

Jackie Salit's Conference Call Talk, December 15, 2015

I want to thank everyone for the questions, they were very helpful and encouraging to read. Not just for the *content* of the questions, but for the *spirit* of the questions. The spirit was "We, this community of independents, feel a deep sense of responsibility for our country and for what's going on." That was very inspiring and motivating to me. So thank you for taking the time to do that, and for giving that. So let's get right to them.

Q: A number of our activists are interested in looking closer at the presidential primary. There is a lot of support among voters for anti-establishment candidates running within the two major parties—Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Ben Carson and others. What do you see as the significance of this? How do you see them being able to use their position to advance the cause of independent voters, or independents being able to use their candidacies to advance our cause?

When I read all the questions, there were a good number of people who asked this question based on the idea that the success of the Donald Trump campaign to date and the success of the Bernie Sanders campaign to date were about the same thing, the anti-establishment uproar in American politics—one on the right, one on the left—but basically mirror images of one another.

In certain respects, this is accurate. But, to be a little more precise, the Trump and Sanders campaigns are perhaps *reactions* to the same thing, even if they are not the same reaction.

American power is changing, America's place in the world is changing, the world is changing. It's becoming more unstable and dangerous and unpredictable.

Mr. Trump is appealing to his supporters with the idea that America can establish a kind of economic and political *dominance* that will benefit ordinary Americans and make the world safer. In Mr. Trump's case, he is saying that neither the elite Republican leadership nor the social conservative Republican leadership can engage, and this is a popular position in the Republican base. After all, for the last 50 years, the Republican Party has been torn between its social conservative wing and its global elite wing and Trump comes along and says, basically, "I have a solution to that schism. It's me! I can make a good deal."

On the Democratic Party side, the party has a long history of being torn by the conflict between its anti-corporate, anti-war left/liberal wing and its pragmatic centrist wing. The Sanders/Clinton conflict is the latest incarnation of that. But the political environment is quite different, and many people want pragmatic *and* creative solutions that go beyond the status quo of both the left and the center.

Independents, it seems to me, have the ability to see a somewhat broader picture, and for me, seeing that picture and responding to it is connected to answering the questions that so many of you raised.

Let me try to explain, very briefly. We are in what's known as "the presidential primary season." This is the season, the part of the cycle, where the parties choose their presidential candidates. They are often bloody, often spectacles. I know all the pundits are saying that this primary

is more of a spectacle than any other primary ever. I'm not sure that's true because spectacle is a relative term, and given that so much of our culture is celebrity culture or spectacle culture, the primary seems to fit into that. But even if the pundits and media are right that it is more of a spectacle, it would be nice if the pundits and media acknowledged that *they* are part and parcel of making it a spectacle.

But, back to the primary season. The role, the purpose of the *party primaries* is not simply to select a candidate, it is also to allow the parties to perform their main function, which is to act as a *channel* for managing—and resolving—the conflicts in American society, to manage those conflicts as they appear inside the parties, and then to manage those conflicts as they appear *between* the parties themselves, in the larger American public. That's what parties are supposed to do.

But here's the problem, or the *new* situation, the new contradiction. Growing numbers of Americans, inside and outside the parties, no longer recognize the political parties as the necessary or appropriate or desirable or trustworthy institutions to do that job, to play that role. That is, in my opinion, what is making this year's primaries volatile in a new way, in a different way, because the American people are raising questions about the role of the parties and whether or not they are satisfied with them.

Today, 43 percent of Americans are independents. And the independent movement, and you are its leaders and its voice, the independent movement is demanding changes—structural changes in the electoral and political process such that political parties can no longer control the mechanisms of political decision making. The fact is that the party system, in its current form, is behind where the American public is at.

In response to the question about whether Mr. Trump and Senator Sanders or Dr. Carson or any of those candidates can advance the cause of independent voters, the answer is that they are, whether they intend to or not. How? Because their anti-establishment campaigns are exposing the limits of our democracy as it is currently structured. They are exposing the parties' inability to manage conflict. And, the weaker they are, the more authoritarian they become. The more authoritarian they become, the more they alienate themselves from the majority of the American people. Now, we have to *do* something with that. But for me, at least so far, the 2016 presidential election is about that—about how the conflicts and contradictions in the parties and in the country aren't being resolved by the parties. This is more explosive right now in the Republican Party than in the Democratic Party, but there are conflicts there that will not go away, no matter who wins the nomination.

