

Who Will Organize the Independents?

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Introduction and Summary

American political theater has, of late, followed a familiar storyline.

In 2008 Barack Obama entered stage left. Subsequent events quickly showed that change would not come from within the Democratic Party. What changed was Obama -- from a transformational figure to a transactional negotiator.¹

A similar scenario has unfolded on stage right. The Tea Party, initially sparked by the Ron Paul Presidential run was, in short order, commandeered by the Koch machine² and other familiar figures within the GOP establishment. They too will prove that their party is impotent to bring change that is progress to America.

Throughout the unfolding drama, mainstream liberal and conservative stakeholders have performed their familiar dance. Progressives and libertarians have each laid claim to their nominal parties, pursuing a strategy that is trying to affect political change by taking control of either of the major parties. But they have had their agendas systematically undermined as a deeply entrenched establishment has co-opted or marginalized them.

Independents have experienced our own painful realities and shortcomings. We witnessed them during the implosion of the Reform Party, which had burst onto the political scene following Ross Perot's first presidential run in 1992. Within five years the movement and the party were dead, in part, due to its own internal power struggles. I served as the chief organizer for the Reform Party of Texas and held a position on the National Committee of the Reform Party of America. In 2001, together with other independents, we formed Independent Texans, the only voter association in Texas seeking recognition for approximately 5 million non-aligned Texas voters.

¹ Close colleague of Cesar Chavez and Obama ground game guru, now a lecturer at Harvard, Marshall Ganz, wrote a *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece just following the 2010 mid-term election, criticizing Obama's change from a "transformational" leader to a "transactional negotiator." Ganz went on to critique the decision to demobilize Obama's extraordinary campaign base that were, "not the party regulars". This cut off Obama's independent support and killed the lawful tension Ganz felt was needed between the outside and inside of the halls of power for real change movements to develop. See: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/03/opinion/la-oe-1103-ganz-obama-20101103>

² We mean the Koch brothers, the industrial magnates, who helped fund the Republican right posing as tea partiers, not Ed Koch, who ran a liberal Democratic machine in NYC throughout the 70s and 80s: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/opinion/29rich.html>.

The independents have learned from these events. First, we learned that there is no change to be had within the current political paradigm. The old paradigm of “left/right” has been replaced. Perot himself talked about it in his second run for the Presidency – America is about the few at the top running the show, with the rest of the people down at the bottom taking orders. And now we’re learning that despite our failure to consolidate an organization out of the independent movement, the movement by ordinary Americans, nevertheless continues to the outside of both parties. The jury is still out on what, specifically, can be built that will succeed.

Is the American political stage set, yet again, for another outbreak of the independent movement? Will it be another “third party”, or another major independent candidacy? Will it be more localized? Could it be a “third force” – a movement -- that moves inside and outside all political parties? And, how will it be built and funded? The purpose of this paper is to spur discussions that bring some answers to those questions, with a focus on Texas.

Texas Miracle or Texas Nightmare?

Perhaps the true Texas miracle is the reelection of Rick Perry, who rose from a plurality of just 39% in 2006. Mega-special interests are now set to consolidate their control through Governor Rick Perry’s appointees, in an administration that has held power for nearly a decade. Since 2003, the Governor’s appointees have contributed \$17 million to his campaign coffers.³ The distortion brought to public policy by this system has, up until this point, been tolerated or simply unnoticed. But now, as the economy continues to contract and massive budget cuts loom to close a \$27 billion deficit, the tinderbox of the Texas electorate is as dangerous and unpredictable as the grassfires overtaking our state.

The Governor and his legislative supporters apparently intend to resolve the budget crisis by cutting deep into education and social services, with few in the legislature arguing for shared sacrifice. For example, Texans for Public Justice (TPJ) just released a study of campaign finance reports revealing that since 2006 natural gas drilling companies have enjoyed a tax loophole resulting in a \$7.4B loss to the state’s coffers. In response, State Senate Finance Committee Chair, Steve Ogden (R-Bryan) said, “I don’t sense there’s a lot of

³ Texans for Public Justice Report, September 2010, “Perry Reaps \$17 Million from his Political Appointees: <http://info.tpj.org/reports/pdf/Perry%20Patronage2010.summary.pdf>

enthusiasm for repeal” among his colleagues.⁴ The TPJ report also revealed that, “more than a fourth of the committee deliberating on this had personal interests in one of more of Texas’ top 32 natural gas producers.”⁵

We would contend that nowhere in America are voters more ready for an independent outbreak than in Texas.⁶ Texas, the quintessential red state, has experienced a one-party *super-majority* takeover of all power centers, despite a demographic picture that promised otherwise.⁷ This includes both chambers of the Texas legislature, resulting from the 2010 mid-term election, giving the Republican Party full control during redistricting.

Rick Perry is traveling the world, far more than his predecessors,⁸ selling the so-called “Texas Miracle” across the world, fanning the flames of a crisis brewing barely under the surface. That crisis is the frightening possibility that there is not enough water to meet the needs of 1,000 people moving here per day, as Texas is now the fastest growing state in the country, and the prospect of another major environmental disaster – contamination of aquifers.

