



LINDA J. KILLIAN

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THE UNTAPPED POWER
OF INDEPENDENTS



THE SWING VOTE

LINDA KILLIAN

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talk about
"The Swing Vote"
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The NEO-INDEPENDENT

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THE SWING VOTE: THE UNTAPPED POWER OF INDEPENDENTS

As our country's politicians engage in bitter partisan battles, focused on protecting their own jobs but not on doing the nation's business, and political pundits shout louder and shriller to improve their ratings, it's no wonder that Americans have little faith in their government. But is America as divided as the politicians and talking heads would have us believe? Do half of Americans stand on the right and the other half on the left with a no-man's-land between them?

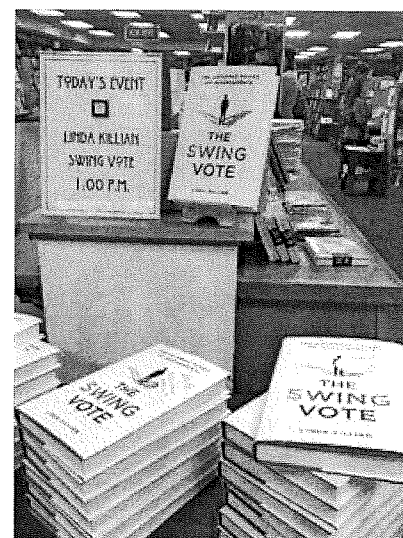
Hardly. Forty percent of all American voters are Independents who occupy the ample political and ideological space in the center. These Americans are anything but divided, and they're being ignored. These Independents make up the largest voting bloc in the nation and have determined the outcome of every election since World War II. Every year their numbers grow, as does the unconscionable disconnect between them and the officials who are supposed to represent them.

The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents tells the story of how our polarized political system is not only misrepresenting America but failing it. Killian paints a vivid portrait of the swing voters around the country and presents a new model that reveals who they are and what they want from their government and elected officials.

In *"The Swing Vote"* she focuses on four states that will be critical in the 2012 election – New Hampshire, Virginia, Ohio and Colorado – and offers a new model of the swing voters, breaking them into four distinct demographic groups:

- **NPR REPUBLICANS** - Socially moderate and fiscally conservative, these voters, who have been known as 'Rockefeller Republicans', are frustrated by overspending and mismanagement of government. But they are also turned off by the GOP's alignment with the religious right and its focus on social issues like abortion and gay rights.
- **AMERICA FIRST DEMOCRATS** – Previously known as 'Reagan Democrats,' these voters, largely male working class, have been hit hard by the recession and by Republican taxation and trade policies. But they also think Democrats don't stand up for traditional American values both at home and abroad. They tend to be more conservative than the Democratic Party on social issues.
- **THE FACEBOOK GENERATION** – Voters under the age of thirty-five, who register as Independents in a higher percentage than any other age group. They mistrust politicians of both parties and want more than two choices.
- **STARBUCKS MOMS AND DADS** - The largest and most important Independent/Swing voting bloc, these suburban and exurban voters are skeptical of big government and turned off by extremism in both parties. A huge and vitally important group. They decide elections.

In *"The Swing Vote,"* Killian looks beyond the polls and the headlines and talks with the frustrated citizens around the country who are raising the alarm about the acute bi-polarity, special interest-influence, and gridlock in Congress, asking why Obama's postpartisan presidency is anything but, and demanding realism, honest negotiation, and a sense of responsibility from their elected officials.



Praise for The Swing Vote:

"Linda Killian has been an acute observer of national politics for over two decades, first winning renown for her path-breaking book on the GOP freshman class of '94. She now brings similar insight and shoe-leather reporting to one of the least understood groups in America - swing voters - who will likely hold the key to 2012 and beyond."

-- David Gergen, Senior Political Analyst for CNN and New York Times
Bestselling Author of "Eyewitness to Power"

"Linda Killian helps us understand who the swing voters who decide elections are and what they are looking for. Killian's analysis provides a valuable guide on harnessing their collective energy into a new way of thinking about politics."

-- Eleanor Clift, contributor Newsweek and Daily Beast

"Linda Killian has written a lively and insightful book about the current state of American politics, melding the best skills of a journalist, a social scientist, a pollster, and a passionate citizen.... With Congress's disapproval rating at an all-time high, and a 'plague on both houses' sentiment exploding in the country, it is hard to imagine a more timely book."

-- Norman J. Ornstein, author of *The Broken Branch: How Congress Is Failing America and How to Get It Back on Track*

"Linda Killian does a great job of not only examining the importance and historic role of those Independent and moderate swing voters who live between the partisan and ideological forty-yard lines, but she examines their mind-sets as

well. What makes swing voters tick, what swings them and why? An understanding of swing voters leads to an understanding of the volatility and the turbulence that drove the 2006, 2008, and 2010 elections and will likely drive 2012 as well."

-- Charlie Cook, editor and publisher of *The Cook Political Report* and political analyst for NBC News.

"[Linda's] book - which makes the case that you and I have much more power than we know - is an important and timely read."

