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independentvoting.org The Hub

April 26, 2024

SPECIAL EDITION

Interview with Jacqueline Salit, President of Independent Voting

The following is a special Interview by The Hub with Jackie Salit following No Labels' decision to end its 2024 Presidential Campaign

The Hub: A year ago, No Labels announced a plan to create independent lines on the 2024 presidential ballot in all 50 states for a yet-to-be-named Unity ticket. This was billed as an “insurance policy” in the event both major parties nominated presidential candidates that most Americans didn’t want. The announcement, coupled with polling and predictions of a path to victory with 270 electoral college votes, immediately met with backlash inside the Beltway, especially in Democratic Party and anti-Trump Republican circles. Meanwhile, the search for a presidential ticket foundered. No Unity candidates of stature would sign on to run. Then, on April 4, No Labels announced it would not run a ticket in the 2024 presidential election. Many in our network have been asking about this. Jackie, your thoughts about what happened and why they abandoned their plan?



Salit: I'm going to give you my best answer, but I'm not an insider at No Labels. I can only share what it looks like to me from the outside. But maybe that's useful since the No Labels drama rests on a plot line where political insiders decided to go "outside," and then suddenly there was a giant target on their back.

The Hub: Sounds like quite a drama!

Salit: Drama, indeed. So, there are a few levels here. There's the public presentation of what the No Labels objective was. And then there's a subtext. As you know, I'm a playwright and a would-be novelist. Subtext is something you pay a lot of attention to. At least on the stage and on the page.

I'll start with the text. No Labels was launched in 2010 to stand up a bipartisan governing coalition. This Problem Solvers Caucus in Congress would draw ideas and solutions and compromises from across the spectrum without regard to party. Then, coming into the 2024 presidential cycle, a circle of No Labels leaders and donors saw that the two legacy major parties were likely to nominate Trump and Biden, a re-match that most Americans did not want. So, they set out to offer an alternative, a Unity ticket, a sensible Republican, and a sensible Democrat, that could run up the center of American politics and win the election. They were not running to build a new party, or any kind of new institution, they just wanted to fix the old ones, a kind of shock-therapy for the two parties. They raised a lot of money, in cash and in pledges, and began executing the plan, acquiring ballot lines on which they could place this imagined, if not imaginary (*as it turned out*), ticket on the ballot. So that's the text.

The subtext is more nuanced. Here's the subtext. *Trump, under no circumstances. Biden, maybe, but only if he turns away from the left wing of the Democratic Party. Put another (subtextual) way, We don't want Trump, he's too crazy and even dangerous, but we're worried about the left-wing of the Democratic Party. From Bernie, to Warren, to AOC, etc. They're socialists, but they're popular and they hold a lot of sway at the base of the party. So maybe, the No Labels crowd says to each other, we can wave the independent flag and scare Biden into backing away from the Left and pressure the Left into standing down from making any demands on Biden. After all, Trump is the devil incarnate, and nobody wants to see the devil in the White House.*

Under normal circumstances, that subtextual strategy could be effective in achieving No Labels' centrist objective. It's an old playbook, after all. Watch the new Netflix movie about Shirley Chisholm's run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972. She was muscled into releasing her convention delegates to line up behind the party's pick – Senator George

McGovern – on the grounds that Richard Nixon was the “devil incarnate.” Or recall how Jesse Jackson’s threat of an independent bolt from the San Francisco Democratic convention in 1984 had to be quashed on the grounds that Ronald Reagan was the “Devil incarnate” and everyone had to line up behind Walter Mondale. Footnote, lest we forget: Nixon crushed McGovern and Reagan beat Mondale handily.

