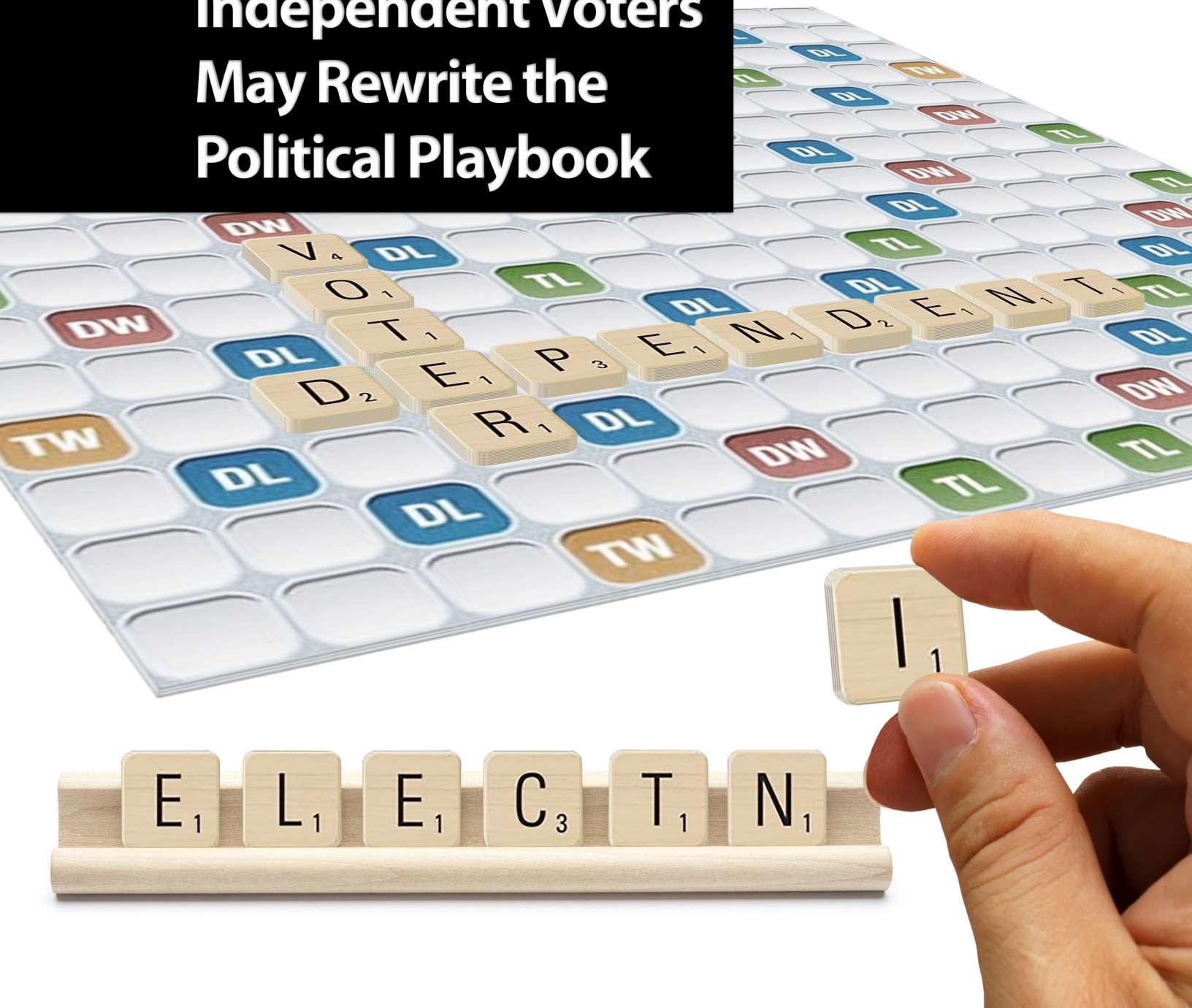


# Gamechangers?

Independent Voters  
May Rewrite the  
Political Playbook



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Thom Reilly  
Andrea Whitsett  
Joseph Garcia  
William Hart  
Patrick McWhorter



Bonnie Reiss  
Christian Grose  
Michelle Cornelius  
S. Jason Giannaros

Contributing resource



Jackie Salit  
Cathy Stewart

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# Gamechangers?

