

## Declaring Independence

### *The Beginning of the End of the Two-Party System*

by Douglas E. Schoen

Random House, 240 pp.

Declarations about political independence are a dime a dozen these days, including from some pretty lofty places. Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* opined that an independent presidential candidate “might be able to drive a bus right up the middle of the U.S. political scene today – lose the far left and the far right – and still maybe, just maybe, win a three-way election.” Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve System, observed “a vast untended center from which a well-financed independent presidential candidate is likely to emerge in 2008 or, if not then, in 2012.”

Douglas Schoen, a top tier political consultant (Bill Clinton, Jon Corzine, Mike Bloomberg), also projected the viability of an independent presidential bid in 2008 in his book *Declaring Independence: The Beginning of the End of the Two-Party System*. But unlike the pop prognosticators, he understands this is not a top-down phenomenon. Schoen is decidedly different from those who perceive us independents (40% of the country) as doing nothing but waiting for a billionaire savior. He has serious respect for independent voters and for those trying to shape a viable independent political movement into a force for progressive, post-partisan change.

Schoen has worked with and learned from the independent movement. He reports on real independents who are neither famous nor rich; real organizations without sanction or money from major party operatives or foundations; and real fights for political reforms that explicitly empower independents. “The networks of independent organizers already in place,” he writes, “would surprise most people, especially those who are confirmed Republicans and Democrats.”

Schoen takes pains to document the work of Independent Texans, the New Hampshire Committee for an Independent Voice, the Independence Party of South Carolina, *IndependentVoice.org* in California, the Minnesota Independence Party and others working on the ground to leverage the power of independents. He presents the work of Rock the Debates, a coalition of independents and third

party leaders, hammering at the restrictive nature of presidential debates and says bluntly: “The Commission on Presidential Debates will have to revise its playbook.” Schoen recognizes that there is a real independent political movement, complete with its own players, its own paradigms, successes, failures, and language.

The book’s only “wrong note” is the notion that independents are centrists. Schoen argues that America is “fundamentally a nation of moderates who want nonpartisan solutions to serious problems.” Not so. We are a nation of nonpartisans who want pragmatic solutions to serious problems.

A non-centrist approach to independent organizing, mapped out by political strategist Fred Newman, has provided the philosophical and practical framework for much of the on-the-ground organizing Schoen documents. Newman has observed that a people who achieved their independence by fighting a revolutionary war and then a bloody civil war to preserve the union and end slavery can hardly be called a “nation of moderates.” And his concept that the left/center/right paradigm is obsolete is popular among independent activists.

Ultimately, Schoen’s *Declaring Independence* rests on an important insight: “The level of dissatisfaction impacts directly and immediately on the overall functioning and, indeed, legitimacy of our system of government.” In this he may turn out to be prescient. Independents participated in record numbers to maximum effect in the presidential season, not as centrists, but as anti-establishmentarians. They chose the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees and will choose the winner in November. The disaffected made themselves stakeholders in this election and as the organized networks of independents grow, they will be in a position to demand more from those whose political fortunes they made. Schoen grasps this new political reality more than most. That alone makes this intriguing palm-sized book well worth the read. NEO

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