

The Saturated Center

Independent Politics in a “What’s Next?” World

Jacqueline Salit

Republican and Democratic party leaders are studying their political fortunes. The Democrats took the House and the Senate. The proverbial political pendulum has swung, but where? After all, the Democratic Party won control of Congress with an anti-war message, but arguably the party remains a supporter of the Iraq war – a critic of President Bush’s execution of it, not his decision to conduct it.

Howard Dean, who rose to national prominence as an outspoken opponent of the war only to find himself cast aside by party elders, has presumably been vindicated. But the vision and direction of the Democratic Party remain murky. This much is known, however: It was independents, protesting early on against the rush to war, fueling the surge for Dean’s dark horse 2004 presidential campaign, and speaking out against the bipartisan consensus backing the Bush policy, who made the war in Iraq the defining issue. The Democratic Party was compelled to follow their lead, building its outreach to independent voters in the process. By the time Election Day rolled around, with 65% of independent voters opposing the war in Iraq, independents had become the deciding factor: They voted two-to-one in support of Democratic congressional candidates.

The Republican majority inaugurated with Ronald Reagan’s presidential win in 1980, which climaxed (perhaps) in the George W. Bush trifecta (GOP control of all three branches of government) was the product of a visceral reaction to the limits reached by New Deal liberalism. Unresolved racial conflicts, the advent of globalization, the collapse of communism, the marginalization of organized labor, intractable poverty, and the long-term detrimental effect of identity politics frayed the traditional liberal alliance beyond repair. Clintonism (per Bill and perhaps soon enough per Hillary) was as much an effort to bury the moribund liberal coalition as it was to salvage it. The Democrats had to “do in” their principles to save the party. That strategy cost them the White House in 2004.

The Republicans, for their part, are profoundly weakened by the neo-cons’ disastrous Iraq policy, together with ethics scandals revealing – surprise, surprise! – that men who are in a position to take bribes often do and that men (gay or straight) who are in a position to use their power for sex often do that, too.

But America’s citizens grew uneasy with the direction of the country, and none more so than America’s independents. It was independents who established that the war was the issue; the Democrats co-opted

that issue and made it work for them. But since the Democrats and Republicans share power – even when one or the other dominates – can the newly energized Democrats connect in any lasting way with the majority of Americans who feel that they themselves have become outsiders in their own government, no matter who controls Congress or the White House?

II

Peggy Noonan, a former Reagan speechwriter and now contributing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, surveyed the national political scene in June when she considered the question of whether America might be ready for a third party. (See p. 9.) Challenging a pervasive notion that should a third party emerge it will be located at the middle because the two parties are ideologically polarized at the left and at the right, Noonan wrote in “Third Time”:

The problem is not that the two parties are polarized. In many ways they’re closer than ever. The problem is that the parties in Washington, and the people on the ground in America, are polarized. There is an increasing and profound distance between the rulers of both parties and the people – between the elites and the grunts, between those in power and those who put them there.

In other words, Noonan sees the divide as vertical, not horizontal:

I don’t see any potential party, or potential candidate, on the scene right now who can harness the disaffection of growing portions of the electorate. But a new group or entity that could define the problem correctly – that sees the big divide not as something between the parties but between America’s ruling elite and its people – would be making long strides in putting third party ideas in play in America again.

Noonan’s column was occasioned by the launch of Unity ’08, an Internet-based blueprint for an intervention into the 2008 presidential election with a bipartisan ticket molded out of the presidential primaries in early ’08. (Think John McCain/John Edwards running as bipartisan independents after Bill Frist clinches the Republican nomination and Hillary swamps her competitors in the Democratic primaries.)

Observing that the “partisanship has gotten deeper as *less* separates the governing parties in Washington,” Noonan concludes that if a political strategy focuses on reconstructing a “center” it will skip over the deeper ills afflicting American political life.

Some of the talk in and around independent politics this year has pronounced partisan polarization to be “the problem” and bipartisan unification to be the solution. *We have to find ways to bring the parties together* is the mantra. Alternatively, *We have to go beyond parties* à la Joseph Lieberman’s faux independent campaign, where the need to go beyond parties became Lieberman’s winning theme only after he lost his own party’s primary.

