

Things Fall Apart:

Building a Unifying Independent Movement

Our country is in tremendous turmoil now. There's constant conflict going on everywhere you turn, everywhere you look. We have a new President. He's a very mercurial person. Some think that he's a genius at political disruption of the system. Some think he's unstable. We'll find all of that out, I'm sure.

Most of the people who voted for him are still in his corner and they're waiting to see if he can deliver on the economic revitalization that he offered to and promised the American people. Most of the people who voted against him are still against him. There are lots of protests going on. People are giving expression to their thoughts and feelings, fears and concerns about a whole host of issues.

The mood in the country, no matter where you stand, is anxious. Very anxious.

And, even though these are very unusual circumstances now, it's also the case that, believe it or not, politics-as-usual is continuing to go on. The Republican Party—with Trump at the helm—is making the transition from being the opposition party to being a governing party. The Democratic Party is making the transition from being a governing party to being an opposition party because it is out of power, at least for the moment. These two transitions are very, very rocky. And the American people, with good reason, are deeply concerned about their capacity to govern.

There's a great deal of uncertainty in the country today. Maybe it's even fair to call it chaos. And one of the things that's going on, as you would expect, is that the political analysts, the media, the major parties, and the power brokers are all trying to make some kind of order out of the chaos.

For the Democrats, restoring order means finding a way to unify its populist—let's call it the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party—with its centrist more globalist wing. They need that kind of unity to put maximum pressure on the Republicans, who the Democrats hope will fail. For the White House and the Republican majority, restoring order means finding some kind of an accommodation among the different wings of the Republican Party on healthcare, on the budget, on foreign policy—at least enough of an accommodation to be able to govern—and then enough successful governing to hold their base and to keep the Democrats from gaining seats in Congress next year and, of course, the White House in 2020.



By **Jacqueline Salit**
President, IndependentVoting.org

This is a room full of independents. And I'm assuming that most of you look at all of that and you say, well, that's the two party game. It's more extreme, it's more polarized than it's been in the past. But it's still that same dynamic, that same old bipartisan power struggle that's gone on virtually since the founding of this country. It's rough, it's nasty, there are tweets, there are Executive Orders and bans and court decisions overturning Executive Orders and bans, and then there are new Executive Orders and bans. But there is a giant tug of war

that is taking place between the parties and, to some degree, between different branches of government. The implications of that tug of war are important. They're complicated, and, in some cases, perhaps even dangerous. But, if you take a step outside this state-of-play, just for a moment—and, by the way, that's who independents are, we're the people who step out, we choose to be outsiders—I think you can see that something else is happening at the same time.

The Center Cannot Hold

Today I want to share with you what I see, what I think that “something else” is, because we’re not simply living through a transition in government, as perhaps frightening or destabilizing as that is. I think we’re living through a much deeper transition in which the tools and the categories of politics—the way we conduct our democracy, the methods of self-governance that we use—are becoming obsolete. The old methods and the old categories, the old standard practices are losing ground. Even while they govern the state of affairs, they are becoming obsolete. They are losing the trust of the American people. To quote the poet William Butler Yeats and the novelist Chinua Achebe, “Things fall apart. The center cannot hold.” That is the moment we are living through.

The 2016 presidential election season was horrible. I think we’d agree on that, independent of the outcome. But, make no mistake. All of the things that happened in the presidential season were signs that the system of politics that we use—a party-based system, a system based on ideology, a primary system that selects certain voters and locks out others, a debate system that keeps independent voices from being heard, media coverage that is hugely partisan, and then the “bipartisan,” if you want to call it that, policymaking process that follows—that whole package is not working for the American people. The independent movement, which is another name for America’s democracy movement, came into existence to respond to that breakdown. That’s important to see. The independent movement was born not simply to offer other choices within the existing partisan system. It emerged because the existing system is losing its capacity to work for and on behalf of the American people. Our democracy is corrupted. The system is unraveling.

