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Declaration of the Independents

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The widely-discussed yet continually misunderstood "independent voter" is neither ideologically driven nor a closet partisan (be it Democrat nor Republican). We are not "swing voters," nor are we "moderates." Rather, we come from across the political spectrum and the one thing we agree upon is the need to minimize partisan control over the political process.

How? By increasing the participation of voters through reforms such as open primaries, nonpartisan redistricting and ballot access. When elections roll around, we vote for candidates who can help advance the prospects of nonpartisan governance. That's who we are and that's what we want.

But why do we want greater participation? And why do we want nonpartisan governance?

As Jacqueline Salit of IndependentVoting.org recently commented, "Americans are starved for dialogue on the developmental issues our country faces ... Yet, both the subject and the form of political discussion remain highly controlled ... Independents are those Americans who believe that this country is actually supposed to be a democracy. They're Americans who express the need for an inclusive, democratic process in which we can talk honestly and openly about the issues we face ..."

We agree.

The question of having a more open political process - of increasing participation, of less partisanship in governance - is a question of development, our development as a people and a nation. People yearn to express themselves (that's as much true of 6-year-olds as it is of 60-year-olds). Greater participation can produce innovations in society when the old approaches, old methods, old ways, keep us bogged down. Political parties - principally concerned with their self-preservation - get more in the way of our development than they help facilitate such growth.

That's been true throughout the course of American history. Only when the outsiders - the independents - apply enough pressure on the parties in power do they adopt (some would say "co-opt") the ideas and demands made by those outsiders. This was true of the planks advanced by the Populists and labor activists of the late 19th century (from the

eight-hour workday to the direct elections of U.S. senators) to the civil rights movement of the 20th century (which overturned Jim Crow legislation in the South).

Today, independents question the ubiquitous control parties have over the electoral process. In North Carolina, for instance, rules established by the two major parties and enacted into law through the legislature under their control, allow members of only the Republican and Democratic parties to be seated on county boards of elections. But that's just the tip of the iceberg (the icing out of independents): non-major party candidates seeking to appear on the ballot for office for a statewide seat need to gather upwards of 85,000 signatures; the Democratic and Republican party candidates don't need to gather a single signature, as they are automatically placed on the ballot through the election laws they devised.

It's completely self-serving and self-perpetuating. The parties control the electoral machinery, and - as perniciously - they over-determine what issues get raised, how they get discussed and ultimately what legislation gets passed. Those who make the rules, rule.

Even with one in four North Carolina voters registered as "unaffiliated," with two out of three new registered voters signing up as such across the state, we have no representation in the state legislature, reflecting similar patterns across the nation.

Obviously, Americans are demanding something other than partisan and ideologically driven politics. In the final analysis, independents seem better positioned than their partisan brothers and sisters to make democratic and developmental demands upon our elected leaders. Being less tied to a party allows for such a degree of openness, and is truly more democratic than the kind of polarized and polarizing dialogue that passes as national political conversation - from fixing our economy and public education to foreign policy and the future of our energy sources. The possibility for a more open and developmental conversation is something that independents, broadly speaking, have in common - regardless of where they generally land on the political spectrum.

Across the nation, with a plurality of Americans now self-identifying as independent (according to the latest Gallup Poll, fully 40 percent) and with historically low approval ratings of Congress, it is both incumbent upon President Barack Obama and those who are challenging him for the presidency to pay closer attention to the demands for greater participation among independents. Quite simply, we are the hope and the future of America.

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