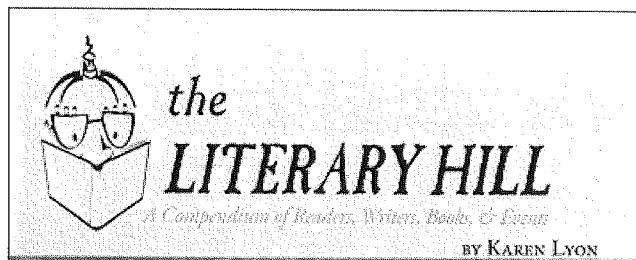
-- Michael Charney, Author of "[Chasing Glenn Beck](#)" ([Read the full review on Amazon.com.](#))

CNN's John Avlon calls "*The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents*" one of "the best political policy books of this presidential season." "The growing ranks of nonpartisan-political-reform literature (including *The Swing Vote*) will only become more valuable when this election is over and we begin focusing on an even more urgent mission: how to heal hyperpartisanship and begin governing again in the national interest."

-- John Avlon, CNN

The Pew Research Center estimates that there are more independent voters now than at any time over the past 75 years. Experts on voting offer several explanations. Some voters' lives are simply too full to give politics much attention, and they aren't involved enough to identify with a party. Diminishing trust in institutions is another factor in eroding party loyalty, particularly among younger voters, specialists say. And then there's the growing dysfunction of Washington, the disgust with polarized, party-first politics. Rejecting both Democrats and Republicans can feel like a modest but winnable protest. "They don't trust the political system," says journalist Linda Killian, a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and author of *The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents*. "They don't trust money in politics. They want compromise. They want results. They don't want partisan yapping."

-- Scott Helman, "How will independents factor into the Brown-Warren Senate race?", *The Boston Globe*, September 30, 2012.



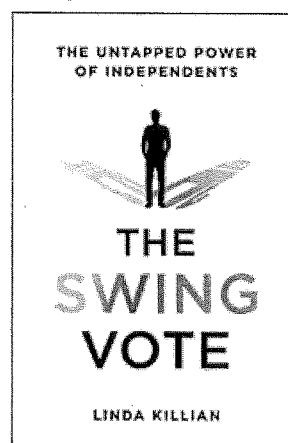
Mad As Hell

"Most Americans, if asked, would probably say that the U.S. system of government is one of the most democratic in the world. And yet," writes Linda Killian, "it's not." In her new book, "*The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents*," the Capitol Hill author documents

the struggle of independents as an "ideological 'middle of the road' or centrist" group that is often fiscally conservative but socially moderate. "These voters swing back and forth between parties" and can be a crucial factor in deciding election outcomes.

More than just a rant on partisanship, "*The Swing Vote*" offers some concrete solutions to the problem, such as reforming voting rules, campaign finances and redistricting practices. Finally, in a chapter aptly titled "Battle Cry," Killian rallies independents to get involved in civic life and take action to break the gridlock. She pictures "a collective moment like that in the 1976 movie 'Network,' in which people across the country stand up and shout, 'I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!'" Only then, she writes, might those whose interests are served by the current system be moved to change it.

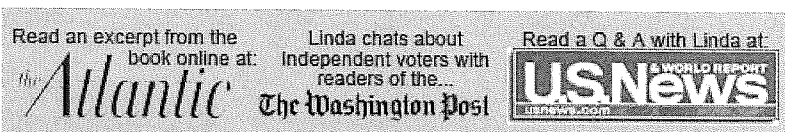
Linda Killian is a journalist and senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and has been a columnist and national political writer for "*The Atlantic*," "*Newsweek*/*The Daily Beast*," and a variety of other publications. Her previous book was "*The Freshmen: What Happened to the Republican Revolution?*"



the stranglehold that the two major parties exert on the political process and the extremism that has increasingly alienated moderate voters and politicians alike. "It's like the parties have gone crazy," bemoans one voter. And a former legislator tells her, "They govern from the extreme, and if you're not on the bandwagon, they drive you out."

The only ray of hope that Killian sees -- barring the far-fetched notion that politicians will come to their senses -- are the independent voters, who currently make up a larger portion of the electorate than either Democrats or Republicans. Based on nearly a hundred interviews with voters and politicians at both the state and federal level, Killian paints a pic-





The New York Review of Books

Excerpt: Swingtime for Obama
June 21, 2012
Michael Tomasky

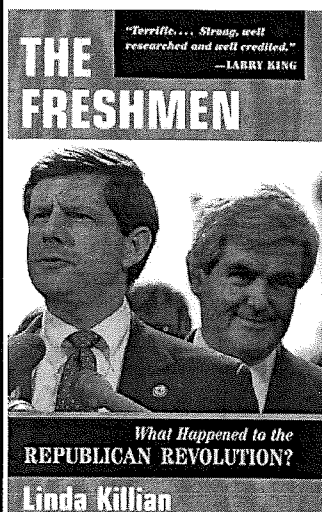
The Swing Voter has useful observations. Killian, a former NPR reporter who is now a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, emulated the admirable part of Broder's legacy and traveled around the country interviewing hundreds of voters who are disaffected. There are lessons to be learned from her reporting.