The catch now is that these aren’t normal times. The “Devil incarnate,” aka Donald Trump has the Republican Party by the throat. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party is hemorrhaging voters of color, young voters, and white working-class voters. Independent voters broke for Trump by a small margin in 2016 and then for Biden by a huge margin, 13 points nationally, in 2020. In this cycle so far, independents are split, and many independents are disillusioned with Biden. They gave him the presidency in 2020, but they’re not sure they want to do that again. Given how close the election is likely to be, Biden can’t afford to turn his back on the party’s progressive wing, he’s got to have those leaders on board the re-election campaign to defeat Trump. And we know that Democratic Party heavyweights, including at least one former U.S. president, delivered that message loud and clear to anyone who was on the No Labels wish list.

So, the subtextual objective of forcing Biden to repudiate the party’s left wing, as Bill Clinton essentially did in 1992, became difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, the main objective came under heavy fire. No Labels simply couldn’t recruit a ticket. None of the hoped-for standard bearers would step up. No Labels is clear in its public statements as to why. The pressure from the Beltway was too great.

The Hub: What about the grassroots, the folks that No Labels had inspired to go down an independent path?

Salit: One of the most interesting moments in the whole process, for me, was the Convention No Labels held after Super Tuesday when Trump and Biden became the unofficial nominees. Even though the window for finding a ticket was closing, the delegates voted to continue the work of putting together a ticket. They didn’t want to stop the fight to challenge the dominance of the two legacy parties. No Labels had opened a Pandora’s Box.

I think the original plan of the No Labels leadership was to open the Pandora’s Box and then have the Unity ticket control and manage what got opened up, to make sure that the base stayed within the confines of No Labels’ centrist save-the-two-parties-from-themselves trajectory. Whoops! They opened Pandora’s Box, but then they couldn’t produce the ticket. In some ways, that’s a snapshot of the state of our country right now. The Pandora’s Box is opening, but now that it’s been opened, it’s an open question as to where it goes. Just look at the numbers of people who identify themselves as independents. Gallup has the number between 41 and 45%.

The Pew Research Center and the *New York Times* are trying to persuade the public (and themselves) that the true number of independents is really very small because they “lean” one way or the other. But as the research I’ve done with Dr. Thom Reilly at our ASU Center for an Independent and Sustainable Democracy shows, the leaner methodology doesn’t hold up. Independents are very fluid in their voting patterns over time. They vote situationally, not out of party loyalty. The country is going independent at the voter level, but the political parties are fighting that tooth and nail.

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The Hub: Would it be fair to say that the Democratic Party was successful in tanking No Labels in 2024?

Salit: The Democratic Party was surely the driver, but the anti-No Labels coalition had some unusual bedfellows in it, not all are Democrats. It’s rare that the centrist Third Way and the left leaning MoveOn.org are on the same side, even though both organizations are Democratic Party organizations. But here they were. And then you throw in the anti-Trump GOP-aligned Lincoln Project, conservative Bill Kristol, and the left-wing *Nation* magazine, and you have a strange brew.

The Hub: You know a lot about strange bedfellows.

Salit: I do, but that’s a topic for another time. For its part, No Labels was very aggressive in response to the ceaseless attacks on them. They filed a complaint with the Justice Department alleging an unlawful conspiracy to destroy their enterprise, which was spearheaded by Senator Joe Lieberman and Dr. Ben Chavis. And here, it’s surely important to note that Senator Lieberman’s unexpected passing was a very significant blow to the No Labels effort. But No Labels is proceeding with the complaint.

The Hub: That could be a high bar to prove their case.

