

New bloc of voters who eschew traditional party politics could determine next president, professor says

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The new independents are “apartisan” but not apolitical, says UCI political science professor Russell Dalton: “They will turn out to vote nearly as much as partisans. They have no loyalty to either side and will make up their minds late in the game.” Credit: Steve Zylius / University Communications

If your 2012 presidential vote is still up for grabs, you're not alone, says UC Irvine political science professor Russell Dalton.

"Today about 40 percent of Americans claim they're independent of either party," he says, referencing a historical high in modern public opinion polling. "The new independents follow politics, and they will turn out to vote nearly as much as partisans. They have no loyalty to either side and will make up their minds late in the game."

In his book *The Apartisan American*, published earlier this year, Dalton examines this new bloc of potentially powerful voters and why they've abandoned traditional party politics. Using the biennial American National Election Studies and more recent [Washington Post/ABC](#) polling data, he finds that the shift has less to do with the scandal and controversy plaguing both sides of the aisle (as many have proposed) and more to do with changes in societal values.

"Democratic citizens today are more informed about politics and less deferential to people in authority," Dalton says. When coupled with a media that thrives on reporting the misdeeds of the elite, the result is a more cynical and independent [electorate](#).

Below, Dalton discusses the makeup of this voter bloc, how its constituents are changing politics and what politicians seeking to woo them need to know.

Q. What do these new independents look like?

A. People often talk about independents as a homogeneous group. Actually, there are two very different groups of independents. The first exists at the margins of politics; they are not very interested or engaged, and their independence reflects this disinterest. The new independents are very different. They are better-educated, interested in politics and often young. They're concerned about politics but skeptical of political parties as representative of their interests. Being a nonpartisan is an affirmation of their own independence. Their votes are unpredictable; this group could be a key source of new votes if a candidate wants to expand his or her base. Given the current balance between Democrats and Republicans, whichever candidate gets the disproportionate number of independent votes has a distinct advantage in winning.

Q. How has the "apartisan" American changed political parties in the U.S.?

A. Independents make life difficult, or perhaps more challenging, for the [political parties](#). Neither the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party can claim that a majority of independents identify with it. But since independents make up the largest voting bloc, the national parties have to be sensitive to their preferences in close elections.

Parties should also be concerned that a growing number of Americans are registering as independents, which means their electorate in primaries is narrowing. The percentage of nonpartisan registrants in California, for example, has doubled since 1996. Reforms like the California open primary are a natural consequence of dealignment; 17 states had open or semi-open Republican primaries this year. Such elections give independents the power to make decisions for either party.

But the challenging part is that independents view [politics](#) much differently than do people who identify strongly with a national party. For example, Romney had to appeal to partisans to win the Republican presidential nomination, but now he must appeal to independents to win the general election. Many of the positions Romney took in the GOP primaries are a turnoff for independents, even moderate independents.

Consequently, parties and candidates have to woo very different types of prospective supporters, and it's difficult in the modern media age to say two things at the same time without drawing intense criticism.

Furthermore, if a party wins the support of independents in one election, victory is fleeting. It cannot depend on them at the next election.

Q. What does this mean for the 2012 election?

A. One might almost say that Democratic and Republican party identifiers won't matter in 2012; it's the independents who matter. I say that because partisans enter elections with their decisions already made. For example, both Gore and Obama got essentially the same share of the vote from Democratic partisans, despite the differences between the candidates and the events that transpired between 2000 and 2008 – ditto for Republican support for Bush in 2000 and McCain in 2008. Obama won in 2008 primarily because he attracted 10 percent more votes from independents than did Gore in 2000. How 2012 compares to 2008 will largely depend on independents. In short, if Obama loses independents, he's likely to lose the election.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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