She identifies four types of independent voters. (1) "NPR Republicans" are "fiscal conservatives who are moderate or libertarian on social issues." They have been moving away from the GOP because of the religious right. (2) The "Facebook Generation" is mostly thirty-five or under; its members are generally social liberals (on the environment or race), but "this age group doesn't really trust either political party and doesn't understand why it can't have more political choices." (3) The "Starbucks Moms and Dads" are "a fickle group who don't mind changing party allegiance" from election to election and "tend to be fiscally conservative and socially moderate, concerned about education, national security, and environmental issues." Finally (4), the "America First Democrats," concentrated in the Rust Belt, support strong defense, are populist on economic issues such as trade and protectionism, but are "more traditional and conservative on social issues than they perceive the Democratic Party to be."

Killian chooses one state that is emblematic of each of the groups—respectively, New Hampshire, Colorado, Virginia, and Ohio. She talks with politicians from both parties—moderate Republican state legislators in New Hampshire chased from their party's ranks, Democrats like the Virginia Senator Jim Webb, retiring after just one term partly out of disgust—who dissent from some party positions. She speaks with voters like Julia Pfaff of Fairfax County, Virginia, a former Army captain married to an active-duty military man, whose comments could stand for a good many others:

"I'm part of this huge group of Americans who feel disenfranchised. We don't like where we're headed. It's like we're riding on a bus, and the two parties are the drivers who are arguing over who gets to control the steering wheel. Meanwhile, there's a cliff in front of us and we're headed straight for it. The rest of us are stuck in the back of the bus, saying, 'There's a cliff up there, do something.'"

There is no question that millions of Americans share Pfaff's frustration. The "cliff" suggests bad, or very bad, economic prospects. But there is a question whether these millions can in fact become an organized political unit, and indeed whether—given their own very clear differences with one another, which Killian herself describes well—they even want to be. [Click here to read the full review.](#)



THE FRESHMEN: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REPUBLICAN REVOLUTION?

In November 1994 the Republicans won control of both Houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years in a victory they immediately dubbed the Republican Revolution. Swept into office in that election were 73 Republican freshmen, the storm troopers in Newt Gingrich's army.

The Freshmen is the inside story of those men and women and of the tumultuous 104th Congress, one of the most historic and eventful congresses in recent history.

The freshmen were at the heart of the Republican revolution. Journalist Linda Killian presents a revealing portrait of their maneuvering and intrigues, their successes and failures. Were they committed idealists or wild-eyed zealots? Killian reveals how Congress really works through amazingly candid conversations with the freshmen. She offers a probing and intimate character study of the colorful and always unpredictable freshmen who shared their private thoughts with her.

In early 1995 the Republicans were riding high but they were sent crashing by the government shutdown. Killian explains how they rebounded from that disastrous political maneuver to maintain control of Congress despite Bill Clinton's re-election to the presidency, and also explains how the Republican revolution never really existed.

Despite being labeled Gingrich clones when they arrived in Washington, in 1997 the freshmen attempted to overthrow Newt Gingrich as speaker of the House. Killian tells the real story of that failed coup.

This book is the first detailed, behind the scenes account of the entire 104th Congress and is based on two years of extensive reporting and hundreds of interviews. Killian goes beyond the headlines to show us the power struggles through the eyes of the freshmen.

PREFACE

Common Sense

IN JANUARY 1776, ONLY a little more than a year after arriving in America from England, Thomas Paine published a sixty-page pamphlet titled *Common Sense*, which became one of the most important documents in American history. Addressing his tract “to the inhabitants of America,” Paine spoke directly to the people, rather than to the political and intellectual classes, and used clear, simple, and straightforward arguments—as he put it—“in language as plain as the alphabet” to make the case for American independence and the creation of a democratic republic to be governed by the people. It was, he said, “nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.”

Paine’s call for not only independence but also political participation by the people and a truly representative system of government was revolutionary in its language and its thinking. Paine argued that the populace could shape its own destiny through the fight for independence and create something entirely new. *Common Sense* mobilized public support for the idea of independence and paved the way for the Continental Congress’s ratification of the Declaration of Independence six months later. It became one of the founding documents of a new form of government—of, by, and for the people.

The reason I begin with Thomas Paine and his *Common Sense* is that Paine’s call for real, participatory democracy still resonates and in many

ways is needed now just as badly as it was at the birth of our nation. Americans today are faced with a dysfunctional and polarized political system, controlled by political and party elites and special interests, that seems incapable of dealing with the serious issues and choices facing this nation. The necessity for a revolt by the people is no less great than it was at our founding.

Throughout his life and writings, Paine believed in the possibility of change and the idea that the citizenry could take control of its own government. "I saw an opportunity in which I thought I could do some good, and I followed exactly what my heart dictated," he wrote of his mission.