There is growing conflict between the Texas “growth machine” (large-scale developers and related industries such as road construction) and oil and gas industry over groundwater. Natural gas drillers are using millions of gallons of precious drinking water to drill for natural gas (called fracturing or “fracking”), with toxic chemicals they are not required to disclose. Texas officials at the Railroad Commission⁹ and federal officials at the Environmental Protection Agency are culpable having granted permits and exemptions in pursuit of an

⁴ “Gas Drilling Tax Breaks Will Be on the Table for State Senate Panel,” Fort Worth Star Telegram, April 18, 2011.

⁵ The full study can be found here: http://info.tpj.org/Lobby_Watch/pdf/GasTaxBreak.april2011.pdf

⁶ This paper is an attempt to use the Texas experiment to aid in discussions around the country on tactics for independents. By no means are we trying to imply that one-size-fits all, merely that there are many ways to skin the independent cats.

⁷ This interactive map in the Texas Tribune, analyzing the U.S. Census release, is extremely helpful: <http://www.texastribune.org/library/data/census-2010/>.

⁸ Houston Chronicle, October 15, 2011, “\$1 million for Perry’s Security of 7 years,” http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story_mpl/metropolitan/7247963.html

⁹ It is a little known fact that the Texas Railroad Commission has separate permitting authority from groundwater conservation districts and regularly grant the use of groundwater for natural gas fracking: <http://www.rrc.state.tx.us/barnettshale/wateruse.php>.

industry driven definition of “energy independence.”¹⁰ Consider also the push by TransCanada on placing a massive high-pressure pipeline (Keystone XL) from the Tar Sands of Canada to refineries in Houston – over the Carrizo-Wilcox aquifer. Landowners in northeast Texas are fighting for their livelihoods to stop Hillary Clinton from approving this project.¹¹ If something is not done, it is only a matter of time before aquifers like the great Carrizo-Wilcox, which serves millions of Texans drinking water and only recharges every 2,000 years, are contaminated.¹²

Citizens are starting to pay attention, particularly since the legislature’s planned severe education cuts. In response, newspapers across the state have recently taken to referencing the dire warnings from former State Comptroller, Carole Strayhorn in 2006, in typical colorful “Strayhornease” about the “hot check” the Governor and his supporters were writing on the state budget in 2006.¹³ Her most haunting warning about education was, “There are only two ways to close a chasm of that magnitude -- future tax increases that you are hiding from Texans now or massive cuts in essential state services -- like public education -- already devastated by your past fiscal indifference.” Her deficit projections and its impact on education were spot on. But how she accounted for the deficit left out something that came to light later that year that has so far received little media attention.

In December 2006 a study released by the Texas Association of Appraisal Districts documented \$4 billion per year in missing property tax collections due to systemic undervalued appraisals for speculative land and commercial developments (40% on average), and \$1 million or more homes (25% on average).¹⁴ KVUE-TV News, Austin’s ABC affiliate reported

¹⁰ This report by the award winning Pro-Publica will surely give you nightmares: <http://www.propublica.org/article/buried-secrets-is-natural-gas-drilling-endangering-us-water-supplies-1113>.

¹¹ Read more at this citizen’s grassroots organizing site: <http://stoptarsands.org/>

¹² This March 11 hydrology study on the potential hazards of a leak of the pipeline is alarming: <http://www.sierraclub.org/dirtyfuels/downloads/2011-03-hydrology-report.pdf>

¹³ Strayhorn’s May 15, 2006, letter can be found here: <http://www.window.state.tx.us/news/60515letter.html>.

¹⁴ This information was released in 2006 by the Texas Association of Appraisal Districts in a study calling for sales disclosure laws. To this day, Texas remains one of only 5 states without it. Go here for the study: <http://costofgrowth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Need-for-Mandatory-Sales-Disclosure.pdf>. Go here for a KVUE news report: <http://costofgrowth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Appraisers-See-Flaws-in-System.pdf>.

the resulting loss at \$4 billion per year.¹⁵ Third graders could figure out through simple multiplication, since 2006, that this almost covers the budget shortfall of \$27B.

Indeed, the “Texas Miracle” is turning into the Texas nightmare as an even bigger threat to taxpayers and overall economic stability is ironically seen in the growth industry. Most members of the intelligentsia, regardless of political persuasion, will tout the great virtues of growth. But there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that unfettered growth can actually lead to declining income and poverty creation. We offer but one comprehensive study published in December 2010 analyzing growth in America’s top 100 municipalities. The point made here by Eben Fodor, recognized community planner and author is, “The 25 slowest-growing metro areas outperformed the 25 fastest growing in every category and averaged \$8,455 more in per capita personal income in 2009.”¹⁶

Lt. Governor, David Dewhurst recently promised that, “People could stake me and Gov. Perry on the ground and torture us, and we still would not raise taxes.”¹⁷ This speaks volumes to Texans who are feeling the pressures of increased taxation hidden in fee hikes, never ending property tax increases, more and more bond indebtedness and off-loaded costs of growth that ordinary citizens feel but cannot put their finger on. Houston Chronicle writer, Lisa Falkenberg’s recent tongue-in-cheek discussion between the Governor and a fictional young man made the point that although we must grant the Governor that 251,000 jobs were added this year, “how well do those jobs pay? ... Texas had the second highest share of minimum-wage workers in the nation, just after West Virginia... and also ranks near the top in poverty, teen births, high school dropouts, the number of uninsured, and...”

