that? What if that boat, and the premises on which it was constructed, no longer float? What if the boat – the infrastructure of American politics – needs to be rebuilt based on a new set of premises that are neither the old New Deal nor the old anti-New Deal? These old political approaches and old battles are still embedded in the two parties and in the party system which protects and preserves them. How do we get beyond all that if we can't release ourselves from their institutional control?

Our premise – the premise of our wing of the independent movement – is that the boat needs rebuilding if we are to safely navigate the waters of a

post-modern world. That is why we bring democratic political reform to the forefront of our independent movement. New ways of thinking, new ways of governing, new ways of solving problems are needed. This is what independents want. This is what people all over the world want! When you turn on the TV to watch the news, you see democracy and development are intimately connected in today's world. Are open primaries or nonpartisan elections the "be all" and "end all," the absolute cure for what ails us? No. But are they a step that takes us outside the box of old power relationships that preserve the old order? Independents believe they are.

And so, with your permission, and hopefully, with your full support, let's continue to build our democracy revolution. On to a nonpartisan America!

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