In some small way, I hope the spirit of Thomas Paine and *Common Sense* is evoked in this book because this moment in our national political life is so critical. We have a choice of continuing to do things the way we have been doing them and expecting a different result—not likely—or making a fundamental change that will benefit all citizens, improve our democratic institutions, and ensure the future strength and prosperity of this nation.

I have covered American politics and government at the local, state, and national levels for many years, and increasingly I have become more concerned about the partisanship, the mounting influence of special interests and money on the legislative process, and the inability of the two parties to work together to solve our problems. I have also become aware that a great many Americans don't feel truly represented by their politicians and the system, especially the Independent voters, who now account for a larger portion of the electorate than either Democrats or Republicans. This disconnect between so many voters and the people elected to represent them is eroding trust in our political system and its effectiveness.

This nation faces so many serious problems: unemployment at its highest level in twenty-five years, a shrinking manufacturing base, a dependence on foreign oil and high energy prices, a crumbling infrastructure, a failing education system, and a federal debt and deficit that are

driving the nation to the edge of a cliff. Our financial system and tax code serve those at the top but penalize the middle class and have increased the income gap between rich and middle-class wage earners to the largest disparity since the Census Bureau began keeping records, more than forty years ago. In 2010, CEO pay of Fortune 500 companies was up an astronomical 24 percent, at a higher level than in 2007, before our near economic collapse, and corporate profits were up 81 percent. But most Americans weren't feeling the benefits of this economic success—it was reserved for those at the top.

Our political system and elected officials seem incapable of dealing with these serious issues. In the eyes of the Independent voters, our politicians are fiddling while Rome burns. They can't seem to stop fighting long enough to do anything and aren't willing to make the compromises and tough choices that might solve some of our problems but might also jeopardize their own political careers.

Why has this happened, and what can be done about it? I hope that this book helps to answer those questions.

I wanted to tell the story of the Independent/Swing voters—the centrist voters who decide elections and represent more voters than those at the conservative and liberal ends of the political spectrum. Most of them are undeclared or unaffiliated—Independent voters. Some of them still remain registered Democrats and Republicans but they feel disconnected from the political parties and the government. They are not hard left or hard right and don't consistently identify with one political party. They are fiscally conservative and socially tolerant. They are in the middle. They "swing" back and forth, voting for candidates from both parties, largely because they are seeking change, aren't getting it from their elected leaders, and are increasingly disgusted with a system they don't believe truly represents them. I use the term *Independent/Swing voter* here to refer to those centrist voters who are Independents as well as to swing voters still belonging to a political party. Throughout the book, for clarity and simplicity, I will use the term *Independent voters* in referring to this group.

I was determined to talk with as many Independent voters as I could and use their own words to explain how they feel let down by the system. I wanted to give voice to these voters—the people to whom American politics should also belong.

Journalists from time to time interview or hold focus groups with “average voters” and feature them in stories. But this is mostly just a garnish. The meat and potatoes of political coverage are the political parties, their leaders, and the horse race—who’s up and who’s down, who’s going to win either the next fight in Congress or the next election. Media stories about the presidential campaign begin long before any politicians have even declared their candidacies and dominate political coverage.

Republicans and Democrats, the left and right, are whom the American people consistently hear from even though a plurality of voters don’t consider themselves one or the other. And the fundamental structural problems in our political system, the disenfranchisement of many of these Independent voters, gets ignored.

If a minority group were getting shut out of full participation in the political process, there would be a huge outcry. But Independent voters are far from a minority group. There are more of them than either Democrats or Republicans. Yet they are still woefully unrepresented within the political system. And they are just expected to take it. To sit back and enjoy the scraps thrown to them by the two political parties who have a stranglehold on the electoral and political process.

The conventional wisdom is that these voters pay less attention and participate less frequently, not to mention that they tend not to be regular or large financial donors to campaigns. Politicians and academics say they tune in and out. Some of that may be true, but the reason for that relative lack of engagement is our flawed political system.

What I heard over and over from the Independent voters I interviewed, who were by and large extremely politically aware and well informed, is that our current politics doesn’t give them much of a reason to care. They don’t see much difference between the two political parties, and they don’t see things changing, no matter who gets elected.

To be sure, in addition to the Independent voters I talked with, I also interviewed hundreds of local, state, and national officials, party leaders, academics, and policy experts for this book. Not to have done so would have been like writing a book about baseball and interviewing only the fans and not the players and managers. But I talked to these politicians to understand how they operate in the system, the frustrations they also have, and what they think can be done to improve things.

I decided the best way to get at this story was to focus on four key swing states from different regions of the country, each representing a crucial group of Independent/Swing voters I wanted to describe. There were many states I considered, including Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. But after much deliberation, I finally determined that New Hampshire, Virginia, Ohio, and Colorado were the best and most interesting examples of the nation’s important swing states. Each state is unique to its region and illustrates a key swing voter demographic, and together they effectively tell the story of Independent/Swing voters throughout the country.