“People are tired of settling. And we know this from the history of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights movements—if you’re tired of settling, you start to look to the systemic changes needed to give the American people the power to chart our own course.”

Is Unraveling Good or Bad?

In my experience I find that when you start to talk about how the system is unraveling, right away people want to know, is that good or is that bad? Is that a good thing that the system is unraveling or is it a bad thing that it’s unraveling? An interesting question. I don’t think there is an easy answer to that question because I believe the answer relies largely on what the American people do, and let me be a little more particular here—on what the

independent movement does in response to that unraveling. That’s our question.

When there is turmoil and change and transition, when things are in chaos, it can be confusing. We watch the news and read the newspapers and it’s confusing. But the funny thing about transitional times like these is that, even though they’re confusing, it’s sometimes the case that you *can actually see things* that are harder to see when the situation is more stable.

One of the things that more and more Americans are now able to see is that the inability of our political process as

currently constituted, the inability to deliver a prosperous and creative and happy and safe life to the American people means that we now, as a movement, and as a country, have to turn our attention to the process itself. This is no longer a side issue, it’s no longer an auxiliary concern, it’s no longer the thing that you say, “Oh, that would be nice, but we really have to focus on” whatever. I think that the unraveling and the chaos in American politics is creating a space in which it’s possible, in some ways perhaps for the first time, to introduce, to stimulate, and to develop a new kind of democracy for our country.

That is hard to do, for a lot of reasons. There’s a lot of resistance, of course. The barriers to that are

substantially entrenched. But there's another reason, too, which is that even the protests against the system—as we saw in the last presidential election—are, to a great degree, reabsorbed into the very institutions that people are rising up against. That's a complicated and difficult situation for the American people to be in. It's something that, as independents, we have to give a tremendous amount of energy to, how to lead and how to teach people, what to show people, in the face of that situation.

Trump and Sanders

There were two very explosive campaigns in last year's presidential election—the candidacy of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. One of them, as we know, won the White House. The other, Bernie Sanders, nearly toppled the most powerful political dynasty in the Democratic Party—the Clinton dynasty. Both of those campaigns reached out to the American people with an appeal about how the system itself is rigged. The story that those campaigns told was that America operates under a political, economic and social arrangement in which there are insiders and outsiders, there are elites and there's everyone else. And judging by the response to both of these campaigns, I think it's fair to say that the American people are feeling very deeply that this is the case. The system is rigged, and it ain't just a slogan. It's the painful, hurtful, devastating reality of daily life for so many people in this country. The coal miner in West Virginia and the mother of three in Detroit and the student starting out in Arizona—along with millions and millions and millions of fellow Americans—live life with the growing recognition that the system is rigged.

The numbers in the election ended up delivering the Electoral College to Donald Trump. Bernie Sanders, many believe, was blocked by the closed primary rules and superdelegate rules of his own party. The young people who wanted to vote for Bernie Sanders

in the Democratic Party primary for president but who were registered to vote as independents found themselves turned away from the ballot box in state after state after state—and, by the way, 48% of millennials in the United States of America are independents. Many of them went to the polls in closed primary states and said “I'd like to vote today in the presidential primary.” Many were there to vote for Bernie Sanders, and they were told “You can't vote today.” They said, “Oh, well, why? It's Election Day, isn't it?” They were told by election officials appointed by local Democratic and Republican Party county leaders, “Oh, you can't vote because you're an independent.” “Oh,” they said, “I thought I was an American.” “Oh, yes, but you have to be registered in the Democratic Party in order to be able to vote today.” “OK. Give me a pen and a form and I'll register into your party today because I'd like to be able to vote for Senator Sanders.” “Oh, no, sorry,” they were told. In New York, they were told, “You had to have done that five months ago.” “Oh,” said the voters, “Bernie Sanders wasn't even a candidate five months ago!” “Sorry, sorry,” they said. “That's the way the system works.”

“We seek to link independents together, without a party, to provide an identity, a voice, a platform, to give that 44% the capacity to be a force, a new kind of force in American political life.”