## Independent Voters May Rewrite the Political Playbook

### Executive summary

Like the thick glass shakers of salt and pepper that dominate kitchen, diner and banquet tables where modern U.S. politics often are discussed and debated, elections and governance largely have been viewed through the lens of a seemingly impenetrable two-party power structure: Republicans and Democrats.

This Americana experience and expectation is a tradition by design, with both political parties – despite their polarizing politics, policies and rhetoric – working together to maintain their duo-monopoly status. They do so via federal and varying state election laws that keep third parties as fringe parties with little to no chance of challenging the two-party apparatus and continue to keep independent voters marginalized.

In recent years, however, a distinct yet ill-defined “party” has emerged above all other alternates: the “independent party,” which in most instances is no official party at all. Like thunderclouds forming on the horizon, this nebulous if not disorganized gathering of voters is quietly becoming a force that no longer can be ignored. In political forecasting, independents have become the unknown factor that neither major party can predict nor count on come Election Day.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that independents are key in determining winners and losers at the ballot box. After all, more than four of 10 Americans called themselves independents in a 2017 Gallup poll. The Pew Research Center notes that both major parties have lost ground among the public, with voters citing a frustration with government and the partisan entities that control it. That’s not to say there isn’t opportunity to close the gap. A 2017 Morrison Institute for Public Policy report found that independents share conflicting political news with Republicans and Democrats, and thus perhaps could help ease the nation’s political polarization.

There is much to be studied and learned about independent voters, not the least of which is the definition itself: Are they simply unaffiliated voters or are they independent thinkers? Are they merely floating between two parties, depending on ever-changing socio-economic times? Or are they swing voters waiting in the wings to be persuaded or serenaded by either major party? Or, despite their differences and disparities, are they the start of a third major party? Or is a new constituency emerging that isn't party based at all?

There are many other questions, as established by the framework for expanded inquiry and analysis in this briefing paper. But just as salsa has eclipsed ketchup in U.S. sales to the surprise and even dismay of many traditionalists, there is undeniable change taking place in the electorate's palate. If variety is the spice of life, is it time for another condiment that is neither salt nor pepper to be added to America's political table?

ASU Morrison Institute for Public Policy, USC Schwarzenegger Institute and Independent Voting pose that question for additional examination, discourse, research and analysis of America's independent voter.

### Topics of inquiry

- How will the two major parties try to reduce independents' influence to preserve the existing two-party system?
- What legal barriers – including voter registration and the all-important primaries – exist to limit or thwart independents' participation?
- How will differing state electoral structures, such as “top-two” primaries, affect independent voting?
- How do candidates for office simultaneously appeal to independent swing voters and mobilize base partisan voters?
- Would promoting independent status among Hispanics, African-Americans, Millennials and others help bring more members of these large but demobilized groups to the polls?
- What effect, if any, will independents have on the nation's extreme elite political polarization?
- How will the changing roles and influence of traditional and social media affect independents' impact?
- Is the independent movement a movement for greater enfranchisement, an anti-corruption movement or a unique synthesis of the two?

## What of independent voters and their impact?

They're given many names: The leaners. The disengaged. The disaffecteds. Even shadow partisans. Their motivations remain sharply disputed. They're still widely dismissed as a sideshow to the nation's serious political action.

Yet they embody the most powerful phenomenon in U.S. politics: The rise of the independent voter and the weakening of traditional two-party power. The continuing flight of millions of voters from the Republican and Democratic parties is reshaping the nation's political landscape in ways no one can control or even predict. It threatens the very basis upon which we have long analyzed campaigns and elections.

How useful are party labels, for example, for divining the future sentiments of voters who backed Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and Republican Donald Trump in 2016?

Is the traditional – and comfortable – two-party framework losing relevance for independent voters? If so, how are candidates, campaign professionals, pollsters and scholars to understand the large, potentially volatile blocs of independents who promise to play an ever more important role in U.S. electoral politics?