I reached out to Independent voters in those states in a variety of ways—I obtained lists of registered unaffiliated voters from voter registration offices and polling organizations and called up strangers on the telephone to ask them about their politics. Amazingly, most of them were willing to talk with me, even eager to do so. They were happy someone was listening. I also contacted universities and civic groups to find the perfect blend of Independent voters. I am incredibly grateful for all the time these voters shared with me. This book wouldn’t have been possible without their cooperation.

I conducted focus groups in all four states before and after the 2010 election, and what I heard during these sessions was strikingly similar, no matter where I went. Many Independent voters were concerned about the spending and growth of government under President Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress, but they also weren’t convinced things would improve if the Republicans were in charge. They were incredibly pessimistic about the political system, did not feel well represented by it,

and believed the average person has almost no impact on what happens. They believe the two parties with their ideological extremism and special interests have a stranglehold on the system. All these interviews and conversations convinced me I was on the right track and the story of the Independent/Swing voters needed to be told.

When I began this project in early 2010, and especially after I interviewed so many voters in the fall of that year and spring of 2011, I knew there was a great deal of anger and frustration out there that needed to be explained. But I had no idea how much worse things would get. As I concluded the final revisions for this book last summer, and the crisis over the debt ceiling erupted, followed by the public disgust over the spectacle and the inability of our elected officials to effectively address our nation's challenges, it seemed everyone, including President Barack Obama, was talking about the dysfunction of the system and the public's loss of faith in Congress and our political leaders. But I knew there was much more to be said.

I would expect this book to be read by those who follow politics closely—the officials, activists, academics, and journalists as well as the political junkies. But I hope that Independent voters—those who feel ignored, fed up, and shut out of the system—will also find and enjoy this book and recognize themselves in its pages. It is my hope that while reading, at some point they will stop and say, “Finally someone gets it—that’s exactly how I feel.” And I hope it motivates them to get involved and to speak out.

I think this book says a lot about where we are as a country right now. I’m afraid it’s not all that good. But I do have some hope. Mostly because I believe in the Independent/Swing voters, and I don’t think the center in American politics is gone forever.

I

Who Are the Independent Voters?

A government of our own is our natural right.

—THOMAS PAINE

NINETY-YEAR-OLD BETTY Hall lives in the 1850s farmhouse in Brookline, New Hampshire, where her grandmother was born. After graduating from Barnard College in 1943, working as an engineer with the Western Electric Company during World War II, and getting married, she returned to New Hampshire with her husband to start a textile manufacturing company and raise their five children.

Back then, only about eight hundred people lived in Brookline, which is about fifteen miles west of Nashua, and Hall’s children were educated in the town’s two-room schoolhouse. She felt the school needed improvement and better resources and decided to try to do something about it, so she ran for town school board and then selectman, explaining her reason for getting into politics.

She started out as a Republican. Most people in New Hampshire were. She first got elected to the New Hampshire House of Representatives in 1970 and served a total of twenty-eight years. “Liberal Republicans were fairly common then. I had a lot of great liberal Republican colleagues, but eventually they got pushed out.” In the 1980s, she found she was voting more often with the Democrats so she decided to change

As a lobbyist, Sciulla ran a political action committee (PAC) and says, "I gave out thousands of dollars in campaign contributions and I became so disgusted with the system, I threw up my hands and got out." Sciulla says he thinks both parties are more interested in getting and holding on to power than in working on real solutions, and the cost of campaigns and the fund-raising politicians have to do to finance them are some of the biggest problems with the system.

Even though a lot of his friends and neighbors make their living working for or with the government, Sciulla says most of them, no matter their political philosophy, believe government spending and waste, fraud, and abuse are huge problems.

Sciulla says he thinks most people voted for Barack Obama because they wanted hope and change and "We haven't had much of either and that is so disappointing.

"Politics is an emotional sport as well as an intellectual endeavor. There's a keg of dynamite under a lot of people, and it can be set off if provided the right match."

Fifty-two-year-old Sue Thomas lives in Great Falls, Virginia, another Washington suburb. She has two children and owns a small company that does information technology management consulting. Her husband works in government relations.

She considers herself a fiscally conservative, socially liberal Independent. She votes in general elections but not in primaries. "I really feel like I'm representative of the nonpolitical American who has a business and a family and cares about what things mean for their parents and children and who's looking around and says this political system doesn't make sense to me." Her family has had some serious health issues, and Thomas is very aware of the problems with our health care system and the crisis that comes with not having health insurance.

Thomas voted for Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. She voted for Barack Obama in 2008 but says, "He was not my first or second choice,

but I didn't feel comfortable with McCain." She thinks Hillary Clinton has done a terrific job as Secretary of State and likes Virginia Senator Mark Warner for his business background and also because "He's willing to step out there and work with Republicans on the right way to tackle the deficit. I'm really glad that he's my senator. I would like to see more people acting like Warner."

Thomas thought it was "stupid" that the government almost shut down last year and says it just proved "it's all about the parties" and that politicians aren't really working for the country. "The notion of fair is lost right now, it's about labels, it's about reelection, and it's about campaign contributions."

These are the Independent/Swing voters.

