

ASHLEY: Independent voters make up about 40% of the voting public, but you wouldn't know it from the media coverage.

RICHARD: No, you would not. Political reporting is often about red versus blue. Independents tend to get overlooked and mischaracterized. So we're going to find out why the assumptions about them are so often wrong. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. In this show, we look at a group of voters that makes up a growing slice of the U.S. population, including a lot of young people.

RICHARD: Our guests are Jackie Salit and John Opdycke. Jackie is the author of Independence Rising and President of Independent Voting, an organization dedicated to bringing respect, recognition, and reform to independent voters. John Opdycke is President of Open Primaries, which campaigns for primary elections where every American can vote, not just registered Republicans or Democrats.

ASHLEY: Jackie, if there's one thing that a lot of people misunderstand about independent voters, what is it?

JACKIE: I would say the one thing is that when an American decides to identify themselves as an independent, they are making a statement both about themselves and about their feelings about the state of politics in this country. I sometimes like to say that they're making a statement of noncompliance with the system, and I think that it's time that that purpose and that sensibility is respected and recognized across the political field. Independents care deeply about this country, and they don't like the direction that things are going in.

JOHN: Yeah, I would say that the biggest misconception is that independents are moderates, that we're somehow in-between Democrat and Republican. If you try to attach some kind of ideological label to independents, you miss the whole point of independents. It's not an alternative ideology. It is a cry for help. It is saying, "We can't believe this is the state of American politics. Can't we do it differently? Can't we do it better? Can't we break free of all the old, Cold-War-era ways that we do things?" But a lot of people reduce all that to, "Oh, these are moderates," and I think that's dead wrong.

RICHARD: Independent voters play a vital role in elections and as citizens. How many people identify as independent or just simply reject party labels?

JOHN: What we know is this: nationally, 42% to 46% of Americans say they identify themselves as independents. That includes the nonpartisan voter registration states and the partisan voter registration states. When you look at voter registration, the numbers are skyrocketing. Independents are on track to be the largest or second-largest group of voters in the 30 states that have partisan voter registration by the year 2030. In some states, they're already the biggest number of voters.

RICHARD: Could you explain for listeners what's different about those 30 states from the others? What do we mean by partisan voter registration?

JOHN: Well, when you register to vote, you have to indicate, do you want to be a Democrat? Do you want to be a Republican? Do you want to be a Libertarian, a Green, a Peace and Freedom, some other party? Or do you want to not be in a political party? And of those 30 states, sometimes they call those

independents blanks or unaffiliated or "decline to state" or "none of the above." They have different terminologies for them, all of which are derogatory.

RICHARD: Jackie, John said that the number of independents, people who identify as independents, is growing fast. Is that your experience?

JACKIE: Oh, very much so, and it really is across all sectors of the American public. In the month after the events of January 6th, the number went up to 50%. But when you look at different groupings of Americans, whether it's Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, 40% to 45% identify as independents. Among Latino Americans, the numbers are above 40%, in some states even higher. Among younger African American voters, 30% among the so-called Millennials, who we just used to call young people.

ASHLEY: Why are a lot of people rejecting the party label and describing themselves as independent?

JACKIE: The number one reason that people say they become independents is that they want to vote for the person, not the party. The number two reason is that the political parties are corrupt and interested more in their own power than they are in what's good for the country.

ASHLEY: It sounds like, from what you just said, Jackie, that a lot of young people are calling themselves independent. Across the board, how does it look?

JACKIE: It's one of those phenomena, there's a lot of things that feed it, I think. First of all, they didn't go through some kind of social, political event or process in which a particular party became identified as the leadership force or as the best political reflection whether that was the Democratic Party for civil rights and anti-war, the Republican Party for the Reagan Revolution, different cultural, social, political trends that tied different generations to one or the other political party.

Younger people are coming of age now, and they're kind of like, "Well, wait a second. This thing looks like a mess. We need to reimagine the process. We need to redesign the thing here, and I don't know that either political party really represents the kinds of things that I'm concerned with." So I think that's what's driving it.

ASHLEY: John, anything to add?