Such questions may once have been relegated to the margins of political science research and campaign strategies. No longer. Identifying and wooing the independent voter now rank among the most urgent challenges facing candidates, campaigns and political professionals.

Why?

- Close to half of Americans (44 percent) called themselves independents in a 2017 Gallup poll.
- The Pew Research Center notes that both major parties have lost ground among the public.
- Pew and other research reports that independents now outnumber either Democrats or Republicans.
- Most independents' driving motivations are frustration with the government and the political parties that control it.<sup>1</sup>

- A 2017 Morrison Institute for Public Policy report found that independents share conflicting political news with Republicans and Democrats, and thus could perhaps help ease the nation's political polarization.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Ideal of Independence**

Concerns about the roles of American political parties are not new. Parties are nowhere mentioned in the Constitution, and many of the Founders warned against the negative implications of parties and partisanship.<sup>3</sup> The ideal of the independent, free-thinking citizen carefully weighing the political choices has held a hallowed place throughout American history.

But not in American scholarship. For the past 60 years, political science research has largely discounted the notion of "independence." Seminal research in the 1950s and 1960s enthroned an analytic framework that placed party identification at the center of the voter's universe. From that point on, most scholarly literature has addressed the "independent voter" within a framework centered on the two major parties in our democracy. Now that framework supports a system that has sunk into polarization and paralysis.<sup>4</sup> Now what?

Political and other social scientists have been the most skeptical of the independent voter; many authors seem almost unable to conceive of a political actor who doesn't choose one of the major parties. Efforts to counter this trend, to forge new definitions of political attitudes and identities that do not center on parties, are often dismissed by academics, the media and political insiders.

Perhaps this helped spawn so many missed projections in the 2016 election. The professionals and the pundits were still focused on the old two-party system while ignoring the real-time dynamics in a yet-explored new model.

In recent years, however, new approaches have begun to appear, suggesting a subtle shift in the analysis of how American voters identify their political preferences and act upon them.

## What Does ‘Independent’ Really Mean?

Discussions of independent voters often are undermined by disagreements over who these voters are, who they are not, and how they behave. Adding to the confusion is the fact that some terms are used interchangeably. Below is a list of the common categories used by scholars and political professionals:

- **Independent Voter.** This is the most general term, and its lack of precision can frustrate both research and public dialogue. It usually means someone who has registered but has not indicated a party affiliation; or does not identify with a political party in public opinion polls when surveyed. However, some states require registering voters to choose a party affiliation; thus the voter may choose one without actually favoring any party.
- **Unaffiliated Voter.** This is a more precise term, because it usually refers directly to someone’s voter registration status, and thus can be more readily validated via registration data in states with party registration. It may also be called a “no party” or “no party preference” voter.
- **Independent Mindset or Independent Thinking.** The research literature most often uses the term “independent” for voters with an independent mindset, regardless of their registration.
- **Independent Behavior.** As distinct from a voting mindset, independent voting behavior refers to voters’ actual choices at the polls. In this case, “independent voting” likely refers to ticket splitting, party switching, and other voter actions inconsistent with party allegiance.
- **Swing Voters.** This could describe a voter who registers with a party but does not always vote for that party’s candidates or as an unaffiliated registrant who votes for candidates of both parties. Swing voters are of great interest to political actors seeking voters they can most influence to gain an edge in the election.<sup>5</sup>
- **Floating Voters.** This describes a voter whose choices float from one party to another in successive elections. This voter may or may not be registered as unaffiliated, but chooses different candidates from different parties across time.<sup>6</sup>

- **Independent Party.** Some voters believe that references to “independent” voters mean people who belong to an independent party. An organized independent party does exist or has existed in some states, but its presence can confuse voters.