When the mounting fiscal (and the related water) crisis peaks, Texas taxpayers, particularly those at the bottom of the heap who have nowhere to go, may well reach their breaking point, especially if independents are present to support their self-organizing. A new day is arriving for populist organizing; organizing around the distribution of wealth and related resources - water, energy, food, and land. In this process, at last the underlying problem – the

¹⁵ The KVUE report can be found here: <http://costofgrowth.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Appraisers-See-Flaws-in-System.pdf>

¹⁶ Go here for the full Fodor study: [http://www.fodorandassociates.com/Reports/Growth & Prosperity in US MSAs.pdf](http://www.fodorandassociates.com/Reports/Growth%20&%20Prosperity%20in%20US%20MSAs.pdf)

¹⁷ “Texas finances not as rosy as they seemed,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-texas-budget-20110207.0.4154023.story>.

structural crisis in our political system - will be more fully laid bare for all to more readily grasp.

Who Are the Independents and What Do We Want?

Major party political organizers have become quite adept at momentarily capturing independents using single “wedge” issues, from guns to gays. However, independents, even in Texas, are not just conservatives. Independents are a diverse group of people across the political spectrum -- from Tea Partiers to Green Partiers. We are people who agree on little else than the fundamentals that have been lost in two-party politics; honesty, fiscal conservatism, stewardship of natural resources, and a competitive electoral environment.

In the 2010 midterms independents swung to Republicans with 55% for the GOP and only 39% for the Democrats.¹⁸ According to independent political analyst, Jacqueline Salit¹⁹, the independents’ swing from Obama to Republicans in two short years was because, “The Democrats thought it [independents' support for Obama in ‘08] meant independents support the Democrats. They don't. They want structural political reform of the process. Without it, independent voters used the only tool available to them - they gave Republicans control of Congress.”

Independents by no means want the same things. However, the political battles in which we have engaged in Texas may provide important clues to some unifying themes for independents, along with growing numbers of traditionally Democratic and Republican voters who are also fed up.

How do we organize independents?

We will need to consider the following facts if we want to engage in a serious attempt to organize independents: first, independents often hold a variety of views that put them at odds with any political party, including a “third party”; secondly, there are deliberate

¹⁸ This FOX news report was given just following the 2010 election:
<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/11/03/women-independent-voters-biggest-swing/>

¹⁹ Salit is President of IndependentVoting.org, a think-tank for the national independent political movement.

restrictions placed on independent political activities such as cross-endorsements (anti-fusion²⁰ or “spoiler” laws) in most states (including Texas); thirdly, while the lack of funding for a central organization is a problem, our progress is most significantly impeded by the dearth of local independent grassroots organizing efforts.

There is, unfortunately, only one independent electoral organization in the state of Texas -- Independent Texans²¹. The organization has engaged in a number of Texas “experiments” since its founding in 2001. Those experiments led us to conclude that we should *not* advocate for a third party, nor just form a lobby advocacy group. (Third parties are too easily marginalized, as they cannot engage in the primaries. Advocacy groups cannot organize on a range of issues and are therefore not nimble enough to follow the money.) Rather, we are arguing more for a political tactic, or tactics, involving different people at different times working within a hybrid organizational form. That form lies somewhere between a movement and a party.

A better plan for independents is to work in coalitions inside either or both party primaries, with plans for independent candidacies in key regions on the November ballot. The point is to use the major party primaries to “pull” voters into the general election as independents. Therefore, we advocate an “inside-outside” tactic²², with the emphasis on the outside. Open primary states like Texas are ideal for the tactic.²³

We also choose our issues with care. So-called “single issue organizing” – a staple of major party organizing based on identity or constituency politics -- cannot and will not work for independents. Though we might choose a particular issue -- like the Trans-Texas Corridor or the current groundwater grab going on in Texas -- that choice is based on; 1) whether we

²⁰ Perhaps the most famous fusion effort in American history was the 1896 Presidential election in which William Jennings Bryan became a candidate of the Democrats and the Populists: <http://www.hcn.org/issues/40.15/of-populists-and-political-fusion>.

²¹ Independent Texans was established as a general-purpose citizens political action committee in 2001, following the implosion of the Reform Party of Texas.

