



# Is This The Rainbow We've Been Waiting For?



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I've been an organizer of political independents for 30 years. The idea that independents are emerging "game changers" in American politics was not in fashion for most of that time. Back in 1980, I campaigned for a black independent running for Congress in Brooklyn in a district that was majority minority. The incumbent, a Democrat, was white. (The era of Democratic Party racial paternalism had not yet drawn to a close.)

My candidate lost the election. No surprise there. Most everyone in Brooklyn – black or white – voted for Democrats. That same year, John Anderson, an Illinois congressman who split from the Republican Party, ran for president as an independent and polled 7% of the vote. Barry Commoner, the popular environmental scientist, ran for president on a Citizens Party/Consumer Party ticket and polled a quarter of a percent. Gus Hall, chairman of the Communist Party, ran too, the third of his four tries.

On that 1980 Election Day in Brooklyn it poured down rain in what seemed like biblical proportions. The campaign workers were drenched, body and soul – the latter because the candidate, the head of a minority construction workers organization, had taken off, presumably for warmer, drier climes, that very day. But we hung in because ours was a lofty goal – building a community base for an independent political movement. The candidate was more of a convenience than a necessity, and a good thing, too, because this candidate was about as reliable as a pair of pantyhose "guaranteed not to run." He was supposed to, but didn't. The stockings invariably do.

We sat in our overly large campaign office overlooking a grim and grey Flatbush Avenue and tallied up election results phoned in from the field. I glanced over at the small black and white TV set shoved into a corner behind boxes of unused literature. The results of the national election were pouring in. I remember noting that Anderson, Commoner and Hall rated bare-

ly a mention. I'm sure I took some perverse comfort in that fact, politically incorrect though it may have been. After all, my campaign barely registered with the candidate, let alone with the media. But I was too busy to muster up any requisite solidarity and returned to the task at hand.

Looking up at the little TV again a half hour later, I saw that Ronald Reagan had been elected president. I immediately flashed on two things. First, that the Democratic Party was in shambles, along with the progressive movement that, coming out of the turbulent 1960s, had struggled to develop mainstream political power. Reagan's hard core conservatism had eclipsed them. Second, I remember realizing that it didn't make a bit of difference that our candidate might be sunning himself on some Caribbean island. Because we – my colleagues and I – had begun a decades-long experiment in molding an independent political movement from the bottom up. Where would that lead? We had no real idea. We just knew that traditional political progressivism was stone cold dead.

It would have been difficult, actually impossible, for anyone at that point to see that the coming 30-year project of rebuilding the Democratic Party and the 30-year project of establishing the independent movement as a beachhead for a new progressivism would run on parallel tracks until they converged at the combustible crossroads of the 2008 presidential election. History doesn't often tell you what it's going to do. But meet up they did.



II

Here's a curious feature of the 2008 presidential election season. It started out in early 2007 with a major league hullabaloo over the possibility of a significant independent presidential candidacy. There was the ceaseless media fanfare over whether or not New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg, who re-registered as an independent last July, was going to decide to run and spend a billion dollars on an independent campaign. He didn't. And there was Unity08, the project designed by Beltway veterans Doug Bailey, Gerald Rafshoon and Hamilton Jordan.

Unity08 hoped to acquire ballot lines in 30+ states, recruit ten million dissatisfied Democrats and Republicans, together with independents, to participate in a virtual nominating process. Thereby a Unity ticket, a combo of a Democrat, Republican and/or an

independent, would be chosen, ballot access completed in the remaining states and the ticket would go on to capture the White House. Unity08 fell well short of its goals, in part, its founders say, because of a Federal Election Commission ruling limiting the size of contributions it could accept. They all but closed their doors in January when Bailey and Rafshoon left to form an equally ill-fated Draft Bloomberg Committee.



Jordan, the architect of Jimmy Carter's 1976 rise to the presidency who died of cancer in May at the age of 63, reflected on the Unity08 effort in remarks at the Atlanta Press Club earlier this year. He acknowledged that Unity08's plans to spawn a third-party presidential candidacy were played out. "I saw a perfect storm of events," he said. But with John McCain and Barack Obama the expected major party nominees, Jordan reflected, "I think the oxygen for an independent candidacy or third-party movement basically is gone now."

I never met Jordan but I did come to know Doug Bailey a bit over the course of several meetings in the early stages of the Unity08 process. Unity's philosophy, not uncommon in some quarters of the independent movement, was that the power of dissatisfied partisans and independent voters lies at the "center," in other words, in the rejection of ideological "extremes" and in their embrace of the politics of moderation. By restoring moderation via a centrist independent ticket, Unity08 believed the party system could be rehabilitated.

