

# Sorting out an elusive constituency: independent voters

Who are America's independent voters, and what do they want?

We tend to hear about this voting block infrequently, and then only in the midst of closely fought political contests. During the 2008 presidential race, independent voters proved to be much in demand, with both Barack Obama and John McCain going to great lengths to enlist their support. Obama's campaign strategists realized that they would need to carry a significant portion of this elusive constituency, while McCain recognized that independents were as critical to the success of his 2008 campaign as they had been to his 2000 New Hampshire primary victory.

Widely referenced by the punditry and the media, the phenomenon of the "independent voter" is often couched in generalities, and cited without meaningful specifics. This is partially due to the fact that independents are difficult to categorize – confounding both the press, as well as the political campaigns that seek to court them. While eagerly pursued, these voters do not form a cohesive ideological block, which makes them difficult electoral targets to hit.

Rather than delving into such complexities, the American media has largely characterized this phenomenon in short-hand, using the "independent" label as a catch-all to describe everyone from disaffected swing voters, to third party activists, to the politically unaffiliated. While never large enough to constitute a majority, independents are nevertheless able to influence election results in decisive ways. As such, the public deserves a more detailed examination of the disparate group of Americans who vote under the "independent" brand.

## **Defining independents**

To properly understand independent voters, we must first define whom it is that we are talking about. Independent voters have been a feature of virtually every American election cycle, and on occasion they have had major impacts on American politics – such as during the 1920s, when they flocked to Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party. More recently, their contemporary emergence can be traced to John Anderson's independent bid for the presidency in 1980. Anderson's candidacy was arguably the

beginning of today's "independent voter" phenomenon, and it established the framework for how we now view independents – as a transient constituency, straying across major party lines, or crossing over to bolster the ranks of third parties candidates.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to differentiate "independent voters" from "third party voters." The classic independent voter has no long-term party affiliation, but instead floats between parties, with his or her choices guided by individual candidates, or by prevailing social circumstances. In contrast, third parties tend to have small but committed voter bases who reliably defend their party over time. It is worth noting that independent voters frequently provide the lion's share of third party vote totals. While distinct, these two groups are inextricably bound together in important ways.

There are a variety of factors that motivate independents – some of which are based upon political ideology, and some of which are based on more transient considerations. Below is a non-exhaustive profile of some of the major categories that today's independent voters fall into:

### **The crisis voter**

There are large swaths of the American voting public who are not self-consciously ideological or partisan – a fact that had been somewhat forgotten in recent years, as tight election results seemed to indicate increasingly strong party affiliations. In reality, this trend was likely the result of independent "crisis voters" reacting to a decade of turmoil. Crisis voters are non-ideological pragmatists who tend to react to near-term conditions or threats when they select candidates. It is arguable that they comprise the biggest segment of independent voters.

After 9/11, these voters aligned themselves with President Bush and the Republican Party, which centered its electoral narratives almost entirely around national security themes. The shock of the 9/11 event froze these voters in place for a period of time, and made them far less transient than they would have otherwise been. If we look to the relative calm of the 1990s for a point of comparison, we saw much more fluidity in this block, as crisis voters split across parties in reaction to crime, and a variety of other concerns.

The economic turmoil of the last few months has unfrozen the crisis voting

block, and has driven many of its members into the Democratic camp, in the hope that the Democrats might be better equipped to confront the burgeoning financial crisis. The future success of the Obama administration (and the broader Democratic party) will largely depend on the extent to which it can alleviate the anxieties felt by this block of voters.

### **The disaffected voter**

A small, unpredictable sub-set of independents can be termed “disaffected” voters. Generally, these voters once held fixed party affiliations, but have become alienated by the major party options presented during a given election. Theirs is a “pox on both of your houses” attitude, which often drives them to cast third party protest votes. Indeed, disaffected voters often constitute a major portion of third party vote totals.

Disaffected independents sometimes vote based on ideology - particularly if they feel that their original party has abandoned them on crucial issues. At other times, they respond emotionally – often to candidates who display unflattering personal traits, or else to campaigns that feature heavy amounts of negative advertising. There is a compelling case to be made that disaffected voters largely accounted for Dean Barkley’s showing in the recent senate race. As the two major party candidates fought a bitter, protracted advertising war, Barkley provided a way for disaffected voters to register their disdain.