JOHN: Maybe one thing to add is that there are real consequences for the failure of the bipartisan political establishment to solve in any meaningful way some of the generational issues whether it's the border, whether it's infrastructure, education. You can't just turn these issues into political footballs and use them to gin up the base of support year after year, decade after decade and not expect there to be consequences. So one of the consequences is that more and more Americans don't trust either party to think about the country. They're just thinking about their own party and the next election cycle and how this issue going unsolved is going to help them. That's one of the tragedies or ironies of American politics, is that unsolved issues are more valuable than solved issues.

RICHARD: What do you mean by that, that unsolved issues are of greater use to the parties than solved issues?

JOHN: Well, as long as the border is—I'm not obsessing on that issue. I'm just using it as an example because it's a humanitarian crisis that, going back to Ronald Reagan, they've been trying to fix it, and

they can't. Well, that's because the Republicans love the fact that there's a mess there because they get to raise millions of dollars and gin people up. "Look at this. Look at these migrants coming forward and coming through our border."

And the Democrats equally gain certain things about, "How racist the Republicans are, and how anti-people of color they are," and they can project how meanspirited they are and, "We're the party of compassion." They don't want to come to a deal. They want to keep this thing a mess because it allows them to raise money and demonize the other side as the bad guys. That's easy politics.

ASHLEY: There are a lot of different types of independents. Can we make some generalizations about who they are and what they think?

JACKIE: I would say there's probably three generalizations that you could make. One, in a society that is governed entirely by two-party premises, they've decided that they don't want to be categorized that way. To me, that's a big thing. This is a society, by the way, that obsesses constantly about identity and about people having the right to identify themselves as they choose, whether that's relative to gender or racial and ethnic heritage, but, in this arena, if you identify yourself as an independent, this is frowned upon or distrusted or discounted.

So, number one, I think a generalization that can be made is that people are saying, "You know what? The categories that exist don't apply to me." Secondly, independents tend very much to want to live in a society that has harmony, that has mutual respect for fellow Americans, and believe that there is a way to run a society in which everyone can share in prosperity and progress. And third, I would say a generalization that you could apply is that independents are forward-looking. I think they have a vision of a political system that is not so entirely governed by partisan destructiveness.

JOHN: One of the things that question makes me think about—are there any generalities? I think one of the problems that we face is that by and large political science, professional political pundits have found a way to apply partisan generalities to independent voters and make them fit because independents are not another species. They live in the United States. They vote. They typically have two choices when they vote, and you can go through a dishonest process to make independents look just like Democrats and Republicans in the search for generalities.

RICHARD: Jackie's answer to Ashley's question, I found to be hopeful and refreshing, yet America is constantly being portrayed as rigidly, deeply divided. Do the views of the majority of voters actually intersect on a number of hot topics?

JACKIE: Sure. I mean, most people want to live in a nice and decent house and have opportunities for their kids and have a meaningful job and be able to take vacations and have enough money to both take care of a family and do fun things. It's not that complicated, really, but so many people are just finding it harder and harder to find that in their lives.

As John was saying earlier, unsolved problems are great fundraising tools and great tools for inflaming people and bringing people out to vote out of fear. The parties are vehicles of division right now. That's just how they operate. It's not a mystery. That's what they do, and they inflict that on the American public.

JOHN: Jackie said this thing in an op-ed a couple years ago. I don't remember what the topic was, but I remember this jumping out at me. What the parties do is they convert our differences into divisions. I've always carried that very close to my heart because I think that is one of the biggest calamities of modern American politics, is that here we are, this rich, diverse country of unbelievable difference in the most glorious, wonderful way, and converting that in some kind of alchemy into hardened, rigid partisan division is such a disservice because those differences—and, again, I'm just stealing from you, Jackie, if you will allow me—those differences are our biggest strength. They're what make this country so wonderful and so productive and so powerful. To reduce it to division is a real disservice to the people of this country.

RICHARD: What do we do with this? How do we have a political system that more accurately reflects the true views of voters?

JOHN: What I like about it is that right now, there's a lot of different people trying to answer that question, and we don't have a consensus, which I think is a good thing because that is a serious political mission. So people are building third parties like Andrew Yang and the Forward Party. There's efforts that I'm involved in to reform the primary system, which excludes independent voters and segregates people. There's efforts to change the way we do vote counting and draw districts. There are all kinds of experiments going on, and hopefully some combination of all that is going to lead to a less partisan-controlled political system.

