



2006 SPRING EDITOR'S NOTE

The latest Gallup poll shows that 34% of Americans consider themselves political independents, surpassing both Republicans (32%) and Democrats (33%). The Committee for a Unified Independent Party (CUIP), the national think tank and training center for the independent movement, is currently conducting a survey of 250 activist independents in 35 states. Among other questions, they're asked why they believe the trend toward independence continues to grow.

The explanations so far have been largely what you'd expect: Americans are "disillusioned," "disgusted," "dissatisfied," "discouraged" and "damn sick" of the two parties and their partisanship. When asked if they thought "the attitude of the Democratic and Republican parties toward independent voters has changed over the last few election cycles," 69% said "yes," some adding that the major parties have come to see independents as "a group to contend with," "not marginal" but "gaining momentum." These independents observed that while the major parties may have a greater recognition of the power of independent voters, they "don't want to share power," "see us as a threat" and "do dirty things to indies."

The pool of respondents in this survey, all self-identified independents, are part of CUIP's national network of activists. Some have fought efforts to limit the participation of independent voters in the New

Hampshire presidential primaries (successfully), others campaigned for nonpartisan redistricting reform in California and Ohio (unsuccessfully); all are building grassroots committees of independent voters in 30 states. Some are Ralph Nader supporters or veterans of the Ross Perot movement; others are veterans of black empowerment movements who have lately turned to independent politics. The majority have never been politically active before.

Most oppose the war in Iraq. But only 34% said that if a major figure were to run for president in 2008 as an independent, such a candidate "would have to make opposition to the war a centerpiece of their campaign."

These activists do not subscribe to the idea that independents are necessarily empowered by backing an independent presidential candidate. Eighty-two percent believe independents should play the field and "use all opportunities," favoring what one respondent described as "a more nonpartisan approach." Thus they'd be likely to part ways with retired Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan, who recently predicted that there is a "vast untended center from which a well financed independent presidential candidate is likely to emerge in 2008 or, if not then, in 2012." In other words, these activists do not take an independent presidential bid to be the only way for independents to gain sway. Their focus is building a movement from the bottom up, which will give them greater influence on the entire political field - whether or not Greenspan's prediction turns out to be on the money, so to speak.

They are conflicted about John McCain's current outreach to the Christian Right. Fifty-one percent reacted negatively, commenting that it makes him "less of an outsider," "another weasel like the rest of them," and makes *them* "sad" and "cautious." But 40% said such appeals did not "impact negatively" on their views of McCain, and described him as "doing what he has to." Still, they expressed the hope that "he's not just a hypocrite."

Presented with a list of potential major party presidential contenders, most did not know of or have an opinion about George Pataki, Mark Warner, Chuck Hagel, Mitt Romney or Bill Richardson. Joseph Biden was described as "too politically entrenched" and "old school," Wesley Clark as "too conservative" and "too liberal." (Now there's a Clintonian candidate for you!) John Edwards is "nice" but "oatmeal," Bill Frist "scary," John Kerry both "smart" and "obsolete," Rudy Giuliani "interesting," Hillary Clinton "not very independent." Russ Feingold was said to be "outside the box" but thought to have "no chance of winning." Al Sharpton was "too controversial" and "OK, if he runs as an independent," while John McCain was "awesome" and facing his "last chance."

In a final question, respondents are asked to choose from among a dozen adjectives to describe the independent movement. Top-ranked was "determined," followed closely by "visionary," "outside the box," and "innovative." A self-reflexive note - "underdeveloped" was chosen by about 40% of respondents. "Idealistic" and "revolutionary" scored in the 30% range, while "spiritual," "naïve" and "fringe" brought up the rear at about 7% each.

Generally speaking, independents who are actively base-building - but not invested in party-building - are buoyed by the changes they have helped to shape. When Carole Strayhorn, the state comptroller in Texas, left the Republican Party to run for governor as an Independent, challenging the Republican incumbent (the latest polls have her at 25%, running a strong second behind Governor Rick Perry in a four-way race), she turned to the leader of Independent Texans, part of the CUIP national network, for help. Strayhorn is among those enlightened major party figures who not only see the power of political independence, but grasp that tapping into organized on-the-ground networks of non-aligned, proreform voters can crack open partisan control.

Indeed, Strayhorn is one of at least six significant independent gubernatorial candidates to emerge so far this year, and the list includes other breakaways from the major parties - including Ben Westlund, a Republican state senator in Oregon; businessman-turned-against-the-grain-politician Christy Mihos in Massachusetts; and anti-corruption activist Russ Diamond in Pennsylvania. There are gubernatorial battles underway for a major party nomination in open primary states where independents are eligible to cast ballots; one of them is California, where Democrats Steve Westly and Phil Angelides are battling it out for their party's nod. For all of these contenders, the way they construct their relationship to becoming-organized independent voters is key.

For the independent movement, meanwhile, these campaigns represent opportunities to engage with the political process and, in doing so, to grow in size and stature. That is all part of setting the stage for independent voters to play an influential role in the 2008 race for the White House.

-Jacqueline Salit, Executive Editor