Salit: Yes, for sure. And probably they mainly wanted to harass the people who had spent so much time harassing them. I get it. You are allowed to sit in a room together and strategize how to gain traction or prevent another political force from gaining traction. That is not illegal in the United States of America, unless you’re using the government itself to tilt the playing field. The No Labels complaint alleges civil and voting rights violations, up to and including

incitement to violence. This is one of the reasons I feel it's so important for independent forces to be communicating with each other, including independent forces that have different, even opposing, strategies for 2024 and beyond. It's critical that all these forces be in dialogue with one another because wherever they might be on the political spectrum, if they have any kind of traction, they are considered an enemy of the two parties, and one or both of the two parties will come after them. On this score, I give a lot of credit to No Labels founder Nancy Jacobson for calling this out in her *Wall Street Journal* column when she wrote that now that No Labels has stood down, the attacks will focus heavily on destroying Robert Kennedy, Jr's independent presidential campaign. And she's right. In the last week there's been a barrage of articles, editorials, and opinion pieces across the spectrum, denouncing RFK. Even Donald Trump joined the chorus, calling RFK a "leftie-loonie." The Kennedy clan held a big press conference to endorse Biden, though I'm not convinced that this will sway anyone. When the Kennedys endorsed Barack Obama over Hilary Clinton in the 2008 primary, that was meaningful. Likely not this time. And I think that RFK's gracious comments in response scores him some points.

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The Hub: Did the public barrage against No Labels hurt their ability to function in the future?

Salit: Depends on who you talk to. I was never a fan of the No Labels strategy for a host of reasons. But the attacks that they were subject to, by partisan operatives and within the media, were the kinds of things that occur if you put a toe, even a little toe, outside of the establishment runway and into the independent universe.

One of the legacies that they leave behind, and former Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings recently made this point in the *Dallas Morning News*, is that they did shine a light on the blunt force backlash that is thrust upon anything that has potential power to disrupt the status quo. Though they couldn't deliver on the ticket, they can tell that story. And as a long-time independent myself, as someone who's been a part of many independent campaigns that endured

every kind of public abuse, whether it was for Dr. Lenora Fulani or Michael Bloomberg or Ross Perot or Andrew Yang's work to build the Forward Party, I thank No Labels for shining that light. The ceaseless efforts to discredit and undermine them wasn't just about them. The attacks were a declaration of war against anything outside of conventional two-party politics.

“For one, we learned that both major parties do not take kindly to outside competitors. The parties are massive machines concerned with electoral victory, self-preservation, and the fundraising that comes with it. They will bring their full weight to bear on anyone who challenges them.”

-- Mike Rawlings, former Mayor of Dallas, TX

The Hub: Where does this leave No Labels and the broader independent movement, including the Forward Party, the legacy minor parties, the Kennedy campaign?

Salit: It's a very fluid situation. From the vantage point of claiming space within the independent movement, No Labels was not looking to build something lasting that is independent. They are mainly looking to reset the two-party governing paradigm. But, if I were advising them, I would say, *don't head for the exit just yet*. If you refuse to be frozen-in-place by the claim that 2024 is the “be-all and end-all” moment in the history of civilization and mankind, and there are more than a few voices refusing to be frozen, then whatever the outcome in 2024, we need to be talking about and strategizing for 2025 and beyond, including for 2028.

The Hub: Okay, but if there are still millions of Americans unhappy with the Biden/Trump re-match, what's the lineup of independent options in 2024?

Salit: Basically, there's the stalwarts, the Libertarian Party and the Green Party. They will field presidential candidates; they will make their runs. They will make their case for voting independent and they might well pick up more support than they have in recent years because the electorate overall is becoming more independent and young people are less persuaded by the “spoiler” argument. Polls show that young people like the Ranked Choice Voting reform because it mitigates any so-called “spoiler” effect.

Beyond the legacy minor parties, you have the Forward Party, which is a cross ideological coalition growing out of the 2022 merger of three independent organizations. This effort was launched by Andrew Yang when he left the Democratic Party to become an independent, together with former New Jersey Governor Christie Todd Whitman, and Michael Wilner, a founder

of the Serve America Movement. Full disclosure: I'm on the Board of Directors of Forward. Andrew asked me to join, and I eagerly accepted, even though I've been out of the party-building movement for some time. I think Forward is trying to redefine what it means to be a national political party and I am aligned with that. Plus, I see the quality and character of the national and state leaders and they inspire me.