JACKIE: I think something that has happened which is unhealthy for our country is that the role of government has been conflated with the role of the political parties. The government is supposed to be a nonpartisan infrastructure in which all of the distinctions and differences and possible different directions in policy get enacted, experimented with, implemented, etc.

But right now, those two functions are completely conflated, and it has led, I think, to a profound sense on the part of the governed that the government and that the political system has been bent in certain respects. So I think a lot of the reforms that are necessary have to do with separating those roles out: governance and politics, the government and political parties. They're not the same thing.

RICHARD: You're listening to Jackie Salit and John Opdycke on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. One of the best things about doing this podcast is hearing from listeners. We make this show because we know there are a lot of Common Grounders out there, and we'd love to hear from more of you. One easy way to tell us what you think is to take our survey.

RICHARD: Yeah, just go to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts and click the Survey link. Give us some feedback, and let us know which issues you want us to look at and who you'd like to hear from. You can leave us a note or send us a voice memo. We want to hear from you.

ASHLEY: And if you need another incentive to get in touch, Common Ground Committee is working with an organization called Ecology. They'll plant five trees for every survey taken.

RICHARD: So head over to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts and let us know what you think. Now back to our interview with John Opdycke and Jackie Salit.

ASHLEY: Independents are shut out of most primaries when only Democrats or Republicans can vote. Is that unfair, and, if so, why?

JOHN: It's very unfair. It's unfair because these are publicly funded and publicly administered elections, which goes to the point Jackie was just making about this conflation between the government and the political parties. The primaries is one area that you see that conflation most dramatically, but it's not just an issue of unfairness. What we have set up in this country is a system in which in order to get elected to office, be it Congress or state legislature or even president, it's a two-tiered process.

First and most importantly, you have to satisfy the most engaged partisan activists. Those are your true constituents. Then you have to go on to a general election, which 80% of the time, you either don't have an opponent, or you have a token opponent. So the primary becomes the only election of consequence in 80% of the elections in this country. So, essentially, we're turning over real power, real influence to small bands of the most partisan Americans, and then we wonder why 80% of our members of Congress act like petty partisans.

Well, they're not stupid people. It's because that's who elects them. So it's, yes, it's unfair to independents. They should be included, but the whole system should be re-engineered so that the American people, in all their totality, have more influence and say-so than small bands of partisans.

RICHARD: If we were to open up primaries, party primaries, to all voters including independents, what would that do?

JOHN: If you want to really change the game, you have to go to what they've done in California and Alaska, Nebraska, and Washington States, which is get rid of party primaries altogether. Just have a public primary where all the candidates get to run, all the voters get to vote for whoever they want. So you're not locked in to a predetermined set of candidates based on your party registration. You just vote for the candidates you want, and then the most popular candidates—it might be the top two, it might be the top four. It varies state to state—they go from the primary to the general election.

See, what's that about is about the voters. That's saying we want a system designed to give maximal flexibility, fluidity, choice to the voters. Look, I'm not just speculating here. We've had open primaries now, or nonpartisan primaries in Nebraska, for 90 years. In Nebraska, you get Democrats and Republicans sponsoring legislation together. You get coalitions coming together across the political aisle every day of the week. It's the norm. It's not some, "Oh, my god, can you believe that Democrats and Republicans are working together?" No, it's the norm in Nebraska.

RICHARD: And Nebraska is a really conservative state, a state where Republicans clearly dominate.

JOHN: And, get this, Democrats have a majority of committee chairmanships in the state legislature. In a red state which voted, I think, 70% for Trump in the last election, Democrats have a majority of committee chairmanships in the state legislature. Why? They don't elect people based on party. They elect them based on merit. They got rid of the partisan system. So all kinds of things are possible when you chuck the red/blue control of the system.

ASHLEY: I think I gather from both of you that you, yourselves, are politically independent. Am I right?

JACKIE: Oh, yeah.

JOHN: Yes.

ASHLEY: Can you each talk a little bit about why and how long for, how that came about? Jackie?