### **Skeptical Scholars**

A tour of the research literature about American voter attitudes and behavior usually begins with Angus Campbell and his colleagues, who first published *The American Voter* in 1960. Analyzing data produced by the American National Election Study<sup>7</sup>, Campbell and his colleagues focused on party affiliation as a central characteristic explaining voters’ behaviors and attitudes. They dismissed independents, stating that their “interest in the campaign is less, their concern over the outcome is slight, and their choice between competing candidates seems much less to spring from discoverable evaluations of the elements of national politics.”<sup>8</sup>

That began to change after the convulsions of the 1960s. The civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, the growing dominance of Republicans in the traditionally Democratic South, the shock of Watergate, and the entry of 18- to 21-year-olds into the electorate in 1972 produced the first notable “bubble” of independents in national and regional polling.<sup>9</sup>

Since that time, national and regional surveys usually include analysis of the views of independent voters. The Pew Research Center, perhaps the most oft-cited source, consistently finds a growing number of independents, noting that “both parties have lost ground among the public.”<sup>10</sup>

Another common source is the Gallup poll, which found independents rising from 35 percent in 2008 to 43 percent in 2014. Gallup concludes that the “rise in U.S. political independence likely flows from the high level of frustration with the government and the political parties that control it.”<sup>11</sup>

A 2015 report by Morrison Institute found that independents claimed the highest number of registered voters in the state of Arizona in March 2014 and held the top spot until the 2016 presidential preference primary election, when – unlike other primaries – independents had to change their registration to either a Democrat or Republican in order to cast a ballot. According to the Arizona Secretary of State’s Office, independents

in April 2017 made up 33.90 percent of the of the state's electorate, with Republicans at 34.63 percent and Democrats at 30.31 percent.

Exit polls are another approach to measuring independents. The polls reflect the views of those citizens who, by voting, demonstrate a higher level of political engagement than the public at large, given that many respondents in telephone polls do not actually end up voting. Exit polls exhibit the same trend in independent voter growth. The first spike in independents occurred in the mid-1970s, consistent with the ANES data. After declining in the 1980s, a smaller uptick occurred in the 1990s. And after one more brief decline, the growth of independents in exit polls showed up again after 2004.<sup>12</sup>

Many reports of the rise in numbers of people who label themselves as independents also appear in regional studies.<sup>13</sup> California shows up prominently in recent research, particularly since the state adopted open primaries in 2012. About 24 percent of voters in California declare no party preference, up from 20.9 percent in 2012.<sup>14</sup> Further, about one-quarter of those are swing voters who do not lean toward any of the major parties.<sup>15</sup>

In 2015, a study of Arizona independents was conducted by Morrison Institute, employing a statewide poll of 2,000 voters and focus groups. The study found that nearly half of independents had changed their registration from another party, and were significantly more likely than Democrats or Republicans to describe themselves as moderates. Still, nearly one-quarter of independents considered themselves liberal or conservative, and voiced a diverse range of opinions when asked about specific issues.

Their perspective was best summed up by one focus-group participant: "We're not a party. We're a mindset."<sup>16</sup>

Over the last several years, Independent Voting – the largest advocacy organization of independent voters in the United States, with 40 chapters – has drawn attention to a set of patterns, issues and trends among independent voters that underscores the call for additional and new research.

Jacqueline Salit, president of Independent Voting and author of *Independents Rising: Outsider Movements, Third Parties, and the Struggle for a Post-Partisan America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), observes: "There's a basic truth behind all the data and

statistics tracking the rise of the independent voter. That truth is that an entire set of interlocking institutions and paradigms – the political parties, the standard categories of ideology and the idea that partisan mediators are required for a democracy – have failed the country. Independent voters are Americans who want to move beyond that failure to what some researchers have called ‘the politics of otherness.’ In my experience, ‘otherness’ and political independence go hand in hand.”