They are not reliably conservative or liberal. Many of them never registered with a party and have been Independent voters their entire lives. Others are former Republicans and Democrats who became disaffected with the parties because of social or economic policies. Many Independents say they have been driven from the two parties by their extremism and a failure to focus on the nation's most important issues. Independent voters think the parties care more about winning elections than about solving the nation's problems, and they have largely lost faith in the two-party system. Nearly two-thirds of these voters say they believe both parties care more about special interests than about average Americans.¹

These voters swing back and forth, supporting candidates from both parties, often in the same election. They live all over the country but are most important and sought after when they reside in swing states that also move back and forth from the Democratic to Republican column—especially the battleground states of New Hampshire, Colorado, Ohio, Virginia, Florida, and Pennsylvania. In closely contested elections, their votes usually determine the winner. The 2000 presidential contest was famously one of the closest elections in U.S. history with Al Gore

winning the popular vote and, after a partial recount in Florida, George W. Bush winning the electoral vote and the state of Florida by fewer than one thousand votes. In 2008, Barack Obama carried North Carolina by only fourteen thousand votes and Virginia by a little more than five thousand votes.² In congressional and local elections, the margin of victory can be as low as triple and even double digits in tight races in swing districts.

The number of Independent voters, along with their disaffection with the two-party political system, is growing exponentially. About 40 percent of all American voters now call themselves Independents, which is a bigger group than those who say they are either Democrats or Republicans and is the largest number of Independent voters in seventy years.³ In some states, Independents are a majority of the voters.

Polling by various organizations from Gallup to Pew verifies the significance and growth of the Independent voters. The American National Election Studies at the University of Michigan has been charting voting behavior and party identification in this country since 1952. Back then, about 25 percent of those polled identified themselves as Independent or Independent leaning. In 2008, the figure was up to 40 percent.⁴ The Pew Research Center in its most recent surveys also puts the number of Independents at around 40 percent.⁵

Among these Independent voters, about half say they have not thought of themselves as either a Democrat or Republican in the last five years.⁶ I believe this figure comes close to the true number of Independent/Swing voters in this country—about 20 percent of the electorate. And the role of this 20 percent of swing voters, especially in recent presidential elections, has been critical. Every election since World War II has been determined by voters in the middle. They are the voters who cast their ballots on issues and in favor of the candidate rather than for the party; and it is these voters who determine who will be president and which party will control Congress.

These are the voters who elected Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. In the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential elections,

roughly a third of the voters were swing voters.⁷ They also elected Barack Obama. The margin by which Obama carried the Independent vote in crucial swing states around the country was one of the significant factors in his victory and will undoubtedly be critical to whether or not he is reelected. Obama carried 60 percent of the “moderate” vote, which made up 44 percent of the electorate in 2008.⁸

The Republican victories in the 2010 midterm election were also decided by these voters. Independents supported Democrats by 18 points in 2006. But driven by their concern about the nation’s economy and strong opposition to Democratic spending and health care initiatives, they supported Republican congressional candidates in 2010 by the overwhelming margin of 56 to 38 percent, a 36-point swing from 2006.⁹ These Independent voters cannot all be classified as one thing or said to have all the same interests and views. They are diverse in age, race, gender, and income level. But I have divided them into four distinct and important demographic groups which comprise most of the Independent/Swing voters.

Those voters who are socially moderate and fiscally conservative and who used to be known as Rockefeller Republicans became Independents because of a growing disaffection with their natural party home. These were traditional, socially moderate, country club Republicans named because their political philosophy was in line with New York Governor and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, a liberal Republican who supported abortion rights and many other socially liberal positions and declared, “I do not believe it right for one group to impose its vision of morality on an entire society.” But Rockefeller has been dead for more than thirty years, and it is time for a new label for these voters. I call them *NPR Republicans*. Betty Hall and James Squires of New Hampshire are examples of NPR Republicans, and many of them can be found in New England, especially in New Hampshire. These voters moved away from the GOP in large numbers during the George W. Bush years because of the war in Iraq, Republican overspending, and what they perceived to be their party’s general mismanagement of the government

and a loss of focus on important issues. They were also turned off by the GOP's alignment with the religious right and its conservative stands on social issues like abortion and gay rights. The NPR Republicans tend to be affluent, well-educated, older voters. They believe in balancing the budget and holding the line on tax increases, but they also believe the government should stay out of people's personal lives. Although there are many NPR Republicans in New England, they can be found all over the country. Increasingly, these voters are being driven out of the Republican Party and out of political office by primary challenges from the right and by those who want the GOP to be a conservative, ideologically pure party.

Another group of Independent/Swing voters is the group I call *America First Democrats*. They used to be known as Reagan Democrats, but just like the moniker Rockefeller Republicans, that title is also outdated. While many in this group admired Reagan and his call for a strong America, many others are too young to have had the chance to vote for Ronald Reagan and were just children when he was president. The America First Democrats are largely male, working- and middle-class voters who are concentrated in the Midwest and Rust Belt of the country. Scott Clinger, Ryan Ayers, and Allen Wells of Ohio are America First Democrats. It would make more economic sense for America First Democrats to be solidly aligned with the Democratic Party. Republican taxation and trade policies have put the squeeze on them and the rest of the middle class in recent decades. But they perceive a reluctance on the part of many Democrats to stand up for traditional American values both at home and abroad and usually tend to be more conservative than the Democratic Party on social issues. They lean toward populism, and are more protectionist, more religious, and more socially conservative than the NPR Republicans. They voted in large numbers for Bill Clinton, and many supported Hillary for president. Because they are persuadable and are often ticket splitters, they are actively pursued by both Republican and Democratic strategists and candidates.