²² The “inside-outside” tactic for the independent political movement was first used in New York, one of a handful of states that allow political fusion, in the early 80s. Dr. Fred Newman and other leaders of the now defunct New Alliance Party, a NYC-based third party, invented the tactic. NAP joined forces with the Perot movement in 1994 and later folded into the Patriot Party, which then folded into the national Reform Party in 1996. The NY state party, one of America’s few major-minor third parties, is the New York Independence Party, which more recently supported NYC Mayor Mike Bloomberg on the Independence Party line.

²³ To learn more about open primaries, visit: <http://archive.fairvote.org/?page=1801>. To learn more about a number of efforts to win open primaries in visit: <http://independentvoting.org/>.

can organize a cross-partisan, cross-ideological effort due to the collusion of both parties, 2) if systemic corruption (“pay to play”) can be exposed in the fight, 3) if we can link the battle to an on-the-ground base building effort for current or future electoral activity, and 4) if the issue is, or is approaching, a crisis that demands immediate action.

Most important to organizing independents is the development of a new politic. That politic is already surfacing in the form of economic populism, small “I” libertarianism and radical participatory democracy. Let us explain.

Economic Populism

A series of studies by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press over the last few years show an interesting evolution in what divides and unites the electorate. A study conducted in 2006 shows that Americans are divided on social issues²⁴. Pew’s study in 2009²⁵ on the views of independents, compared with Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of issues related to the role of government in the economy, shows independents largely in the middle between Democrats and Republicans. However, a Pew study conducted in February 2010 showed high agreement and anger amongst Democrats, Republicans and independents on questions related to bank bailouts and bank bonuses.²⁶

The February 2010 Pew study came closest to asking the kinds of questions which might reveal why economic populism is a viable politic around which to organize independents. Americans might be conflicted on precisely what role the government should take in “safety net” issues related to taking care of vulnerable Americans (the elderly, disabled, and children). They are much more united in the belief that government should not provide a safety net for “too big to fail” big business interests.

²⁴ The study entitled, “Pragmatic Americans Liberal and Conservative on Social Issues”, can be found here: <http://people-press.org/report/283/pragmatic-americans-liberal-and-conservative-on-social-issues>. Pew researchers asked respondents to evaluate questions like, “When something is run by the government it is usually wasteful and inefficient.” There was a thirty-point division between conservative Republicans (77%) and liberal Democrats (39%) and independents in the middle (61%). If anything, even on the historically divisive abortion question, Americans are looking for tolerance on both sides of the issue. <http://people-press.org/report/283/pragmatic-americans-liberal-and-conservative-on-social-issues>.

²⁵ The study entitled, “Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era,” analysis with some results can be found here: <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1517>.

²⁶ The study entitled, “Midterm Election Challenges for Both Parties,” can be found here: <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1665>.

The most promising organizing in the last six years has been done around issues that specifically deploy this populist fear-and-loathing towards any marriage between big business and big government. They seek new solutions that do not fit, ideologically speaking, within the confines of the left-center-right paradigm that is wed to 200 years of two-partyism and its vagaries that founding father, George Washington, warned about in his farewell address in 1796.²⁷ Therefore, we do not see ourselves as part of the new Tea Party movement, though there are many independents to be found there. We understand ourselves to be much more in the vein of the Tea Partiers of 1773, who called for, “No taxation without representation.” They were not, at least yet, partisans.

The upcoming period of likely more political instability in our country is the time for independents’ “becoming.” We are up for grabs. That is both an exciting and frightening prospect, and perhaps the greatest challenge of this moment in American political history.

The Statewide TTC Experiment

The most significant economic populist experiment in Texas over the last two election cycles was the uprising against Governor Rick Perry’s Trans-Texas Corridor (TTC) and related freeway-to-tollway conversions. The effort was led by independent voters but also fueled by individual Republicans, Democrats, urban environmentalists, property rights groups, farmers, ranchers, and wildlife advocates. These diverse Texans were told the TTC was a done deal after Perry allies put a deceptive statewide measure on the 2001 ballot. Legislation that passed nearly unanimously (Democrats and Republicans) in both chambers in 2003 began to implement the TTC and the freeway conversions.

In 2002, Linda and David Stall, a couple from Fayette County, read about the TTC in a trade magazine and organized quickly to bring out 800 people from their rural area to a meeting with TxDOT. Linda recounted how TxDOT had rapidly moved to hold obligatory meetings in all 254 counties at a time when no one knew anything about the TTC; consequently the average attendance of these meetings was about 5-10 people. The Stalls took long weekends for four years traveling up and down the TTC routes speaking to mostly rural

²⁷ This quote from Washington’s farewell address best explains why we are not current day Tea Partiers in the vein of arch partisan tea partiers like Sarah Palin: “However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”

crowds, while they built a respected information web site at CorridorWatch.org, a statewide email list and a network that became crucial in future legislative sessions.