Q: Keeping with the theme of the Presidential, three more questions we'd love to hear your thoughts about. What leadership can the independent political movement provide to the American people during the presidential election in this time of conflict, violence and terrorism both in the United States and around the world? Also is there a Perot moment for independents in 2016? Finally, what are your thoughts on endorsing a candidate next year?

That's a complicated question, something I think about constantly and am glad to be sharing some of my thoughts on this tonight. First a few polling numbers of interest. These won't surprise you, but they're worth reviewing. Interestingly, though Mr. Trump has talked about the possibility of leaving the Republican Party and running as an independent, he is not hugely

popular with independents. A recent CBS/New York Times poll showed that among independents, 8% are excited about his becoming president; 23% are optimistic about what a Trump presidency might accomplish; 26% are concerned, in a negative way, about Mr. Trump being in the White House; 41% of independents are just straight out scared about a Trump presidency. So 67% or two thirds of independents are concerned or scared about the consequences of Trump being in the White House. By the way, the feelings of independents about Hillary Clinton are not altogether different: 4% are excited about her becoming president; 35% optimistic; 27% concerned; 32% scared; 59% concerned or scared.

Another note on the independents and the Democrats. Quinnipiac did a poll recently where independents were asked who shared their values more, Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton. 46% said Sanders; 33% Clinton. Then the poll asked who is more honest and trustworthy? 64% said Sanders; 26% Clinton.

Now, some political people look at these numbers, including many of us, and say hey, surely there is room for an independent presidential candidate who can be a viable alternative to the two parties and their candidates. Mr. Trump does not appear to have that kind of support from independents, though he says he is considering it. Senator Sanders *does* appear to have that base of support, though he is not considering that. He ruled out that option when he began his campaign.

But the question is what leadership can we provide in this political contest? I think we have to take every opportunity we can to expose, to engage, to teach the American people the ways in which the system itself is not working for us, and we have to challenge those who insist that the political system

must remain the same. I do not believe that our movement is strong enough to reshape the presidency right now. Latasha Willis of Mississippi sent in a question about whether President Obama fulfilled the description that he was America's first independent president. My answer to that is no, though independents gave him his margin of victory over Clinton in the primary and supported him over John McCain in the general election. The Democratic Party controlled the White House in spite of that. So, we are not strong enough, *yet*, to reshape the presidency. But we do have the capacity to reshape the political system.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. As you know, we've been working in Arizona on a campaign to bring an initiative for nonpartisan elections and for disclosure of all campaign contributions over \$10,000 to the ballot in November, 2016. At the same time, we're also working on a campaign to pressure the Democratic and Republican parties in the state of Arizona to open their presidential primaries to independent voters. Independents are 36% of the registered voters in that state. There are 1.2 million independent voters in Arizona, many of them are Latino, many of them are young people, and we've been running a campaign directed at the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Four thousand people have sent letters or emails or phone calls to open up their presidential primaries to independent voters. The Republican Party is saying, "Oh, we really can't do that." We sent them a legal letter telling them that they can. We're going to the Attorney General to make a request for an opinion on this. Everyone is telling us that the Republican Party is feeling the heat, that the Democratic Party is feeling the heat from us.

I would like us to broaden this campaign beyond the borders of Arizona. I want the parties and the candidates to feel us. When the results of the

survey came out that showed that something like 60% of Trump supporters would support him if he left the Republican Party and went independent—those are Republicans—I put out a tweet that said “Let’s give Trump the test of what it means to be a true independent. Will you call on the Republican National Committee to open all the Republican presidential primaries and caucuses to include independents?” There’s been no answer to that. Here’s the thing. There are fifteen states with closed presidential primaries or caucuses, an additional six states closed in the Republican primaries and caucuses and eleven states where independents can vote but they must join a party in order to do so.

I really want to encourage folks from those states to generate some more bottom-up heat on the parties relative to the 2016 presidential campaign that makes clear to them that 43% of the people in this country are independents. We want a system that is inclusive and fair to us and we want a culture change in the way the primaries are conducted.

Q: Picking up on this theme about what independents can do at this moment, one person asks if there is a way to get the candidates to go on record on the Delaney bill? Also, In Iowa and New Hampshire, activists are looking for ways to amplify independents’ voices in these states that are influential in the early stages of the presidential race, and want to know if you have a strategy for making our presence known there within that context. Others want to know whether it would be helpful to support more independent candidates, and build local independent political clubs across the country, or to run independents in the major parties as the Tea Party has. I hear in all these questions people grappling with what

there is do at this moment. Can you speak to some of these ways that our activists are looking to build the movement?