Another significant Independent voter demographic are those under thirty-five—which includes a portion of what is often referred to as Generation X along with Generation Y—or the Millennials who were born after 1980. I call them the *Facebook Generation*. Adam Gray and Jeanna Grasso of Colorado are Facebook Generation voters. These young voters are not joiners and are mistrustful of groups except for those organized online. They are often more comfortable communicating via a computer screen than face-to-face and are used to having hundreds of choices when it comes to entertainment and most other aspects of their life, so they don't understand why they should be forced to choose between just two political parties.

They see themselves as unique and special and don't think they can be pigeonholed in just one political party. They do not like party labels and are similar to the NPR Republicans in their social libertarianism and fiscal conservatism, especially since they haven't yet experienced the need for many government programs except for student loans and education aid, which they strongly favor.

They were captivated by the transformational nature of Barack Obama's 2008 candidacy and voted for him in large numbers, but they are disenchanted with the partisan gridlock in Washington and Obama's inability to bring about the fundamental changes to the political system that he promised in the campaign. They are also far less reliable than other groups when it comes to turning out to vote, as was evidenced in the 2010 election.

Finally, the largest and most important of the Independent/Swing voting groups, aggressively pursued by both parties, are the suburban and exurban voters. I call these voters the *Starbucks Moms and Dads* because they rarely live very far from a strip mall with a Starbucks and they usually have children. Sue Thomas and Michael Sciulla of Virginia are a Starbucks Mom and Dad.

These are the real power voters—up for grabs and deciding elections in every region of the country. They too tend to be skeptical of big

government, socially moderate, concerned about education and national security. In 2006, suburban voters went 50 percent in favor of Democrats and 48 percent for Republicans, but in 2010 only 42 percent of suburban voters chose Democrats versus 55 percent who voted Republican.¹⁰

There can be overlap among these groups, and they do not represent the only Independent voters in the country, but they do comprise the majority of swing voters that really matter. Academics often use the term *swing voters* to refer to persuadable voters who haven't made up their minds a few months or weeks before the election and show up in pre-election polling as undecided voters. But I am focusing here not on the voters who might predict or explain the outcome of a single election, but on the longer-term national implications of voters who are known by academics as *party switchers* or *floating voters*.¹¹ These voters swing back and forth between parties from election to election and often split their tickets voting for candidates from both parties and, in so doing, decide election outcomes.

In addition, party affiliation is an ever-moving target because party allegiances and preferences shift constantly. Voters' views change over time and are affected by national events. Someone may start voting for one party more frequently but not change their original voter affiliation. Or they may register as a Democrat in the South to vote in local and state primaries where the candidates are more plentiful but vote Republican in national races. Or they may call themselves an Independent but consistently vote for one party over another. Because of all these factors, some academics who study voting behavior insist the number of true Independent voters is smaller than 40 percent.

The crucial Independent voters that I am describing here are ideologically "middle of the road" or centrist, and their views reflect the feelings of more Americans on national issues than either liberals or conservatives. They tend to be fiscally conservative, more skeptical about government, and more concerned about deficits, which is more in line with

Republican Party positions. But they do believe some government programs are important and agree more with the positions of the Democratic Party on issues like abortion and gay rights. They want the government to stay out of their personal lives and they want Congress and the president to spend their tax dollars wisely and conduct foreign policy and defense in a way that will protect American interests and keep the country safe.¹²

In several Pew Research Center polls over the past few years, more Independents say the Republican Party comes closer to their views on foreign policy, national security, and economic issues. But they say the Democratic Party is closer to their views on social issues.

In this regard, more than twice as many Independent voters than Republican voters favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally (45% vs. 20%).¹³

As a group, independents remain difficult to pin down. They are clearly left-of-center when it comes to religiosity and issues of moral values—independents' views on homosexuality, gender roles, censorship and the role of religion in politics are clearly closer to those of Democrats than Republicans. At the same time, their views on broader economic issues have taken a turn to the right. In particular, they are now more conservative on questions relating to the role of government in providing a social safety net and the government's overall effectiveness and scope.¹⁴

They are concerned about the federal deficit, government spending, and the American economy. They are extremely angry with Congress, frustrated with the way things are going in Washington, and mistrustful of a Democratic expansion of government, and these feelings determined their votes in the 2010 election.¹⁵

There is no doubt this ever-growing bloc of voters is significant. But calculating its size is not an exact science. In twenty-nine states, citizens register to vote by party and the number of unaffiliated voters

in those states is a matter of public record. But in the other twenty-one states—including Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin—voters do not have to specify their party affiliation when registering, which can make calculating party affiliation in these states a bit tricky. These are, however, the states where Independents can participate in the primary process.