In 2004, the Blackland Coalition was established led by Chris Hammel, Agnes Voges, Margaret Green, Joyce Steglich, Inez and Leonard Cobb and other farmers and ranchers living in the “blackland prairie” of Texas, one of the richest farm soils in the world. The TTC-35 was slated to split the blackland down the middle, destroying heritage farms and critical farmland. These rural based Texans put the organization together quickly because the Texas Farm Bureau was not fighting the Corridor. They brought out 1,500 people to the first (and very funny) Gubernatorial forum in 2006, focused on this hot issue.²⁸

Grassroots organizing on the related freeway-to-tollways conversions began in Austin in 2004 with ordinary citizen and marketing whiz, Sal Costello. Costello was upset that a bridge near completion in his neighborhood was, at the last minute, going to be tolled - despite the fact that (as Costello put it) “it had already been paid for.” He found out that the area transportation planning organization intended to implement over a dozen similar freeway-to-tollway conversions surrounding Austin. Branding this new genre of toll roads as a “double-tax,” Costello called out the press and 500 of his neighbors. While the cameras rolled, he explained to his neighbors that they would have to pay a toll just to go buy a loaf of bread from the local grocery store. The next year, Terri Hall²⁹ of San Antonio, a home schooling mother of 8, joined Costello’s Texas Toll Party effort.

These efforts by these extraordinary citizen activists started a movement that, within two years, would involve tens of thousands of Texans in a unified urban and rural cross-partisan uprising. This spurred the still underrated independent gubernatorial candidacy of then Comptroller and Republican Carole Strayhorn.³⁰ Strayhorn focused on the worst aspects of the TTC - the land grab (the largest in U.S. history involving at least 500,000 acres of prime

²⁸ Video footage of the debate, with Kinky Friedman and Carole Strayhorn’s, can be seen here: <http://www.indytexans.org/independent-texans-videos.php#>

²⁹ Terri now writes about transportation for the San Antonio Express-News and founded Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom: <http://TexasTURF.org>.

³⁰ Strayhorn’s moderate messaging TV ads about the TTC, were none-the-less a lightning bolt across the state that brought the project to light to millions of Texans in urban areas who, up to that point, knew nothing about it.

farmland) and giveaways to a foreign corporation.³¹ Strayhorn's run pushed the TTC and Perry's "double-tax" toll roads so much into the news that the election became a referendum on the issue.³² The subsequent 2007 legislative session, much to the Governor's dismay, was largely dedicated to the TTC and toll conversions. It was downhill from there for the TTC, though Perry benefited by the fact that there were two independents (Strayhorn and Kinky Friedman) splitting the independent vote in a four-way race.

Independent Texans played a critical role in the lead up to the Strayhorn candidacy and then, in the campaign itself, by helping to coordinate anti-toll, anti-corridor groups behind her, by providing advice on gaining statewide ballot access -- no easy task in Texas -- and by attempting to bring the Strayhorn and Friedman campaigns together. Unfortunately, despite several meetings, the union was not to be. Nevertheless, Carole and Kinky's two combined total votes (1.3 million) came in second to Perry, beating the Democratic nominee, Chris Bell.³³ Perry's 39% showing became an embarrassment he would overcome later, but not until after Perry's "done deal" of the century, the TTC, was dead.³⁴

The task then for those who built this incredible movement was forward motion. We succeeded through a joint political/electoral action ignoring the many partisan differences between us. However, once the 2006 election was over, most of the activists went back to their

³¹ This was quite literal – Dan Shelley, a lobbyist for CINTRA, the Spanish based toll road consortium looking to win the contract for the TTC, was put on the Governor's staff to help write the legislation for the TTC. Later, Shelley went back to CINTRA!

³² This WFAA-TV report parked on this activist anti-TTC site was one of scores of articles about this issue in the 2006 Governor's race: <http://corridornews.blogspot.com/2006/10/i-cant-endorse-doing-it-in-manner-that.html>.

³³ Our effort focused in 32 counties adjacent to and east of IH-35 where the federal government had held 54 hearings required under NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act. Strayhorn spoke to crowds at 18 of them and had independent organizers at all 54 hearings gathering signatures and emails of over 4,000 of the 20,000 attendees. The combined statewide votes of Carole and Kinky were 4,000 votes more than Democratic nominee Chris Bell. The combined Carole-Kinky votes would have won all of Bexar County, a tribute to the "independencia" spirit alive and well amongst Texas Hispanics. These facts were underreported despite their indication of a seismic shift in Texas voting, with two-partyism suffering a severe jolt. Carole Strayhorn won five counties and came in second in 104 counties. The combined votes of Carole and Kinky won 47 counties (including Bexar, the home of the city of San Antonio), and placed second in an additional 74 counties.

³⁴ Economist, Dr. Pat Choate, an expert on infrastructure and international trade, (who grew up in Texas and was Ross Perot's running mate in 1996), wrote about the TTC battle in his book, *Dangerous Business: The Risks of Globalization for America*. Choate explained that Governors in other states had already brokered similar deals receiving big upfront cash payments from toll operators, rather than face the music that additional moneys (taxes) were needed for infrastructure. The problem is that tolls are just another revenue source (a form of taxation) that leads to more costly (by 30%) infrastructure.

respective places in the parties. Strayhorn has yet to come through on her promise to help keep building the independent movement and to raise the necessary funds. Kinky tried a brief stint with the Democratic Party, losing a primary run for Agriculture Commissioner and then endorsed the Libertarian candidate, Kathy Glass, for Governor in 2010.