### **Why is this Happening?**

One analyst ascribes the shift to political trends and a trickle-down effect of polarization in Washington. “... [I]t has become like a fashion statement or ‘I want to be different,’ so that they can tell people, ‘I don’t like either of them, I’m an independent,’” stated pollster Bernie Pinsonat.<sup>17</sup>

Some studies have focused attention on the rise of independents among Millennials, college students, and Latinos. Significant attention has been paid to the evidence of an independent, even anti-party, mindset among Millennials (roughly those born from 1980 through 1997).<sup>18</sup> A 2014 Pew study found this generation “relatively unattached to organized politics and religion.” Half of Millennials described themselves as political independents, a level “at or near the highest levels of political...disaffiliation recorded for any generation in the quarter-century that the Pew Research Center has been polling on these topics.”<sup>19</sup>

Millennials did favor Democrat Hillary Clinton over Republican Donald Trump by 21 points in 2016, according to national exit polls. But the share of their vote for each major party candidate was lower than 2008 or 2012, with the remainder going to third party candidates in 2016.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, a 2012 poll of North Carolina college students found a strong independent mindset in this population.<sup>21</sup> It concluded that “Independent voters hold a broad range of ideological perspectives and come from diverse demographic backgrounds. What seems to bind these voters together, despite their different views in traditional ideological terms, appears to be their disapproval with partisan politics and their interest in reforming the political process.”

The African-American community has had a unique alignment with the Democratic Party dating back to the 1930s, and has given supermajority support to that party since the 1960s and '70s. However, there is evidence that there is a rise of independent identification among African Americans.

The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies put the number of African Americans who identify as independent at 24 percent in 2004. In the Pew Research Center's tracking of party identification, they found 16 percent of African Americans identifying as independents in 2012, midway through the Obama years.

The trend toward independence and away from the Democratic Party is strongest among younger African Americans. The Joint Center found 30 percent of African Americans between 18 and 25 years old and 24 percent between 26 and 35 years old identify as independents. As David Bositis of the Joint Center points out, "The increased political independence of young African Americans is a cause for political concern because they lack political choices."<sup>22</sup>

Indicators of political volatility have also emerged in voting patterns in the African-American community. In 2005 in New York City, 49% of African American voters abandoned the Democratic Party to back Mayor Michael Bloomberg. In the 2014 U.S. Senate primary in Mississippi, Black voters chose to vote in the open Republican Party primary runoff to support incumbent Senator Thad Cochran over a Tea Party challenger.

In a poll from January 2017 presented to the Congressional Black Caucus, Cornell Belcher of Brilliant Corners Research found 63 percent of African Americans feel taken for granted by the Democratic Party. Further, many African-American voters are not mobilized by white Democratic elected officials.<sup>23</sup>

The growth of Latinos in many battleground states has fueled interest in these voters' levels of independent political thinking. A 2012 Gallup survey shows that a majority of U.S. Hispanics identify as political independents.<sup>24</sup> Zoltan Hajnal and Taeku Lee find that foreign-born naturalized Latino citizens are much more likely to identify as independents than are Latinos who are not immigrants.<sup>25</sup>

The 2015 Morrison Institute survey of Arizona Latinos found patterns similar to the national poll, with most Latino independents stating that they registered that way so as to be able to support the best candidate.<sup>26</sup> In general, however, the survey found

Latinos dissatisfied with Arizona politics, with large majorities complaining that officials are more loyal to their party than their constituents; two thirds said they are not contacted by candidates asking for their votes.

### **Hunting the ‘True’ Independent**

Given that the number of Americans identifying as independent has risen from the 1960s to today, what does this mean?<sup>27</sup> For example, if state voter registration laws are being changed to make it easier for people to register as independent or unaffiliated, is the rise of independents a manifestation of those legal and institutional changes? Or is there growing public detachment from politics in general that shows up in the data as independent self-identification? Or both?

Despite the growth of voters self-identifying as independents, skepticism persists among some researchers about whether voters who claim the independent label are “really” independent. They cling to the notion that most people who claim to be independent are really “undercover” or “closet partisans.”<sup>28</sup> In this view, only some voters are truly independent. Such skepticism echoes *The American Voter* in 1960, whose authors set the tone for the decades-long debate by assuming that political independents are unengaged and uninformed.