The Unity08 strategy mesmerized the media but not the populace. And while the FEC ruling did hurt its fundraising, there were other reasons Unity did not take hold. Public dissatisfaction with government and the political process is a response to the partisan elites in Washington – Republican and Democrat – who protect special interests rather than solve problems. It is not about the search for moderation or rehabilitation. When gas is \$4 a gallon or your kid is going to a lousy school, you don't exactly feel "moderate" about it.

For some analysts and political actors, the fact that independents have previously split our support between Republicans and Democrats in presidential elections (e.g. in 2004 independents split 49/48 between Kerry and Bush) means that we are at the center. How that qualifies as evidence of centrism, rather than as evidence that independents have spanned the political spectrum from right to left, is a mystery to me. Beginning with the 2006 midterm elections, however, independents began to develop more of a consensus view and split 59/37 for

## December 20, 2007: CNN Coverage of the New Hampshire Primaries

**CNN: Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama is taking aim at people like Russ Ouellette, an independent who's supporting Obama. Obama is trying to win over more people like him by promising to reform ethics in Washington. And he's sending a signal to independents that he can reach across the political aisle.**



**OBAMA: If there's a Republican out there who is the best person for any particular cabinet position or any administrative agency that's going to make a difference, then I will make that appointment...**

Democratic congressional candidates. The pivotal issue was the war in Iraq, and independents had turned against the war. As CNN's William Schneider commented: "We haven't seen that big a vote for one party among independents since exit polling began about 30 years ago. In previous elections...the swing voters have divided evenly, so who cares?"

Neither Bloomberg nor Unity08 captured the imagination of most independents, a necessary precondition for launching a successful "third way" presidential bid. But independents have been a force in the presidential process nonetheless. Gravitating in a progressive direction, and "lifting up" candidates arguing for a new politic and a new direction for the country, independents shaped the primary season in some startling ways. Approximately 65% of independents who voted in open primary or open caucus states chose to vote in the Democratic rather than the Republican contests. But most conspicuous is the fact that Barack Obama attracted substantial support from independents and

would not be the Democratic Party nominee but for the backing of an estimated 57% of independent voters who cast ballots in the Democratic Party contests where non-aligned voters were allowed to vote.

How does this translate in terms of the contest between Obama and Hillary Clinton? Obama's margin in the popular vote was 281,370 out of a total of almost 33 million cast. If all primaries and caucuses had excluded independents, Senator Clinton would have led in the popular vote (not counting Florida or Michigan) by 373,910.<sup>1</sup>

Independents also had a decisive impact on the Republican side. John McCain's near miraculous regeneration was made possible by a slingshot effect after New Hampshire, an open primary state where he had roots among the 44% of the electorate who are independents. He pulled enough of those votes to jump to the head of the Republican pack. Ron Paul ran strongly with independents throughout the primary season, in no small part because of his outspoken opposition to the Iraq war. McCain's capacity to attract large scale support from independents in the general election is doubtful, in light of his support for the war and his closeness to Bush.

1. This impact analysis of independent voters is based on exit poll data furnished to the media by Edison Research Associates. The data is available on major political websites (e.g., CNNPolitics.com, MSNBC.com). Pollsters asked a statistically valid sample of presidential primary voters: "No matter how you voted today, do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an independent or something else." Data were compiled on what percentage of the participants in the primary self identified themselves as "independent or something else" and for which candidate they voted. The above analysis is an arithmetic extrapolation of this data, computed in the states whose Democratic presidential primary was open to independents.



**OUELLETTE:** *And that's great. But I don't think being independent means just reaching across to Republicans.*

**OBAMA:** *Why...well, that includes independents. I mean, independents even better.*



III

Winston Churchill once famously described Franklin Delano Roosevelt's decision to join Britain on the battlefield against Hitler and the Nazis thusly: "You can always count on Americans to do the right thing," Churchill said, "after they've tried everything else." I might be tempted to say something similar about the Democratic Party's plan to relate to independents (depending of course, on what it does).

In 2004, the Democrats tried mightily to win the presidential election for John Kerry by energizing and mobilizing their core constituencies. The lessons from the brutal loss of Ohio were not lost on the Obama camp. Would-be kingmaker George Soros poured millions of his billions into ACT (Americans Coming Together) to bring out organized labor and other traditionally Democratic urban voters for Kerry, only to be eclipsed by Karl Rove's suburban/exurban vote pulling machine.

In 2008 Hillary and Bill, partisans to the end, were blind to the need to move "outside the box," so they never saw that the Obama strategy to round up delegates in the "red" caucus states would put them at a severe disadvantage – one from which they never recovered. They also underes-

timated the extent to which independents would come to influence Obama and shape his anti-Washington, we-need-reform, it's-time-for-a-change message, a message that helped him bond with a majority of this crucial group of voters.