Independents activated at the state level in 2006, but did not have the resources to keep organizing statewide. The people of Texas were left to fend for themselves against the reactionary status quo, including the re-election Governor Rick Perry.

The Stop Domain Subsidies Experiment

The second populist independent experiment began in 2007 in the City of Austin led by Brian Rodgers, a small real estate developer who caters to local businesses. Rodgers questioned a plan by the Austin City Council to grant a generous and misrepresented tax incentive package to developers of a luxury shopping mall who were well connected within the local Democratic Party.³⁵ Rodgers led a 20,000-signature petition drive to put the issue of tax incentives for retail facilities up for a public vote. It was on the ballot as Proposition 2 during the Presidential election in 2008.

The political question behind the measure was, is it the City's purview to pick winners and losers in a highly competitive market that does not really need subsidies. Most petition signers related to it as a no brainer, hence our slogan. "Vote for Prop 2, it's a no brainer." All political parties supported the effort, as well as 500 local homegrown businesses. It was looking like passage was assured. But just five weeks before the election, large-scale real estate interests and the upper echelon of the Austin Chamber of Commerce dumped over \$400,000 into a deceptive advertising campaign resulting in a close defeat of Prop 2 by just 2%.³⁶

This was a different kind of ballot measure campaign. Over 123,000 Austinites voted for Prop 2. It was just the beginning of a trans-partisan movement with a strong populist message. The defeat was used to build a permanent independent pro-active effort (under the

³⁵ The incentive package is a 20-year agreement to rebate sales and property taxes to the largest mall developer in the U.S. – Simon Properties -- for The Domain luxury shopping mall in Austin, The first of seven misrepresentations was the claim that the deal involved \$37 million when it was closer to \$65 million. See more here: <http://StopDomainSubsidies.com>.

³⁶ Prop 2 forces spent a total of \$130,000, but only approximately \$40,000 in the final 5 weeks.

auspices of ChangeAustin.org), which has expanded on the broader questions that were raised in Prop 2 - namely, how is public money allocated and on whose behalf.

Rodgers has proceeded to make a compelling case to cut off the money that is flowing to the “growth lobby” in a massive transfer of wealth to an already highly subsidized real estate industry by way of infrastructure for their projects,³⁷ These virtually hidden costs of growth (water, wastewater, roads, schools, police, fire, etc.), involve over \$122 million per year in the city of Austin alone.³⁸

Rodgers’ point is that you can’t stop them coming but you can *make growth pay for itself* to avert a crisis. And, as Rodgers has pushed, push has become shove; he recently discovered and revealed to local media the round-robin secret meetings the Austin City Council has been holding since 1997 in a systemic breach of the Open Meetings Act. The story is continuing to unfold as the Council is now under investigation by the County Attorney.³⁹

The Texas House District Pati Jacobs Experiment

The third experiment is the Pati Jacobs campaign for Texas House District 17 in Bastrop, Brazos, Colorado, Fayette, and Lee counties, just east of Austin. The independent minded Jacobs, one of the leading Democratic insurgents in the state and a local independent rancher, was running against a one-term Republican incumbent and Giddings City Attorney, Tim Kleinschmidt. Kleinschmidt was dubbed “furniture” by the *Texas Monthly* magazine for having accomplished little in his first term. The issue in this race quickly became a deal pushed by private water vendors (helped along by Perry appointees on the Texas Water Development Board) to force the Lost Pines Groundwater Conservation District to grant permits to continue the over-pumping of a portion of the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer underneath Bastrop and Lee

³⁷ Rodgers’ fight with the “growth machine” is really no different than the fight independent New Yorkers had with the Ed Koch liberal Democratic machine in the early 80s after Koch had turned the city’s financial decision making power over to an unelected board of real estate and banking interests (called Big MAC), chaired by investment banker, Felix Royatyn: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Rohatyn. Congressman Dennis Kucinich, had the same fight with banking and real estate interests back in 1977 when, at age 31, he was the “boy mayor” of Cleveland: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Kucinich.

³⁸ For some impressive data to back up Rodgers’ point, he helped create a fact and data-based website on the issue of Travis County’s costs of growth at: <http://costofgrowth.com/>

³⁹ The editorial board of the Austin American-Statesman ran this editorial on January 27th, supporting the City Attorney’s investigation of the Austin City Council: <http://www.statesman.com/opinion/braced-for-the-gathering-storm-1214956.html>.

counties. The deal also includes the state backing bonds for a 100-mile, \$400+ million pipeline to send the water to private developers in Hays County and San Antonio.