It's now four months since the election. And, much of the raw outcry that the system is rigged has been eclipsed or channeled into Republican Party and Democratic Party warfare. Whatever you think of Trump—I'm not a fan, by the way, but I'm also not a hater. I believe in

the signs you see at anti-Trump rallies that say, “Love Trumps Hate,” I believe in love. But, whatever you think of Trump and whatever you think of Sanders, I ask you please, please, please don't forget that it was the American people who rose up to push them forward. Whether Trump voters will be happy with what Trump delivers remains to be seen. Will the budget cuts proposed by the President cause greater pain to those who voted for him in an effort to ease the pain? Will that massive jobs and infrastructure program advocated by both Trump and Sanders actually happen? We don't know.

And, will Sanders voters be happy with the new leadership of the Democratic National Committee and its strategies? After all, it was the DNC that conspired to block Sanders' candidacy. And, after that whole uproar about independents being locked out of the presidential primaries, the DNC—in spite of massive lobbying by independents and independent-minded Democrats and Republicans from all across the country—decided to abstain on the question of determining whether future presidential primaries should be open. They decided to “leave the matter to the states.” Here's the thing. If you look at the experience of 2016, you see that Americans from many different walks of life delivered a resounding message. The system is rigged. The political parties do not want to respond to that message. But the independent movement does.

The Fulani Factor

Later today you'll be hearing from my very dear friend and longtime colleague, Dr. Lenora Fulani, who ran for President in these United States in 1988 and 1992 and became the first woman and first African American to achieve ballot status in all 50 states. I had the privilege and honor of being her deputy campaign manager, and I handled communications for her. In that campaign, almost 30 years ago, Dr. Fulani's message was very simple. Her message was “The system is rigged.” It's rigged economically. It's rigged politically. It's rigged against African Americans. Black America is taken for granted. Independents are locked out. The system is rigged.

At that time, very few people heard her message. For one thing, she was locked out of the presidential debates. And we began litigation on this issue in 1987, and which continues to this day (and we're going to be hearing about that in some detail later). But when Dr. Fulani joined forces with the Perot movement five years later, a lot of people started to notice. They said, “Wow, here's a new coalition—a Black and Independent Alliance, that's saying, this system is rigged, and we're going to join forces to do something about that.”

The fear of this alliance runs very, very deep within the power structure in the United States of America, and within the Democratic Party in particular,

now that President Obama has left office. People are saying, “What binds Black America to the Democratic Party now?” Many say it's the fear of Republicans. But even with that fear, in this last election, when the Clintons were so certain they had every African American voter in their pocket, over a million black voters didn't come out to vote in some of those key swing states. People are tired of settling. And we know this from the history of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights movements—if you're tired of settling, you start to look to the systemic changes needed to give the American people the power to chart our own course.

Political Divisions

I want to say a few words about the political divisions in the country today. We all know that poll after poll shows how the country is divided over the issues. People have different opinions. On trade. On the environment. On guns. On abortion. On criminal justice. On immigration. On education. Those differences are real. But, the tragic thing—actually, more than tragic, it's criminal—is that the parties make it their business to exploit the differences that the American people have. They do it to gain political advantage, no matter the cost to the social fabric of this country.

But there's even another feature of this manipulation of the political differences in our country that I find very, very disturbing. And that is that if you keep people tangled up in partisan crossfire, it covers over the deeper fact that the whole institutional framework is falling apart. It covers over the fact that the center cannot hold. And it covers over the fact that we are all living through a moment in history where the very tools of self-governance are beginning to fail.

Things are falling apart, even if we have different experiences of that, depending on who we are. The problem is that as things fall apart, as we continue to lose our country, which is what is happening today, in my opinion, the American people are being denied the power that is rightfully ours to put our society back together again on a humanistic and developmental course. We have to have a healthy and vigorous and challenging democratic society to be

able to do that. If we're all caught up in the divide—and the parties now thrive on that—we can't see that this transition is happening to everyone in our country. And I am saying this, not as a moral appeal, or an idealistic appeal, that says: oh, it's better if we're all together. That's not what I'm talking about, although I do happen to believe that is better. No, I'm making a very, very, very practical point here. We have to find a way to go through this transition together and to come out of it expanding and enriching our democracy or we will not come out of it at all. This, I believe, is a basic truth, a truth about what is happening in our country today.

