INDEPENDENT VOTERS and ARIZONA PRIMARIES

Tuesday, October 7, 2014
5:30 - 7 p.m.
Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)

Facilitated by: Ms. Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

5:30 p.m.
Welcome and Introduction
Ms. Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

5:45 p.m.
Community Discussion
Ms. Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

♦ A large and increasing number of voters describe themselves as “independent” of the Democratic and Republican parties. What explains the growth in the number of self-described “independent” voters?

♦ Is the increase of “independent” voters a positive or negative development for democracy?

♦ What changes to our political system, if any, should be made in light of this development?

♦ What special roles, if any, should “independent” voters have in healthy democratic processes in Arizona, and why?

6:45 p.m.
Closing Questions and Recap of Discussion

We are grateful for support from NAU’s W.A. Franke College of Business and the McKenzie Endowment for Democracy.
A large and increasing number of voters describe themselves as “independent” of the Democratic and Republican parties. What explains the growth in the number of self-described “independent” voters?

The growth of independents is primarily due to an increase in negative views of the major U.S. parties and Congress, as well as a generally low level of trust in the government. Here are some of the reasons independents give for not officially affiliating with a political party:

- 64% say that Republicans and Democrats care more about their own special interests than that of the average American.
- 58% say they don't affiliate with one party because they agree with Democrats on some issues and Republicans on others.
- 34% say they believe there is no major difference between the two major parties.
- 19% state politics are unimportant to them.

“We’ve got a government with very little accountability; we’ve got a government with no productivity; and we’ve got an increase in partisanship on both sides, which means they become less accountable and they do even less.” -- Bill Hillsman, Independent Voters of America

Is the increase in “independent” voters a positive or negative development for democracy?

To answer this question, it would be helpful to say more about the characteristics of independent voters. However, experts disagree about these characteristics. Are independents:

Secretly partisan? Many independents admit to leaning towards a particular party.

Attentive to issues not labels? A.J. LaFaro, chairman of the Maricopa County Republican Committee, argues that independents support candidates that best fit their own positions rather than looking at which party they fall under.

Uninformed and disengaged? Citing independents’ unpredictable voting patterns as evidence, political scientist Philip Concerse claims independents are less informed on issues. Linda Killian, author of The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents, says independent voters typically display knowledge of current events and are usually engaged in politics in some way.

Independents’ party preferences for different types of issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economics Issues</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy and National Security</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Issues</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>39%</td>
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</tbody>
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The chart shows the percentage of independents favoring each party’s stance on political issues. Independents may be secretly partisan or may favor a combination of positions that does not match one party.

This informational handout was prepared by Kaitlin Baker, a visual communications major and philosophy minor at Northern Arizona University. The faculty supervisor is Dr. Jona Vance, lecturer at the Northern Arizona University Department of Philosophy.
What changes to Arizona primaries or other aspects of the political process, if any, should be made in light of this development?

In Arizona, independents make up about 35% of registered voters. Currently, Arizona allows independents to vote for the party of their choice. In order to vote in Arizona primaries, independents must request the ballot of the party they wish to vote for. By contrast, party-affiliated voters receive their ballots automatically. The extra step of having to request a ballot, either by mail or at the polls, may discourage registered non-partisan members to vote.

- Independents have had an almost constant voter turnout of 10% during primaries according to Arizona Secretary of State Ken Bennett.

Like Arizona, most states already have open partisan primaries, where voters can select a partisan ballot of their choice. With open partisan primaries, major parties usually advance one of their candidates to the general election, and one of the major party candidates usually wins the general election. However, there are alternatives to open partisan primaries.
Some types of primary put more restrictions on who can participate.

- A semi-closed partisan primary leaves the question of whether or not to allow non party members to vote in them up to the major party itself. Even if non party members are included, they are still required to change their registration to that of the major party they are voting for.

- In a closed partisan primary only members of the primary’s party may participate. For example, only registered Republicans may vote in a closed Republican primary. This method of voting excludes independents and any minor partisan parties from voting in primaries.

Other types of primaries put fewer restrictions on who can participate.

- In a non partisan primary, all voters and candidates may participate using a single ballot. Some have suggested using “top-two” or “top-four” non partisan primaries, where all voters and candidates can participate regardless of political affiliation, as a better way to include independent voters in the political process. However, non partisan primaries may have the potential to create a more competitive political environment, as all candidates have to compete with each other regardless of party.

![Graph of the Arizona voter registration trends.](image-url)
The answer to this question depends in part on how one conceives of a healthy democracy. Within the two-party system some view independents as playing a crucial positive role while others think independents have a negative impact on politics. Political parties in particular tend not to favor independent voters.

- Independent voters are one of the biggest voting blocks in the United States and are considered a “swing vote” for many partisan groups. They can have a major sway in the political process.

One could also see independents as expressing a challenge to our largely two-party system, for good or bad. Here it may be worth considering what some of the Founding Fathers said about party politics.

“There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.” –John Adams

“There is an opinion, that parties in free countries are useful checks upon the administration of the Government, and serve to keep alive the spirit of Liberty. This within certain limits is probably true; and in Governments of a Monarchical cast, Patriotism may look with indulgence, if not with favor, upon the spirit of party. But in those of the popular character, in Governments purely elective, it is a spirit not to be encouraged. From their natural tendency, it is certain there will always be enough of that spirit for every salutary purpose. And, there being constant danger of excess, the effort ought to be, by force of public opinion, to mitigate and assuage it. A fire not to be quenched, it demands a uniform vigilance to prevent its bursting into a flame, lest, instead of warming, it should consume.” –George Washington

Sources
1) http://www.gallup.com/poll/166763/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx
2) http://www.people-press.org/2012/08/03/party-affiliation-and-election-polls/
6) http://ivn.us/2013/04/02/nonpartisan-primaries-vs-open-primaries-fundamentally-different/
7) http://independentvotersofamerica.org/manifesto/
HOT TOPICS CAFÉ COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members that represent diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

*Voted on Fall, 2014 “Hot Topics.”

Flagstaff & Winslow

*Celia Barotz
Flagstaff City Council

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*Joe Boles
Professor Emeritus, NAU College of Arts and Letters

*Carynn Davis
Executive Director, The Literacy Center

*Coral Evans
Flagstaff City Council

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MD MPH; County Director and Chief Medical Professor and Chair, Preventive Medicine and Public Health, Miami Miller School of Medicine; Co-Founder, The Compassion Project

*Jacque Gencarelle
Northern Arizona Behavioral Health Association

*Barbara Hickman
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*Bob James
Retired from Lockheed Martin Space Systems; Member, The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany; Member and Docent Museum of Northern Arizona; Adjunct Math Instructor Northern Arizona University; Member, The Boy Scouts of America—Silver Beaver

*Sherman Stephens
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NEXT SEDONA HOT TOPICS CAFÉ:
Should Northern Arizona be Adapting to Climate Change Now? If so, How?

Wednesday, October 22, 2014

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)