Aqua Water, Inc., one of the largest water coops in the nation (with over 50,000 members), based in Bastrop County, held a forum on the water pipeline issue six weeks before the election. It was at this forum that independent activists began inserting themselves into the dispute, calling it the “Trans-Texas Water Highway” as a water pipeline was part of the old TTC plan. Kleinschmidt tried to claim that there was really nothing he could do, since the legislative session would deal “solely” with the “budget shortfall and redistricting.”⁴⁰ But as he continued to get poked in front of the 400 people in attendance, he was forced on the defensive and then abruptly left in the middle of the forum. Before he left, independents were able to extract a promise out of him to debate his opponent Pati Jacobs on the issue “anywhere, anytime.”

The next day, Independent Texans called Kleinschmidt to invite him to a local forum to debate Jacobs, but no calls were returned until after the forum. Independent Texans endorsed Jacobs and began working to spread the word that the reason Kleinschmidt wasn’t up to fighting the onerous water deal was something he hadn’t disclosed -- that he had leased his own water rights and therefore had a financial incentive for the deal to go through. Word spread quickly throughout the community; it got so heated that Kleinschmidt’s own friends were beginning to question him. He was forced to debate on the local public access channel. Sitting next to the knowledgeable and passionate Jacobs, Kleinschmidt came off badly.⁴¹

That was about the time when Texas House Speaker Straus wrote the first of two \$150,000 checks to help save Kleinschmidt.⁴² By the home stretch, in an increasingly unfavorable political environment, the Texas Democratic Party sought to shore up support for endangered incumbents and dropped backing for promising challengers. Jacobs simply ran out of money -- and in the wrong election year. That said, the basis for continued cross-partisan action was set. It’s ready to go again on what promises to be the next populist battle front - the Texas Water War.

⁴⁰ A bevy of 30 bills have in fact been introduced into this legislative session, including major constitutional amendments on water such as HRJ 137, which would give the Texas Water Development Board (all Perry appointees) revolving bonding authority. No other agency other than the Veterans Land Board, has the power to issue bonds without legislative oversight. <http://quorumreport.com>

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Small “I” Libertarianism

There was a mass movement of young people behind Ron Paul’s 2008 presidential campaign. They were not Republicans; they were non-aligned. They fueled the very beginning stages of the Tea Party movement. In fact, the first tea party was a “money bomb” fundraiser for the Ron Paul campaign in November 2007, with Paul raising over \$4 million in one day via the Internet. The second Paul tea party was on December 16, 2007, when he broke all fundraising records by raising over \$6 million in one day on the internet, eclipsing John Kerry who raised \$5.7 just following locking up the Democratic nomination.

Paul’s base of support came from people largely outside of traditional fundraising and voting circles – they were independents – which perhaps explains why Glenn Beck attacked Paul supporters, conveniently calling them terrorists.⁴³ After Beck’s attack, Paul went on his show and commented regarding the \$6 million money bomb that, “This is the first time in history where a grassroots type candidate, an independent-minded person has been able to compete with the special interests. We don’t have as much money, but we get their attention...and now we can compete and this scares those people who are in control of government, whether it’s the banking interests, the military-industrial-complex, whether it’s the medical industry...because I think we represent the majority...they represent, if you take the base of the Democratic and Republican Parties, that’s about 30% of the people.”⁴⁴

A *USA Today* article - and the accompanying comments - published the day after Paul’s money bomb demonstrated who makes up the Ron Paul movement.⁴⁵ Many of them are young people who do not necessarily agree with some of Paul’s positions -- for example, many

⁴³ The Kleinschmidt campaign was truly panicked. That explained their no less than 9 costly shotgun blast mailings in the midst of early voting, making conflicting claims bordering on the ridiculous. Our favorite was the mailing that Kleinschmidt dunderheads sent out claiming that Pati was both a “radical funded by Austin environmentalists” while supposedly ‘smuggling toxic waste across the Mexican border.’

⁴³ You can watch this 7 minute November 12, 2007 Glenn Beck clip just after a \$4 million money bomb for Paul in early November, where Beck calls Ron Paul supporters terrorists, after which the FCC was flooded with thousands of complaints from Ron Paul supporters:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Rc4OJWH1nE>.

⁴⁴ This was an interview by Glenn Beck, two days after Paul’s money bomb:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZXWW4C2kpE>.

⁴⁵ This USA Today article, including the comments section, gives a flavor of the Ron Paul backers. They are not your traditional Republicans, though since Paul’s 1988 Libertarian run for President, he has remained inside and firmly committed to the Republican Party. http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2007-12-17-ronpaul-fundraising_N.htm.

are pro-choice on the abortion issue -- but they agreed with his long stated concerns about globalization (that has outsourced American manufacturing jobs), his disdain for central banking and the financial elites it empowers, his support for non-interventionist military policies, and his opposition to the tremendous waste (in financial and human terms) of the War on Drugs – something Paul has likened to long-failed and repealed alcohol Prohibition.⁴⁶

The Debra Medina campaign for the Texas Republican gubernatorial nomination was an attempt to capitalize off the Ron Paul movement in the Presidential election and was a great fight for the hegemony of the tea party by the libertarian, independent wing of the Republican Party of Texas. But Rick Perry, with a little help from Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck, won.⁴⁷ The strategy of “party takeover” by the libertarian independents that made up Medina’s core constituency - failed once again.