As the unpopularity of the two-party system grows, voters are becoming open to, even anxious for, alternatives. A new *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll showed that 42% of voters called themselves “independents,” while 28% self-identified as Democrats and 24% as Republicans. Republican (and former Perot) pollster Frank Luntz recently found that 81% of voters would consider backing an independent presidential candidate “who is not tied to the Washington political establishment but can point to a record of results. He (or she) will say ‘no’ to the lobbyists and special interests but still have the financial means to run a serious national campaign.” Luntz goes on to assert that there’s “only one person in America who fits the bill: New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg.” (See p. 13.)

Bloomberg has some unique characteristics, not least that his election (twice) and his ability to govern in a nonpartisan, anti-special interest way, was facilitated by a coalition catalyzed by independents and the Independence Party, whose voters provided his margin of victory in 2001. The Bloomberg Revolution, as his 2005 reelection victory has come to be known, forged a new coalition of independents, reform-minded Republicans, non-sectarian Democrats, and black and Latino voters looking for a way out of their blank-check contract with the Democratic Party. An unprecedented 47% of black voters broke with the Democrats to back Bloomberg and 30% of Latinos joined them, even with a Latino, Fernando Ferrer, heading the Democratic ticket against Bloomberg.

Far from unifying or “transcending” the major parties, as current conventional wisdom suggests is the recipe for a viable independent presidential campaign, in the New York scenario Bloomberg took over the Republican Party (his wealth and the fact that the Republicans were near-dead in the city were key fac-

tors here), allied with the Independence Party, and *split* the Democratic Party. Projecting Bloomberg's trans-partisan popularity into a possible independent presidential run requires an accurate reading of his new coalition – with a black and independent alliance at its core – and what it produced on the ground in New York City.

III

Unlike Mike Bloomberg, Al Sharpton seems to want to run for president. Not surprisingly, however, his considerations are different. Bloomberg is an independent, a man without a national party, and that is no small part of his political appeal. Al Sharpton is a Democrat. He ran in the Democratic presidential primaries in 2004, securing a position as a nationally known progressive black leader, and in many ways supplanting Jesse Jackson as the country's preeminent living civil rights figure. Now his party is coming back into power, and with that power comes a new set of political dynamics.

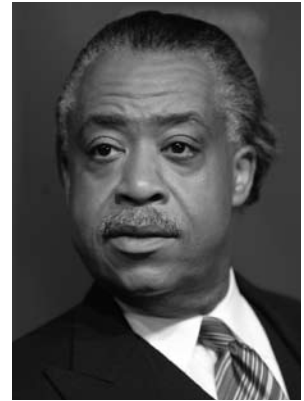
Nationally, Illinois Senator Barack Obama has become the Democrats' biggest celebrity other than the Clintons, with *Time* magazine's cover promoting his bona fides to be the nation's first black president and Obama himself openly contemplating a run. Harold Ford Jr.'s high-profile Senate run in Tennessee elevates his standing as a national black political figure, even though he did not win. Obama and Ford do not come from the left and civil rights traditions that shaped, at least in part, Sharpton's evolution as a political figure. And even black establishment figures who do trace their political lineages back to those traditions – like Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel and Detroit Congressman John Conyers, now ascending to the chairmanships of the House Ways and Means and Judiciary Committees, respectively – will feel extreme pressure from the national party to weigh their words, their subpoenas, and their power carefully. No insider – white or black – wants to be perceived as hurting the Democrats' chances to take the White House in 2008. While his peers move even further inside, Sharpton is thus uniquely positioned in national Democratic politics as the progressive African American outsider.

Perhaps the delicacy of Sharpton's role is most acute in New York, his home base and a testing ground for the twists and turns of his political career. He went from street organizer to premier electoral politician in New York State, transforming himself from a much re-

viled agitator to a kind of Agitator-Without-Portfolio, whose annual celebrations honoring Dr. King draw personal appearances by Hillary Clinton, Governor-elect Eliot Spitzer, Mike Bloomberg, and numerous other notables.

Sharpton's situation is challenging here because the Democrats now taking control of New York after 12 years of Republican rule under presidential hopeful George Pataki – Spitzer and Clinton – are seeking to triangulate the party: to shore up its connection to upstate white blue collar and upscale white suburban voters while holding on to the black vote with minimal concessions to the latter. The Democrats intend to lock down control of New York for eternity, while Clinton and Spitzer, both with presidential ambitions, go in hot pursuit of the Holy Grail of national politics – crossover appeal. An independent-minded militant like Sharpton could end up a fading star in that triangulated universe.