The Independent Movement

So, let me wrap up here by saying some things about independent voters, the independent movement and the fight for nonpartisan structural reform, which are completely, entirely interconnected and intertwined. The commentator David Brooks—I'm sure some of you read him, he writes for the *New York Times* and he's on the *PBS NewsHour* and other media sources, and I like some of the stuff he says, some of it I don't. He recently has written, and he's been saying on TV, "The parties are in chaos!" And it's true. It's true. And he gives various accountings of this, about what's happening in the different camps in the Republican Party and how difficult it is to sell globalism to the Sanders populists, how the Democrats don't really have a clear position on globalism, and on and on and on. And it's all true, but, it surprises me a little bit that it doesn't occur to him, nor to the hundreds of other commentators who are out there, who are proffering very similar analyses, it doesn't occur to him that the chaos in the parties might have something to do with the fact that 44% of the American electorate are now independents. It doesn't occur to them that this has anything to do with the chaos. There was a pre-election poll that was done that asked respondents what they think the great divide is in the American public. 67% of the respondents said that they did not believe that the great divide in our country was

between Democrats and Republicans but rather it was a divide between those at the bottom and those at the top, those who were trying to lead a regular and happy and decent life in this country and those who control the levers of power in the United States of America. That is the great divide.

Which brings us to the independent movement. The independent movement is growing. The political reform movement is growing. That's what brings many of you into the room today. We seek to link independents together, without a party, to provide an identity, a voice, a platform, to give that 44% the capacity to be a force, a new kind of force in American political life. We seek to end all forms of voter suppression. No one should be required to join a political organization as a condition for casting a meaningful vote in an American election. That just shouldn't be. We want open primaries. We want redistricting reform. We want ballot access reform. Ranked choice voting. Initiative and Referendum. Campaign finance reform. Electoral College reform. We gotta reform that goddamn Federal Election Commission. But

these are not—in and of themselves—the solutions to America's crisis. They are the building blocks for expanding and retooling our democracy. They actually set a new stage where voters and activists and communities and interest groups can come together to do different things to make us whole as a nation. We need that growth and expansion because it's actually in that activity that people become more sophisticated, they become more engaged, they become more aware, they become more

empowered. We need to make room in our political process for interconnections that can't happen under the partisan system. We need to make room for connections between the overtaxed and the underserved. We need to open a pathway between those focused on income inequality and those who day by day by day live life and fight the hardships of poverty. We need to make room for the Trump voter and the Sanders voter to join forces. That cannot

"The activity of working together to rebuild our democracy, that's the activity that breaks down the walls that divide us."

happen in the partisan system. We need a space for the Committee for Independent Community Action and New Yorkers for Political Reform to join forces to make the necessary changes in our city so that through a democratic process everyone can have a decent home, and everyone can live a decent life. We need a revitalized democracy to make those kinds of connections. The activity of working together to rebuild our democracy, that's the *activity* that breaks down the walls that divide us.

Party Control

The parties want less democracy. They are demanding greater control over the political process. That's their reaction to the 2016 presidential election. They want to control everything. There are probably ten state legislatures right now that are contemplating bills to restrict the rights of independent voters, to make voting more difficult for all kinds of communities. There are four or five court cases that are underway or were just wrapped up that, again, have to do with the rights of independents to fully participate in the political process. The parties are invested in control. They are invested in controlling nominations, controlling outcomes, controlling districts. Controlling the way the districts they want to control are designed. They control the debates, but most of all—and I know you know this—the cardinal rule for them is they want to control the voters. They want to keep voters in line, and keep them angry at each other and fearful of the other side. And, for goodness sakes, keep those independents on the sidelines!