That is so important. My response is mainly to talk about what people are doing. There's tremendous leadership initiative all around the country. If you look at, for example, getting the voices of independents out into the public square, Randy Miller and Tiani Coleman wrote a piece that was published in the *Salt Lake City Tribune*. Bob Perls did a radio show that ran on *SantaFe.com*. Kim Wright, Patrick McWhortor, Al Bell and Jim Morrison all had pieces in the *Arizona Capitol Times* or the *Arizona Republic*.

Univision, a major Spanish-language television outlet, just did a major piece on the nightly news featuring Armida Lopez and Danny Ortega talking about open primaries, the numbers of people who are becoming independents, and the distrust and dissatisfaction with the political parties. You referenced the Delaney campaign, how do we get the presidential candidates to speak to that? We should go to events where they are and ask them. Thirty-five thousand people have signed postcards to their local elected Congresspeople asking them to sign on as co-sponsors of the Delaney Bill, the Open Our Democracy Act. That's a very big number and it's getting bigger every day.

Here's another new development that I think is interesting, and I wanted to encourage folks to consider this in your arsenal of activities to bring forth the independent movement. In Arizona, Arizona State University and the Morrison Institute recently conducted an extensive survey with independent voters and focus groups with independent voters, and they published a report. It's the first of its kind in Arizona and it created a profile of who the independent voter is. While there are a lot of defects, I think, in their conclusions, I think the fact that they *did* the survey and that they held a

major event which Cathy Stewart, our Vice President of National Development spoke at, tells you something about the extent to which a cross-section of forces in the political world, in the academic world, in the political science world, are saying, "You know what? We cannot ignore this phenomenon anymore. There really are 43% of Americans who are independent." And the explosiveness of primaries, the inability of the parties to control the candidates and the conversation, the levels of dissatisfaction with Congress – all of that means that we've got to start to understand who these people are.

I think it's a great opportunity to push that, and I want to encourage everyone who is on the call to take a look at universities and colleges in your area, and begin to set up meetings to talk with the history department, the political science department, the media department. Show them the ASU Morrison Institute study and talk to them about conducting a similar one. I'm going to ask Sarah Lyons, who runs our national spokesperson trainings that many of you have been a part of—these wonderful conference calls where you learn how to talk to the media, elected officials and to run campaigns locally—I want to ask her if she will do a training to help all of you get up to speed on the ASU survey and to prepare to reach out to colleges and universities in your area.

We also have campaigns going in South Dakota and Florida, building up towards referenda, hopefully, on open primaries. Dr. Jessie Fields spoke on the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act at an event sponsored by the National Action Network where she stated that the legacy of the Civil Rights movement has to be that no voter should be required to join a political party as a condition of voting.

There are so many different kinds of creative activities. Should you support independent candidates? Yes, go find them. Go support them. But, teach them what it means to be an independent. As a lot of you know, when people run for office as independents, they do so more out of a sense that you can't really can't bring alternative messages out through the Democrat and Republican Parties, but they don't know that there is a movement. They don't know that structural political reform is the key to changing the dynamics in American politics and transferring power from the parties to the people.

So, there are dozens of things for people to be involved in. These are just some of them. But I just want to say that I think the work that people have been doing, the creativity, the ingenuity, the leadership, the strength, the militancy, the intelligence, the consistency and insistency of the work that people have been doing, has been truly wonderful.

Q: Now, a number of our independents are asking how did we get to the point where the major parties control and monopolize the political process, and actively work to exclude others. They are asking why the two major parties think they have the right to control the political process? Does the current system have the capacity to represent the diverse concerns of independents? Why don't candidates address issues of independent voter nonparticipation in the primaries? Could you speak to this glaring disparity in our country that we think of as a democracy—the disparity between the power of the parties and the voice of the voters?

How did we get to this point? That's an important question. This goes back to the issue we were discussing earlier about the role that the parties play in managing conflicts in the country, and how those conflicts are becoming bigger, more embedded. Income inequality, poverty, police violence, border control, environmental pollution, these conflicts are not being resolved, and the parties believe they need to control the political process more tightly than ever, and so they do.

The parties push in the direction of greater control, not just of the process, but of their candidates, of elected officials and of their voters. People have asked me if I think we, as a movement, should support a particular presidential candidate in 2016. As I said earlier, I don't see a scenario in which we can take the presidency in 2016, though I do believe we can take the process. Maybe something will present itself, I'm always open.

First of all, let me say I encourage all of you, if there is a candidate that you favor, to support that candidate, provided that you find ways to push that candidate to support leveling the playing field for all voters and for all candidates.

