



Who Is The Independent Voter?

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Panel Discussion Hosted by the Arizona Citizens Clean Election Commission
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Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's discussion of "Who is Arizona's Independent Voter?" This could not be a more timely or important question to explore. I have been an organizer and leader in the independent movement since the early 1980's, and currently serve as the Vice President for National Development with Independent Voting, the largest network of independent voters in the country.

I want to thank and commend the Citizens Clean Elections Commission and the Morrison Institute for conducting this study on independent voters. This report – apparently the first of its kind--comes at a moment when 45% of the American electorate and 37% of voters in Arizona are independent. Understanding this emerging constituency and grappling with issues of how to organize independents is, in my opinion, the most important issue on the political agenda today.

I am by no means a political "analyst" or pollster. I am an activist, primarily an organizer and trainer of independent voters. I bring you a report from the field— if you will—that I hope will shed further light on the question of who are independent voters—here in Arizona and across the country.

Last year I worked with independent organizations and activists in over a dozen states who participated in the VOTING RIGHTS ARE PRIMARY campaign. Independents were protesting the fact that so many primaries are closed or restricted, depriving them of the right to vote. Their actions were covered in print, radio and television outlets as they staged protests and informational pickets outside polling places. Sometimes those protests were one person standing with dignity and a sign saying “Free my Voice, Unpartisan my Vote” as Natesha Oliver did in Kansas City, MO. Sometimes it was scores of independents in front of the State Capitol in Ohio or on the streets of Harlem with signs saying “1st Class Taxpayers, 2nd Class Voters”, or conducting an informational exit poll to inform fellow Americans as Jenn Bullock, the leader of Independent Pennsylvanians did with her team carrying signs saying, “I can’t vote today, ask me why.” They were all making a simple point, **no American should be forced to join a political party in order to cast a meaningful vote.**

I was very heartened to read in today’s report that across the board, Democrats, Republicans and Independents want to see independents organize. I think we all recognize that independents could be the force for positive structural change in AZ and the country. What kinds of changes? How about nonpartisan elections, redistricting reforms and campaign finance reforms that focus on disclosure and incentivize small donors. What we are seeing is the transformation of what has been a “good government” movement into a voter empowerment movement.

The ASU Morrison Institute Study did something very important in the focus groups with independents. They asked them why they were independent. Such a simple question, but one that has been missing from all the national polling. Independent Voting’s local affiliate here, Independent Voters for Arizona, has done some grassroots surveys across the state on why people register independent. Here are their top three reasons:

- I want to be able to vote for the best candidate, no matter what party they represent.
- I want to vote, but I don’t want any party telling me who to vote for.
- I don’t like the political climate in the state, it is far too partisan.

Put another way, independents don't like parties.

The release of today's report also raises important methodological questions about how to approach this new dis-alignment in American politics, where 45% of Americans now identify as independents, having left the two dominant political parties. Here in Arizona, this is the largest community of voters.

All too often the political professionals want to negate the dis-alignment, explaining it away by categorizing independents as "leaners" toward one party or the other; or one ideology or the other and, therefore, not genuinely independent.

If you look at independents through the traditional lens of our dominant political culture—ideology and party affinity—then that's what you'll see, what you will find. But I think if you only apply that lens, you can miss some of the most essential features of what independents are motivated by and searching for.

In the ASU Morrison Institute study, independents were asked to place themselves on the political spectrum from liberal to conservative. The vast majority of independents (73.3%) placed themselves as moderates. Yet in the focus groups one theme that emerged among the majority of independents was that they did not see themselves as "middle of the road", and disagreed with the term itself. I think if you want to come closer to understanding how independents view themselves, you would have to ask them if they accept the idea of defining themselves along ideological lines at all.

In our experience organizing independents from Maine to Alabama; from New York to North Carolina, from Florida to Utah---independents cannot be adequately understood by applying the dominant paradigm of partisan politics.

After all, they are making a determined move away from that very paradigm—a move away from the political parties and a move away from the traditional pillars—partisanship and ideology. Independents are looking for new ways to move beyond them, to get out of the partisan stalemates and to create new coalitions and new ways to come together to deal with our most pressing issues. These are Americans from diverse backgrounds, over 50% of Hispanic voters in AZ

are now choosing to be independents. Many Americans are leaving the major parties, or would if they didn't forfeit rights by doing so.

I believe that how Americans are choosing to describe themselves might turn out to be more important than who they vote for in any given election cycle where the choices are profoundly limited. We are living in a time of intense political crisis, where the political parties are moving further and further away from the American people, from our young people, from us all. Government at the state and federal level is more and more dysfunctional, in many states independents are completely locked out of the primaries, or as in AZ we are marginalized and most independents do not know they can vote in party primaries. We have a system of increasingly noncompetitive elections. Nationally, only 13% of next year's Congressional elections are predicted to be competitive. We have widespread gerrymandering where elected officials pick the voters rather than what was intended in our democracy for the voters to pick them!

In Arizona when the voters adopted a nonpartisan redistricting commission, the partisan state legislature took them to court, finally landing in the Supreme Court where in a 5 to 4 decision, the Court upheld the right of the voters to set the manner of redistricting. In their decision, the majority wrote, "...the legislature's responsiveness to the people its members represent is hardly heightened when the representative body can be confident that what it does will not be overturned or modified by the voters themselves."

Much has been made of the lower voter turn out among independents, both in the primaries and general elections. Today's study comments on this and makes note of the fact that many independents do not even know they can vote in the primaries. I think there is also another factor at work here. When Jackie Salit, the President of Independent Voting was on "Arizona Horizon" this June, Ted Simons complained about the lack of participation by independents. Jackie took issue with this and pointed out that asking independents to vote in a thoroughly partisan system is like asking someone who is allergic to peanut butter to come over and have a peanut butter sandwich.

The ASU Morrison Institute study concludes that “the truth is, there is no such thing [as an independent voter] because there is no “typical” voter.” I would agree that there is no “typical” independent voter from an ideological or party affinity point of view—however far from being fragmented, there is a highly unified perspective among independent voters.

They agree that there is a decline in our democracy and a need to rebalance the power dynamic between the political parties and the American people. In our national grassroots polling of independents (Independent Voting has a national phone bank talking to independents across the country 52 weeks a year) we see this every day:

- In NH, 95% of independents want the same voting rights as all other voters and 75% of independents in our poll want the Presidential candidates to be asked how they plan to address rising partisanship and dysfunction in Washington.
- In SD, 70% of independents feel that while the Republicans and Democrats go back and forth, it does not matter who is in charge, nothing changes and our country continues to stagnate. And 71% feel until we change our election system so that ordinary voters have more power, both parties will continue to represent the rich and powerful.
- In AZ, 89% of independents feel that the parties should have to pay for any primaries in which independents are excluded. And 96% of the independents we have spoken with are adding their name to a letter to the Democratic and Republican state chairs urging them to open the March Presidential Primaries to independents.

Independent voters are not just like other voters, who just happened to not be a Democrat or a Republican. Becoming an independent is an act of defiance of the traditional political arrangement. It is a challenge to the status quo.

And it is an appealing challenge, at least that is what today’s study reveals. Nearly one half of Democrats (48.9%) and Republicans (46.8%) who were polled would “consider changing their party registration to independent.” No wonder the

political parties oppose reforms like Top Two Nonpartisan Elections. They prefer to have a captive base.

Let me leave you with what my thirty years of organizing in the community of independents has taught me. What do Independents want? It comes down to the three R's:

- RESPECT—all Americans should have equal voting rights
- RECOGNITION—as independents
- REFORM—of the political process to empower all the voters

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today in this important conversation and exploration.