It's so interesting to me where the resistance to this comes from. Most recently, I read an article that ran in *The Atlantic Monthly*, which is a progressive magazine. It argues that all of you who are involved in political reform and in trying to open up the process should stop. You should stop. Because the situation has become so chaotic that we need to hold onto those institutions which have the capacity to control our society—namely the parties. So whoever is out there doing things to try to reform the political process, and transfer power from the parties to the voter, “Stand down! Stand down! Because now we need those parties more than ever.” It's just amazing to me that this kind of authoritarianism is coming

from a progressive news source. By the way, this is not *Breitbart News*, the mouthpiece of the Alt Right, so-called. This is the *Atlantic Monthly*, a mouthpiece of liberal and progressive thinking in the United States of America. Let me just inform them today. We will not stand down.

Beyond Issues

I was speaking with a friend last week who is a founder of a major grassroots organization with millions of members that is allied around progressive causes and allied, to some degree, with the Democratic Party. She and I have been friends and colleagues for about five or six years. And, like many people, she's been very active on a host of issues, from women's rights to immigration issues to daycare to job creation to healthcare, and so forth. She's somebody who has tried to create environments where people who have different positions on these issues can have productive conversations. And she and I have been having talks along these lines for a number of years. But in this conversation we had last week, she said to me, “Jackie, you know, I think we're in a different time now.” She said, “We can't just keep debating the issues and having those arguments. We all know the arguments. We know our side's arguments and we know the other side's arguments. We could recite them chapter, book and verse.” She said, “We can't keep having that conversation, we have to do something other than that. We have to find a way to do something different, to move to a different place and have different kinds of conversations about different things.” And then she said to me, “You know, this stuff you've been working on for all these years, political reform and organizing independent voters?” She said, “This is your time. This is your time.” I was very moved by this, but I have to tell you, it was very sobering, really. I took it very, very seriously because I think with the fact that it is our time comes a great deal of responsibility. We have to really face up to that and deal with that, perhaps in some new ways.

Part of what that means is that we have to deploy some of the capabilities that we independents uniquely have. Thom Reilly from Arizona State

University's Morrison Institute was talking about this in the focus group he and Cathy Stewart just led. He talked about the ways that independents interact with all kinds of people that is very particular to independents and is a way of breaking down some of these cultural barriers. I do think that independents have some very, very unique and important capacities that we need to bring to bear now. We are more accepting of "otherness." We don't demand that people be like us to talk to them. I think we're also more accepting of uncertainty, and of chaos, and of the breakdown of the old order. That doesn't mean that "anything goes." But I think that it does mean that we understand that the old order has to break down to make room for the new. And we can't be afraid of that.

A Unified Movement

The times that we're living in are an environment for growth. But for the independent movement to grow, to become more powerful, including perhaps powerful enough to assemble a competitive independent presidential bid in 2020, we have to *help* each other to grow. We have to help each other to gain influence. We have to change the rules of

the game together. There are many, many different and disparate forces in this room today. And I'm very, very happy about that. But I want to push the envelope on it a little bit. It's not enough just to be here together for this day at this conference. We have to create ways to work together, to impact together. We need a unified independent movement, and I think the way that we get there, the way we unify our movement, is to work together to create the tools that the American people need to unify our country.

The authoritarian power of the parties is dead set against that. They are determined to prevent that from happening. We have to take responsibility for helping the American people go through this time of change and transition, to resist the pull to fall back on the old ways and the old institutions, the old divides. I think we are doing that. I think that is so beautiful. Something that is so touching to me is that at a time of tremendous ugliness and discord, there are beautiful things that are being created and that are growing in our country. And when I look out at all of you, I feel that so very deeply. So, let me close here and just say that I so deeply appreciate all of what you do. I look forward to all of what we're going to do. Hey, let's build a better world together. Thank you.



The above statement was presented by Jacqueline Salit as a keynote address at Independent Voting's biennial National Conference of Independents, "Crossroads for an Independent America," on March 18, 2017 at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City.