That bonding was not one-sided, meaning that the 30-year project of up-from-the-bottom independent organizing had grown sufficiently to give independents the capacity to articulate a reform vision and leverage their position. Locally based, nationally linked independent voter groups engaged the presidential candidates from the earliest moments of the primary and caucus season. Their message was clear – independents want our own voice, we are not merely swing voters, we have an agenda for political reform and we want the presidential candidates to recognize that and to recognize us. The New Hampshire Committee for an Independent Voice, American Independent Movement of Idaho, Massachusetts' Coalition of Independent Voters, California's *IndependentVoice.org*, Independent Texans, North Carolina Independents for Change, the Alabama Independent Movement, the South Carolina Independence Party, Georgia iMove, Independent Pennsylvanians, South Dakota Voice of Independents, and many more such groups, branded themselves as the emerging spokespersons for the larger movement





of independents. Many of them backed Obama and campaigned to bring out an independent vote in the open primary and caucus states.

Barack Obama is the Democratic nominee and if he is elected president of the United States, it will be because the Democrats broke out of their partisan isolationism *and* because independents materialized a sufficient level of political self-determination to become recognizable, if minor (still very minor), players in the major party game.

But a new dynamic sets up a new acid test. For as surely as the Democratic Party had to turn to independents to navigate its way back to power, it will also look to absorb the nascent independent movement as soon as it gets the chance. In short order, the mettle and the tactical acuity of the independent movement will be tested.

#### IV



It was the summer of 1980, just a few months before the election when my congressional candidate would disappear, as would the Democrats' hold on the White House. Someone – I don't remember who – had given me a floor pass to the Democratic Party National Convention at Madison Square Garden. The atmosphere was strained the day I went. Jimmy Carter survived a challenge from Ted Kennedy and became the party's nominee, but many Democrats were already predicting that the weakened incumbent would not survive the Reagan assault in November. Somewhere in between speeches and balloting, I ran into Stanley Friedman, boss of the Democratic organization in the Bronx.

I had crossed paths with Friedman a year earlier in 1979, when he had skipped over the senior black state senator, Joe Galiber, in his choice for Bronx borough president. There was a vacancy because the incumbent had been sent to jail. A white loyalist had gotten the party nod (it was, as I said, still the era of racial paternalism) and Galiber was in the mood for a fight. He approached a union of welfare recipients – the New York City Unemployed and Welfare Council – about supporting his insurgent bid against the Friedman candidate in the primary. The Council had close ties to the fledgling independent movement and a deal was struck: we independents would back Galiber against his own party machine; then, win or lose the primary, Galiber would run as an independent in the general election.

Friedman's candidate won the Democratic primary, Galiber continued his run as an independent and

came in second, carrying the South and Central Bronx, which was largely black and Hispanic. The Democratic organization held onto the seat. But it was rattled by the strength of the new alliance between black and Latino voters and independents.

When I saw Friedman at the Garden, he was suave and urbane in a local kingpin sort of way. After a hesitant handshake (at the time party bosses were just learning how to shake a woman's hand) he made me an offer. "Why don't you join with us?" he asked me. "Why don't you become a Democrat? You've made your point. Now you can be a serious player."

I smiled (I was just learning how to smile when talking to The Establishment) and replied, "No thanks, Stanley. We're going to hang in with independent politics a little longer." "OK," he shrugged, and went off to find a crony. I think it was the first time I truly understood that party bosses really don't like it when people are independent and they can't control them. Incidentally, Friedman ended up going to jail, too, for his involvement in some crazy scheme involving parking meters.

This long forgotten scene came back to me recently as I was thinking about the political blowback that invariably accompanies any expression of political power by independents. It's no accident that top New York Democrats (including, fittingly enough, Hillary Clinton) and some Republicans conspired to take control of the New York City Independence Party after its progressive local leaders put Michael Bloomberg in City Hall. Nor is it a coincidence that the Idaho Republican Party has gone to court in an effort to impose a closed primary system on voters in Idaho – a state which has always maintained a nonpartisan system – at a moment when independents have begun to use open primaries to exercise influence.

When Barack Obama becomes his party's official nominee and if he is elected President of the United States, he also becomes the head of the Democratic Party. He will set the tone for the country and for his party. And he will also set the tone for how his party relates to the independent political movement. Will the path be one of coalition? Of cooptation? Of coercion?

Independents are coming slowly, but measurably, to discover our own power. Most of us will vote for Obama in November. We'll celebrate his victory, if he wins. But when the inaugural confetti is all swept away (do they use confetti in January?) and the politics of hope are settled in at the White House, we'll have to ask ourselves a question. Is this the Rainbow we've been waiting for? **NEO**