The Forward strategy for 2024 is not to run a candidate at the top of the ticket, but to run down-ballot candidates, to produce a reverse coattail effect driving pro-democracy voting up-ballot, and to invest in building party infrastructure for the long term. As Forward puts it, the mass of independent voters and disillusioned Democrats and Republicans need a trusted post-partisan political organization. Forward has recruited a potent and colorful roster of candidates, ranging from those running on a Forward line to Republicans and Democrats who are aligning themselves with Forward and its independent brand.

Another important player in the independent space, of course, is RFK Jr. If you're an average American and you're looking for a place to go in the 2024 presidential race that is neither Trump or Biden, nor the hyper-ideological Greens or Libertarians, if you are looking to send a signal of distress and non-alignment to the political establishment, RFK is going to appeal to a bunch of those voters. He's been denounced by much of his Democrat royalty family and, of late, by Trump. And if Trump and the Kennedy family are against him, all of that will probably make him more popular with disaffected independent voters. He's decided that he is not going to pursue the nomination of the Libertarian Party, which would have given him access to 50 ballot lines. I would guess that he did not want to be bound by some of the ideological and provincial structures that govern Libertarian Party politics or Green Party politics. Same, I would guess, for Dr. Cornel West, who separated from the Green Party early on in his campaign. Dr. West is running as an independent, though his ability to get on the ballot is very limited. Still, his campaign is based on raising themes popularized decades ago by Malcolm X and then by Dr. Fulani – namely, that the African American community puts the Democrats first and the Democrats put Black people last. The conflict in the Middle East and over Gaza in particular, has heightened the potential appeal of Dr. West's message in some circles. And if I might add a fantasy note here, if the Libertarians and the Greens had chosen to join forces this year and run their own Unity ticket with Kennedy and West, that would have dramatically changed the dynamics of the presidential election and laid the groundwork for a massive and competitive national political coalition.

The Hub: Wow!

Salit: It's unlikely that one single force will be able to grab control of the independent movement or of the phenomena, but the circumstances could put

pressure on the players to come to the table. Maybe No Labels will play a positive role in a coalition building process. I hope that the Forward Party will instigate and curate such a process. Perhaps RFK will leverage his popular support to join with others after the election is over and the dust settles. And who knows, maybe in these turbulent times, the Greens and the Libertarians will get over their sectarianism and throw in with a larger independent coalition. I know it all sounds unlikely, and it probably is. But in moments like this one, where the old institutions are losing their grip, and so many people want political change, unlikely things can emerge out of chaos. A girl can dream, right?

The Hub: I'm thinking about how our founding name in 1994 was the **Committee for a Unified Independent Party**. **IndependentVoting** became a project of the CUIP in 2000, after the Reform Party – which we helped to build – blew apart. We decided to organize independent voters as a force rather than as a political party. We began that pivot with a national petition drive calling on Ross Perot, Ralph Nader and Governor Jesse Ventura to join forces to lead a unified independent movement.

“But the need for a unified independent movement remains, in fact it's stronger than ever. Look at how much has changed since the landscape of national independent politics turned into a desert 24 years ago. But, it's not a desert anymore. I don't know that it's quite a forest, but maybe it's a meadow, ringed by saplings, that could grow into something verdant, beautiful, and nourishing for American democracy.”

Salit: Yes, tens of thousands of independent voters signed that petition. Unfortunately, Perot, Nader and Ventura didn't step up. But the need for a unified independent movement remains, in fact it's stronger than ever. Look at how much has changed since the landscape of national independent politics turned into a desert 24 years ago. But, it's not a desert anymore. I don't know that it's quite a forest, but maybe it's a meadow, ringed by saplings, that could grow into something verdant, beautiful, and nourishing for American democracy. So, it might be time to dust off the old nameplate that says Committee for a Unified Independent Party and put it back on the door.

The Hub: And I think it's a good place to end. For now.

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