But Sharpton has constructed his position carefully, and not without some savvy. He is cultivating his connection to independent voters and the independent movement. He joined forces with the independent-minded "blogosphere" to back Ned Lamont in the Democratic primary against Joe Lieberman in Connecticut, delivering 55% of the black vote which, together with anti-war independents, put Lamont over the top. And while Spitzer and Clinton made a play to disempower the New York City branch of the Independence Party, which elected Bloomberg and peeled 47% of the black vote away from their party's mayoral candidate (see p. 27), Sharpton stays publicly connected to America's leading black independent, Lenora Fulani. (She and Sharpton have known each other, and periodically partnered, for more than 20 years.) Fulani is a powerful figure in the New York City Independence Party and she remains a principal target of the Democrats' wrath. Sharpton recently featured Fulani (and this writer) as guests on his popular New York radio show *The Hour of Power*, where the discussion highlighted the current and future status of the Independence Party and the independent political movement.



Reverend Al Sharpton

PHOTO: PETER KRAMER/GETTY IMAGES

Sharpton grasps that the newest and most potent coalition in New York City politics is the black and independent alliance – the one that sent Mike Bloomberg to City Hall and empowered him to become the only viable independent presidential candidate in the United States of America; it is the force that may also elect New York’s next mayor when Bloomberg leaves office after 2009.

IV

Even the most attitudinally conservative commentators are conceding that there is a paradigm shift underway in American politics of unknown – even unknowable – dimensions. Two weeks before Election Day, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks opined that we are entering “The Era of What’s Next,” when traditional liberalism and traditional conservatism are being rendered obsolete. (See p. 12.) “Process will come to the fore,” says Brooks, noting: “If you look at the political landscape, identification with the Republican Party is falling but identification with the Democratic Party is not rising. Instead, there is a spike in the number of people who do not identify with either.” Of course, the political polls to which he is referring never discover those who don’t identify with “identity” at all. But that is a subject for another time.

Brooks’ chronicle of the end of traditional ideological framings is based on his recognition that America is moving onto new political terrain. The ways in which we defined ourselves (or allowed ourselves to be defined) no longer apply. Who we are as a country, as a people, is not who we were. But who and what we are becoming, politically, is up for grabs.

Fifteen years ago the distinguished psychologist and postmodernist Kenneth Gergen described the breakdown of individual identity in his landmark book *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, arguing that “both the romantic and modern beliefs about the self are falling into disuse, and the social arrangements that they support are eroding.” Gergen paints a vivid picture of how “social saturation” – the advent of a culture in which advances in technology, mass communications and transportation saturate in-

dividuals with information, experience and points of view – has changed, indeed eroded, our understanding of the human self. He believes that there is a new post-modern culture “in the making,” one in which “persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction” and “the center fails to hold.”

While Gergen’s observations were largely social and psychological, his insight about an unraveling of the center has important political consequences, too (as he himself recognizes in his later writings). American politics is in the midst of a sea change, the era of what’s next, as Brooks puts it. In that kind of “continuous construction and reconstruction,” the center cannot hold despite the frantic search for a “center,” or a place “in the middle,” by some elites who can see that the system is in serious need of repair.

One of the most glaring indicators of that breakdown is the fact that independent voters are now well more than a third, closing in on half, of the electorate. In America, all politics is colored by whether a state is blue or red, Democrat or Republican. And the end of the 2006 campaign came down to intense speculation about how the independents were going to “break.” That’s what John Kasich wanted me to tell him on Fox News’ *From the Heartland*. That’s what all the consultants and analysts were scrutinizing: *Who can get – and hold – the independents? They used to tilt right, now they’re tilting left.*

Nationally, the independents “broke” two-to-one for the Democrats. But even that statistic fails to record the more fundamental dynamic that independents defined a new political landscape and the Democrats came after them. Their aggressive push gave the Democrats the two-to-one margin. So what do independents want? A restructuring of the political process to close Noonan’s divide between “the elites and the grunts.” The independents forced both parties to close that divide on the war policy: Donald Rumsfeld has resigned and the Democrats defeated the neo-cons. Get some populist democracy in the picture, we grunts believe, and you’ll have policies that are closer to what the American people want. Then the era of what’s next will be one in which the American people, not the partisan elites, determine what kind of country we are going to be. NEO