In every New England state, Independents—or what most voter registration offices call unaffiliated or undeclared voters—outnumber Republicans or Democrats. In Massachusetts, more than half of all the voters are Independents.¹⁶ In Maine, where Eliot Cutler, the Independent candidate for governor, narrowly lost the 2010 election by less than 2 percent to Republican Paul LePage, Independents number about 35 percent of the electorate.¹⁷ In Connecticut and New Hampshire, more than 40 percent of the voters identify as unaffiliated.¹⁸ In Rhode Island, where former moderate Republican Senator Lincoln Chafee left the Republican Party in 2007 and successfully ran as an Independent candidate for governor of the state in 2010, about 48 percent of the voters are Independents.

But it's far more than just a New England phenomenon. In Alaska, more than 53 percent of the state's voters are registered as "nonpartisan or undeclared."¹⁹ In New Jersey, more than 46 percent of the voters are undeclared, more than twice as many as are registered Republicans, and significantly more than are registered as Democrats,²⁰ making it clear that GOP governor Chris Christie's election in 2009, the first time a Republican had won statewide office in New Jersey in a dozen years, was thanks to his winning the state's Independent vote.

There has also been a growth of Independent voters in many other states, including Iowa and Colorado, where they outnumber both Democrats and Republicans. About 30 percent of the voters in Arizona are Independents, a 15 percent increase between 2008 and 2010.²¹

Independent voters represent the largest and most important group of voters in this country. They are not part of a temporary phenome-

non or fad, they have been around for decades, and their numbers are growing. They are angry and frustrated over the problems of the political system, but they don't march on the capitol or show up screaming at congressional town hall meetings and so don't get the attention they deserve.

Despite their critical role in election outcomes, these Independents have little to say about whom the parties select to run for office. That's because in half the states in the country, the primary process is closed to them. An electoral system that all Americans pay for with their tax dollars is run solely by and for the two major political parties. Which means the American electoral system is not fully democratic. In many states, Independent voters are shut out from the start. Polls show that Independent voters are usually less satisfied with their choice of candidates than Republicans and Democrats and frequently say they are voting against something or someone rather than for someone.²² As a result, Independents are typically less engaged in the political system.

But in general elections, politicians need the Independent voters to win. Candidates seek the votes of Independents and woo them with attention in November. But once they have their victory or—to use the vernacular—get what they want, Independent voters are forgotten as quickly as a one-night stand. That has left them feeling a bit used—disconnected and disillusioned with a government they do not believe truly represents them. Independent voters feel ignored, fed up, and shut out of the system.

Once candidates are in office and looking toward their next reelection, Democratic and Republican office holders are beholden to their base supporters, the special interests who donate time and money to them and the parties that control both candidate selection and the agenda.

Independent voters are getting tired of being taken for granted. They're tired of partisan wrangling, which all too often results in either gridlock and a lack of action on the most important issues the nation faces, or unsatisfactory, extreme legislative outcomes, pushed through by one political party with little input from the other.

Independent voters have determined the outcome and sought change in each of the last three national elections, but they haven't yet seen the change they are looking for. Recent polls show that most Americans do not believe the country is on the right track and confidence in government is at an all-time low.²³ That feeling is even stronger among the ever-growing group of Independent voters, especially those I spoke with in focus groups around the country.

Many think a third- or multi-party system might work better in representing a wider number of political views. They believe campaign contributions from special interests and lobbyists and political ads control and pervert the system, making it extremely hard for the average citizen to make his voice and views heard. They believe most politicians are simply interested in getting reelected and will do whatever it takes to win. These voters also think politicians consider their own reelection more important than the average person's problems.

Not surprisingly, polls taken after the 2010 election showed that Independents believed both parties should move toward the center and that President Obama should work harder to find common ground with Republicans.²⁴ They believe governing is about compromise, and they want elected officials to work with the other side to pass good legislation on important issues.

But even as the number of voters who consider themselves at the ideological center of American political opinion continues to grow, the number of moderates in both parties in Congress, the ones needed to achieve compromise, shrinks with every passing election, and the political parties become ever more extreme.

Political scientist Morris Fiorina of Stanford has written about this in several books—*Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* and *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics*. "There is little doubt that the political class in the United States is significantly more polarized today than it was a generation ago. But a close examination of the general population finds little or no sign of a comparable increase in polarization," writes Fiorina.²⁵ "In both red and blue states a

solid majority of voters see themselves as positioned between two relatively extreme parties."²⁶

Most Americans are in the center and actually agree on a great deal. We're not so deeply divided a nation as either the two parties or the political pundits would have us believe. They just need to listen to the Independent voters. These voters at the ideological center of national political thought represent the way forward for the political parties and a new way of thinking and trying to solve problems. These voters want compromise and common sense, and they want Republicans and Democrats to work together on centrist solutions to the most difficult issues we face as a nation. Only by listening to these voters and reforming the political process can we revitalize our politics and our country.