Many people in our networks want to support Senator Sanders, in particular. Not everyone, of course, some feel he's too far to the left. I am sympathetic to many of the issues he's talking about. He's asking a set of moral questions about what kind of country we want to be. I might even choose to vote for him in the New York presidential primary if I could, *but I can't* because I'm a registered independent and I am barred from voting in that primary. I wish Senator Sanders would speak out about that injustice, instead of having his campaign tell independents to re-register as Democrats so we can vote for him. I wish Senator Sanders had agreed to meet with Dr.

Lenora Fulani and me a year ago, when we asked him to, or had agreed to meet with Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein when she asked him to. But he wouldn't.

In fact, I read an article recently in *Counterpunch* that makes the argument that Sanders is more electable than Hillary because independents like him and will vote for him in November. Not a bad argument, but if it's true, then I'd like to see him reach out with more sensitivity and courage to the independent movement than he has, at least to date.

So, your question was, does the current system have the capacity to represent the concerns of independents? My answer is no. But the question doesn't go far enough. Does the current system have the capacity to address the concerns of the American people? No.

Q: A number of people in our network are thinking about the issue of party. Some want to explore issues relating to creating a new party, whether it's viable; others are interested in looking at support for—and independents forming alliances with—alternative parties currently out there and how our support for top two meshes with that issue. There are some wondering about whether independents could share a platform without becoming the oatmeal of the two party system. Can you speak to the issue of party and the advancement of the independent cause?

This is a very important issue and has been since the beginning of our movement. And don't forget, IndependentVoting.org is the name of our organization; our founding name is the Committee for a Unified Independent Party. We retain that name because we retain a vision that the most

important thing to develop in our movement is a unification of independents, whether it's in the form of a party or of a process. I think people tend to think in terms of party because that's the natural way to think, that makes sense. But what I'm seeing, at a very practical level, is that the coming together that is happening in this country today is *not* happening around party. If anything, it's happening about anti-party or not party.

I just came back from a week in Arizona where we're working on a campaign for nonpartisan reform and campaign contribution disclosure, working to bring these two issues together. The coalition that's backing this is a very diverse coalition. We have major leaders from the Republican side who are saying, "I can no longer function politically in the ways that the Republican Party is dictating to us that we must function." We have major leaders on the Democratic side saying, "I can no longer function as a political person in the ways and according to the rules that have been promulgated by the Democratic Party." We have business leaders, community leaders, and independent leaders in the state. I literally just came back from several days of sitting in rooms with these very diverse Americans, talking together about what we're going to do to regain control of our democracy and to make it a viable instrument for governance and for fulfilling the aspirations of the American people.

That's why I think unification and alliances and partnerships that cross ideological lines, that cross partisan lines, that cross geographic lines, that historical lines, cultural lines, is not just on the agenda. It is happening. And I think it is happening not under the rubric of the Democrats and Republicans. And not even under the rubric of alternative parties. It is happening under the umbrella of diverse Americans coming together with the leadership of independents to change the structure, the rules of the

game, and the culture of the way we do politics. I am enormously optimistic about that.

What I've seen in Arizona and South Dakota and Florida and New York and California and Texas and Illinois and parts of New England and all around this country, I see that happening when *we*, the grassroots independent movement, make it possible for that to happen. I think we can feel very proud about that. We also have to feel very challenged by that. It is difficult work. And it's not oatmeal, to go to your question. It's not the lowest common denominator. Frankly, it's the highest common denominator, because it's the denominator of democracy, which is what the foundation of this country was built on and how the country grows and does the right thing.

I'm enormously energized by this. I think the presidential season is a great one for us, even if we never have anything to do with a single presidential candidate along the way. I think we're growing, I think we're leading, we're influencing, we're educating, we're making a difference. We're setting the state for the future.

Q: Jackie, some of our folks had more personal questions for you. Why did you become an independent? Have you considered doing something different? What keeps you motivated?

I wanted to be with and work with and learn from different kinds of people, with different kinds of views and experiences, different understandings of how our country needs to grow and develop. I felt that being in a party made it impossible to do that. When I think about other activities, I think of

a play that I wrote called *Votes*, which is going to open in New York, off-off Broadway on April 1st. It's a musical, a political play. It was a great experience for me, both as a playwright and as a songwriter, so I liked doing that. But I like the experience of being with the American people. Maybe that sounds corny, but it is really true. It is what keeps me motivated, and I feel very optimistic. I feel pretty certain that we're not going to be able to take the American presidency next year, we're not strong enough. But I do think we can take the American political process to some new places and remake it in some positive ways, and that's very gratifying to me.