The surge of independents appearing in the early 1970s fueled this debate. David Broder’s 1972 book, *The Party’s Over*, discussed the possible end of parties, but was soon followed by research indicating that partisanship was alive and well. In *The Myth of the Independent Voter*, researchers argued that that the independent voter’s mindset mirrors that of their partisan fellow citizens.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1980s, much of the “post-partisan” thinking disappeared in the wake of broad Republican victories, and a new crop of literature returned to the notion that parties shape voters. Most of this research claimed that many self-identifying independents are actually partisans who consistently act in partisan ways and hold consistently partisan views.

One 2012 study, for example, concluded that independents strive for objectivity and nonpartisanship, but fall short of their own ideal. “Self-proclaimed independents show considerable variation in their implicit party identities and make partisan political

judgments in line with those implicit identities....”<sup>30</sup> This skepticism about the true meaning of “independence” continues to influence the academic, media, and political literature.

The view that independents are masking their true partisanship is shared – and debated – by a wide array of popular commentators, especially in the media and among political actors.

Another point of contention is over the view independent voters could be even more partisan, in a sense, than “mainstream” partisans. This arises from anecdotal evidence of people refusing to identify with a party because they do not see the party they used to identify with as “partisan enough,” feeling that it has shifted too far from its core values.<sup>31</sup> This skepticism about the “true” independence of these voters is the most common theme in the literature.

A further point in dispute is whether independents – of whichever category – actually play a significant role in elections. Are political independents the “swing” voters that ultimately decide many elections? If they are truly straddling the parties, they are some of the most influential voters in the electorate. Or, lacking the motivation of partisanship, are they less involved in elections and thus less influential than partisan voters?

Linda Killian’s 2011 work best represents the research into these questions. In *The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents*, she explores voters who contributed significantly to the victories of Barack Obama in 2008, and Republican congressional candidates in 2010.<sup>32</sup> She found that people increasingly see a disconnect between the priorities of elected officials and those of voters. She supports this perspective with reference to polls showing confidence in government at an all-time low.

Killian presumes that voters who are disenchanted with parties constitute a growing bloc inclined to evaluate candidates based upon their likelihood to seek compromise and moderate solutions.<sup>33</sup> She thus advises candidates to increasingly reach out to these swing voters, who are up for grabs in any election.<sup>34</sup> Others similarly see party independence as a function of conflicting pressures on the voter, combined with a more pragmatic, less ideological disposition.<sup>35</sup> Independent voters are also more likely

to consider the country's economic conditions, while partisan-identified voters use the cues of party and ideology.<sup>36</sup>

The potential impact of independents was on full display in the 2016 presidential primary election season, mostly in states which allow unaffiliated voters to participate in their primaries. Many commentators concluded that Donald Trump's success led many disaffected Republicans to return to the party primary to cast ballots for the non-traditional Republican candidate. Meanwhile, Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders actively cultivated independents in his challenge from the left to eventual Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton. Proof of these theories may be lacking, but one analyst stated that "the same forces that lead people to avoid associating with parties would also lead them to candidates like Trump and Sanders."<sup>37</sup>

Do independents turn out to vote? Here the use of the "unaffiliated voter" designation, referring to the voter's registration status, is most often cited and records a much lower turnout for independents. But that could be the result of legal barriers preventing those voters from participating in the same fashion as partisan voters. However, authors who broaden the concept of "independent" to consider those not registered as unaffiliated, still conclude that independent voter participation is lower than others.

### **What Are They Thinking?**

Efforts to probe independents' thinking have introduced psychological and sociological concepts to the subject, suggesting the degree to which non-political factors could be influencing voters' mindsets.<sup>38</sup>

The 2007 nationwide Washington Post/Kaiser Foundation/Harvard survey of independents asked respondents why they label themselves as independent. Nearly eight in 10 (76 percent) said they vote on the issues, not on the party line, and seven out of ten said they vote for candidates, not parties. About half of independents said they agree with both Democrats and Republicans some of the time, while half were not comfortable with either party.

Four in 10 said they do not like to put a label on their political views. But only 15 percent said they are not very interested in politics, which distinctly contradicts the view persisting since *The American Voter* in 1960.<sup>39</sup>

Research by Samara Klar at The University of Arizona and Yanna Krupnikov at Stony Brook University argue that the importance of the independent identity as a personal attitude will determine political behavior.<sup>40</sup> Much as ideology is a key determinant of a partisan voter's political engagement, they say, the importance of political independence to a voter can drive an independent's political engagement.