JACKIE: Sure. Well, I grew up in a pretty politically active family, very active in the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement. I grew up in New York City, and I was involved in various community organizing efforts, including an effort to win collective bargaining rights for welfare recipients and to create a union of people receiving public assistance to negotiate over terms and conditions, etc. While doing that, I encountered a number of elected officials in New York City municipal government who were African American and Latino, who were Democrats who'd been elected as Democrats but who had been denied the opportunity to rise up to a position of greater power both in elected office and within the party by the party bosses.

So we had long discussions about what to do about this and came up with a collaborative effort that became known as the New Alliance Party, in which these mainly Black and Latino elected officials ran for public office both as Democrats and as independents. So, in the course of using independent politics to leverage the position of poor communities, of communities of color, and to have political independence be a tool to challenge the power of the party bosses, it basically became clear to me independence was the way to go.

RICHARD: And one thing that's really interesting about that is you don't sound like you're a moderate.

JACKIE: I have never been a moderate about anything. No, you're right. I'm not. I'm not, but allow me here, if you are concluding that I come from the left side of the spectrum, which, in many respects, I do, I am not in any way, shape, or form a traditional leftist. I think the left in general in this country has given its fealty to the Democrat Party. It's been very, very hostile, largely, to independent politics and to creating coalitions that go outside of the boundaries of ideology, and I couldn't disagree with that political orientation more.

ASHLEY: John?

JOHN: Well, I come from the exact opposite from Jackie, in that my family could not be more unsophisticated politically, and I was arrogant enough, when I went away to college, I said, "I'm going to change that. I'm going to learn something about politics." And I had a girlfriend who was from Chile, and I got close to her family, and I'm like, "Jeez, I'm a straight A student, but I literally know nothing about how the world works at all."

And my freshman year of college at the University of Michigan, I joined the Young Democrats and the Young Republicans in the same week and very quickly learned that that was, how shall we say, frowned upon. Honestly, it was a rude awakening that this was not a learning environment. This was a contact sport. You had to pick a side, and I felt very turned off by that.

I got lucky in that I met, very soon after that experience, I met Lenora Fulani. Jackie was her Deputy Campaign Manager. She was running for president as an independent, first woman, first African American. She came to my campus and spoke, and I was blown away because she was talking as an independent and was talking about the world and these issues and was not lining up Democrat or Republican, and I felt drawn to that.

RICHARD: I think the audience for this podcast, we're pretty open-minded, and we probably change our minds from time to time. What is the one thing that both of you would like to do when it comes to changing our perceptions about independents? Jackie, you're first.

JACKIE: I would ask your listeners to consider the following. The American public has outgrown the existing system, and we're in kind of a funny position of trying to shoehorn all of our political aspirations and all of our political convictions into a system which is now outdated and which forces people to distort themselves and forces communities to distort themselves. And I would ask your listeners to consider that and to be willing to involve themselves in activities that help to create new kinds of processes and new kinds of political institutions that are more suited to where we are as a country today.

JOHN: I think that's very poetic and beautiful, and I couldn't agree more. I would like to ask your listeners that whenever they're reading an article or listening to MSNBC or FOX or whoever they listen to, and they hear the word "Democrat leaners" or "Republican leaners," that they stand up, and they yell at the TV, and they say, "That is a fraud!" because what they do is they take independents, and they say to them, "Yeah, you're an independent, but who do you lean towards?" And independents will say, "Well, last election, I voted Democrat." They say, "Aha! You're not really an independent. You're a Democrat or Democrat leaner or a Republican leaner."

It's one of the tools that's used to prevent the political system from growing, as Jackie is saying. The political system needs to grow to catch up with the American people. Those words, "Democratic leaner" and "Republican leaner," they might seem innocuous. They might just seem like, oh, it's typical jargon used in Washington. No, it is an offensive, violent term used to maintain the status quo. So I want people to get angry about it.

ASHLEY: Noted. John and Jackie, thank you both so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground.

JOHN: Our pleasure.

JACKIE: Well, thanks so much for having us. It's really great to talk to you.

RICHARD: Jackie Salit and John Opdycke on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.