### **The libertarian-leaning independent**

This category of independent voters developed in reaction to two prevailing political trends – a perceived lack of fiscal discipline on the left, and the rise of social conservatism on the right. While a formal Libertarian Party has existed since the early 1970s, the appeal of libertarian ideas has spread beyond the party proper. Indeed, many libertarians found a home in the GOP during the 1990s, due to their resonance with fiscal conservatism.

Elsewhere, Jesse Ventura articulated a libertarian ethos early on in his 1998 gubernatorial campaign, and characterized himself as a “fiscal conservative and social liberal” throughout that contest. At the time, his victory seemed to represent a breakthrough for this political philosophy, and the moment seemed ripe for a broader political realignment to occur. Such was not the case, however, and Ventura’s Independence Party never matched its 1998 electoral success.

On the national stage, the Libertarian Party has provided a reliable voting option for libertarian-leaning independents. This year, expectations were high that the Libertarian presidential ticket would benefit from high levels of dissatisfaction among fiscally conservative Republicans. However, those votes did not materialize, and the Libertarian Party captured less than one percent of the presidential vote.

### **The progressive independent**

Since the 1960s, the Democratic Party has undergone a transformation at the hands of progressive activists of all stripes. At times, however, the party has not been viewed as hospitable to some progressive ideas. Such was the case during much of the 1990s, as Bill Clinton embraced free trade and other Republican policy solutions. This decade produced a distinct “progressive independent” who navigated between the Democrats, and the nascent Green Party. This inter-party migration reached its peak during the 2000 election, when Green Party candidate Ralph Nader captured enough of the progressive vote to tip the election to George W. Bush. Nader’s candidacy spoke to key issues embraced by the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, and it allowed Nader to peel some of their votes away for a cycle. At the same time, the outsider cache of Nader’s campaign brought along others, who resonated with his “none of the above” critique.

As the Bush years wore on, much of the progressive left chose to forego third party politics, and re-integrated into the Democratic Party. As progressives re-captured the party machinery, the “progressive independent” brand lost much of its luster. However, it is not inconceivable that progressives could once again splinter off - particularly if the Obama administration fails to gain traction on issues central to them, such as NAFTA renegotiation or renewable energy policy.

### **The future of the independent voter**

This year, anecdotal evidence indicates that independents broke for Obama in significant numbers, largely over economic concerns, but also in resonance with his compelling historical moment. During the 2008 presidential race, third party candidates had a difficult time positioning themselves vis-à-vis their major party competition, and were unable to attract independents in meaningful numbers. Given the prevailing political conditions, it is notable that this has occurred. Over the past two years, the Republican brand has been critically damaged in the eyes of much of the voting public. Normally, this might drive disaffected Republicans and

libertarian-leaning independents toward third parties, as a way to avoid supporting the Democratic presidential nominee. However, Barack Obama was quite successful in adopting the rhetoric of change, and his promises of political transformation provided a way for many independents to channel their dissatisfaction without resorting to third party protest votes.

The future of the independent voter now depends largely on how the two major parties choose to proceed. If, for instance, Sarah Palin captures the center of gravity within the Republican Party, Republicans may lose libertarian-leaning independents (and some libertarian-leaning Republicans) for the foreseeable future. If the economy does not turn within the next two years, the reliably transient crisis voters will drift away from the Democrats. Given the vast set of challenges that the nation now faces, it is certain that President-elect Obama will disappoint some segments of his electoral coalition as he begins to implement policies to address these problems. Stumbles by the Democrats could put independent voters back in play, or else create conditions in which third party candidates could recapture segments of the electorate in 2010.

Throughout our history, independent voting has been strongest during the disintegration of older political regimes. The emergence of a sizeable independent voting block has often foreshadowed a paradigm shift in national politics, and has occasionally signaled the demise of a major party. The electoral chaos of the mid-1800s provides us with a prime example. At that time, voters peeled away from the Whig Party into several fractious voting blocks, and the discord of that era ultimately laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Republican Party.

While some have suggested that the 2008 election signaled a fundamental realignment of American politics, the relatively close popular vote totals indicate that the traditional paradigm still remains in place - at least for the moment. Over the next few years, the behavior of independent voters will provide one indicator of when - and if - such a re-alignment might fully take hold.

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