Voters are sensitive about how others will view them if they identify as partisans, the researchers found. They discovered that many Americans are embarrassed by their political party and do not wish to be associated with either side. Instead, they intentionally mask their party preference, especially in social situations.

More, "Americans view independent voters as more likeable [and] trustworthy ... than Democrats or Republicans. They are preferred over partisans as discussion partners and workplace colleagues."<sup>41</sup> In other work, Samara Klar finds that "[independents] are evidently distinct from partisans when it comes to the processes underlying their political engagement. This is not to say that independents are less engaged, but rather they are less likely to become engaged as a result of ideology and more likely to become engaged as a result of their commitment to being independent."<sup>42</sup>

Underlying this and other research is a fundamental question: Is the voting public truly polarized? And if so, is its polarization driving polarization among political elites, or vice-versa? Are the voters as polarized as they think they are?

Perhaps not. A 2014 Pew study concluded that "partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades." In each party, negative views of the opposing party are twice as large as they were a generation ago. A variety of measures of partisan antipathy, including sorting by residence, choice of friends, and marriage, indicate that partisan animus has turned into social animus.

However, Pew notes, "These sentiments are not shared by all – or even most – Americans... [In fact], more believe their representatives in government should meet halfway to resolve contentious disputes rather than hold out for more of what they want."

Could this majority view be leading to rejection of the parties altogether, and thus a factor in the growth of independents? Pew doesn't draw that conclusion, but states, "many of those in the center remain on the edges of the political playing field, relatively distant and disengaged..."<sup>43</sup>

Between the ideological divide, according to Pew, rests the 39 percent of Americans who hold a mix of liberal and conservative views. But that large segment of the public, according to the study, is less likely to engage in politics at the level that partisans do. How many of these mixed, politically disengaged voters are independents? This remains an unanswered question that is crucial for several reasons. A 2017 Morrison Institute survey found independents to be more at ease than partisans in interacting with both Republicans and Democrats, and more open to differing viewpoints; this may be a key to bridging the political divide.<sup>44</sup>

Morris Fiorina suggests that the answer to the question, "Has the American electorate polarized?" is no, according to the data. "The American public, however, believes that the answer is yes."<sup>45</sup> This perception varies depending upon where people fall along the continuum of partisanship and political engagement. "... All in all, the evidence indicates that those most psychologically involved in politics have the least accurate perceptions of the views held by their fellow citizens."<sup>46</sup>

The implications of this misperception could be substantial: "It is possible that misperceiving the other side (and one's own side) as more extreme may detach people from the political process, decreasing their participation as they feel they are unrepresentative moderates in the extremist milieu of American politics."<sup>47</sup>

Or do they reject the partisans altogether and become independent? The political polarization research sidesteps the possibility that public perceptions of growing polarization are contributing to the increase in independent self-identification, but none addresses it head-on.

### **Independent Voters: Searching for Solutions to Political Gridlock**

While voters may not be as polarized as many assume, Washington's elected officials and Democratic and Republican party activists are polarized.<sup>48</sup> Many voters who identify as independent are put off by this elite polarization, and say they want

elected officials focused on good public policy. Independent voters believe that “identifying with a party is akin to affiliating oneself with disagreement, fighting, and gridlock.”<sup>49</sup> Independent voters view the major political parties as ineffective, and may prefer to “rise above one’s pre-existing, unthinking partisan biases in crucial electoral circumstances.”<sup>50</sup>

Extreme political polarization among elected officials may have its roots in electoral and political institutions, and this distrust for the major parties among independents is exacerbated when unaffiliated voters are barred from electoral participation. Many U.S. states have closed primaries, where only individuals registered with a party can vote in that party’s primary. Independents who are not registered with a major political party cannot cast a vote in closed primaries.<sup>51</sup>

Some political reformers have embraced top-two primaries or open primaries, as these primary systems allow for independents to take part in primary elections. A USC Schwarzenegger Institute research report revealed that candidates running for legislative offices in open and top-two primary states are more likely to reach out to independent voters than candidates running in closed primary states.<sup>52</sup>

Other institutional barriers may disfranchise or depress independent voter participation in the political process. The two major political parties design electoral institutions in order to enhance their respective candidates’ reelection chances, and the electoral rules used subsequently affect voters and public policy.<sup>53</sup> Independent voters who are unaffiliated may be those most likely to be disfranchised, especially in closed primaries or in states with significant ballot access restrictions.

## **The Questions Ahead**

It is a dramatic and potentially pivotal time in American electoral politics. Few disagree that the rise of independents is transforming the nation’s political landscape. As noted above, widely differencing opinions exist about the direction of this transformation, the motivation of its agents, and its ultimate impact. These issues are of special urgency for the nation’s two major parties, which are watching voters by the millions choosing not to identify as Democrats or Republicans.

Further questions abound, including:

- Why does someone choose to declare himself or herself an independent? And is there long-term commitment to that stance?
- How will the two major parties try to reduce independents' influence and thereby preserve the existing two-party system?
- What legal barriers to independents' participation – including in the all-important primaries – may be maintained or erected by the major parties?
- How will differing state electoral structures, such as “top-two” primaries, affect independent voting?
- How do electoral rules and institutions discourage independent voter registration and swing voting? How do the two major parties seek to benefit from making it harder for independents to participate?
- Will the parties seek to recruit independents as swing voters in close races – and thereby risk alienating their base? How do candidates for office simultaneously appeal to independent swing voters and mobilize base partisan voters?
- Why do some independents dislike identifying with a political party, yet will sometimes vote with one party more often than another? Is independent voter identity something that changes over time, conditional upon the candidate choices in a given time period?
- Would promoting independent status among Hispanics, African-Americans, Millennials and others help bring more members of these large but demobilized groups to the polls?
- Will Millennials' interests in independent politics continue through their lifetimes or will they join established parties as they grow older?
- What effect will independents have on the nation's extreme elite political polarization? Are they fleeing partisanship and thus perhaps exerting a moderating effect, or are they contributing to polarization by seeking out more extreme candidates who are not part of the mainstream?
- How are independents influenced by the changing environment of information networks that now run seamlessly between traditional and social media?

- Do levels of unaffiliated voters across states vary conditional on the type of primary used? And how do independents vary in their issue positions across states, and in their commitment to identifying as independents?
- Is the independent movement a movement for greater enfranchisement, an anti-corruption movement or a unique synthesis of the two?

Though growing rapidly in number, America's independent voters have yet to exert the impact they could have at the polls. But their increasing presence in the system is challenging the major parties' hegemony, and disrupting the ways in which we have long analyzed electoral politics.

Disaffecteds? Leaners? Shadow partisans? Whatever the label, independents are changing the political landscape beneath our feet. At question is whether this movement will ever take the next step and overcome a resistant two-party system that has placed barriers to independent voter participation for more than a century and a half. These and other questions call out for greater inquiry, research and analysis to better gauge and understand the independent voter impact and our changing electorate.

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**ASU Morrison Institute for Public Policy**, Arizona's premier think tank, was established in 1982. An Arizona State University resource, Morrison Institute utilizes nonpartisan research, analysis, polling and public dialogue to examine critical state and regional issues. Morrison Institute provides data- and evidence-based review to help improve the state and region's quality of life. Morrison Institute is part of the ASU College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

**USC Schwarzenegger Institute for State and Global Policy** is committed to advancing post-partisanship, where leaders put people over political parties and work together to find the best ideas and solutions to benefit the people they serve. The Institute seeks to influence public policy and public debate in finding solutions to the serious challenges we face.

**Independent Voting**, founded in 1994, is a national association of independent voters with local organization in 45 states. The nonpartisan advocacy group is a national strategy, communications and organizing center working to connect and empower the 40 percent of Americans who identify themselves as independents.

## Notes

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