Ironically, the strategy may well have even ensured Perry’s ultimate victory. The Medina campaign clearly underestimated Rick Perry’s willingness to move as far to the right as it would take to co-opt her base. Former Houston Mayor, Bill White, running on the Democratic ticket for Governor was painted as “sanctuary city Bill” and the Republican anti-immigrant right stood by their man. They suffered from memory loss about the Trans-Texas Corridor when the truth was that Perry and White were nearly identical on the immigration issue. Medina would have increased her credibility and outreach by endorsing Bill White, but couldn’t move from the right of Rick Perry, stay in the Republican Party, and endorse a Democrat, especially one that had been targeted by her own supporters as “sanctuary Bill.”

After the primary, Independent Texans approached the Bill White campaign to ask that he begin reaching out to Texas independents, with a pro-redistricting reform message. We counseled that we needed a positive unifying theme to woo independents. No one would even discuss the issue. However, once early voting started we received hints of desperation from Democrats who saw the Republican tsunami coming.

⁴⁶ It should also be noted that Ron Paul has carried some of the most popular (with independents) and unpopular (with the major parties), legislation to open up the Presidential ballot and debates to independents and third parties. For more on this whole subject, we highly recommend [Ballot Access News](#), Richard Winger’s longtime publication. Winger, an early founding member of the Libertarian Party, is America’s foremost ballot access expert.

⁴⁷ Medina’s potential was completely underrated by media pundits who were astounded to see polls showing the possibility that Medina might over-take Republican titan Kay Bailey Hutchison in the primary. Independent Texans endorsed Medina, helped her reach over 100,000 Texas independents, and wrote about her being “Glenn Becked”, as a sign of her viability and independence within the Republican Party: <http://bootperry.org/2010/02/12/the-tea-party-crashers-perry-beck/>.

One Democratic PAC contributed to \$50,000 Independent Texans to help publicize our prior decision to urge voters to vote for “anyone by Perry” (for Kathie Glass the Libertarian candidate or for Democrat, Bill White) to over 100,000 Texas independents. But it was too late. Texas Democrats, along with the regular Republican machinery, have utterly failed Texans of all persuasions. There is no strictly inside game in either party – they cannot be changed from within, nor “taken over.” However, we do have reason to believe, from the 2006 gubernatorial race, that they can be vulnerable to competition.

Populism, Participatory Democracy & Political Reform

A September 2010 Gallup poll shows that over the last seven years, the support for a third party in America has risen. Tea party supporters favor a third party by 62%. Independents now favor a third party by 74% and, interestingly, liberals and moderates tend to be more pro-third party than conservatives.⁴⁸

Independents have argued for decades that we need at least three options to win qualitative change.⁴⁹ But how do we get there, since the major party duopoly so thoroughly controls the electoral system? Though we see a dire need for fundamental election reform, that’s not necessarily where we should start in the midst of America’s current melt down. We might better start by inserting independent politics into the growing crises in ordinary citizen’s lives as they are crying out for help. All of these are related to the continuing contraction of the American economy and the unraveling of the welfare state. What will replace it? That question will not be answered by politicians because politicians cannot answer it. It must be answered by the citizenry if American democracy is to progress.

No Labels

Recent calls for consensus and moderation by politicians such as NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Senators Evan Bayh and Bob Bennett, are well intended but they are a

⁴⁸ The study can be found here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/143051/americans-renew-call-third-party.aspx>.

⁴⁹ Social theorist Georg Simmel figured this out in the late 1800s, when he proposed that dyads (a two person group) and triads (a three person group) have dramatic differences. Simmel explained that when one of the two members of the dyad withdraws, it destroys the group but when a third joins, making a triad, a qualitative change occurs. Simply put, the triad can impose its will upon one member through the formation of a coalition by the other two.

miscalculation of the “independent center.” American independents are all over the map. Centrists often call right and left wing independents “wing nuts,” and therefore, succumb to their own labeling schemes.

Independents are not primarily at the “center” of a political system that is now a corporatist den of deal making -- so much so that one must question whether the “political center” even exists. No Labels⁵⁰ makes the claim that the process for consensus has collapsed by virtue of the activists within the major parties controlling the show in primaries. But, the truth is that activists within the parties do not run the parties, despite their connections to the base. Just ask Debra Medina about the Republican Party of Texas – she is frustrated. Just ask any number of progressives about the Democratic Party – Obama broke their hearts.

Complicating this situation further, are all sorts of identity-based political organizations (from unions to AARP to the NRA) that are naturally consumed with the perpetuation of their own organizations. They cannot represent the best interests of America’s “populist underclass” -- the outsiders and the unorganized – who are quickly becoming the majority of Americans, who have very little to no politics whatsoever.

The Day of Reckoning

The day of reckoning described by Ross Perot nearly 20 years ago as he warned about the dangers of deficit financing is now close upon us. To ordinary Americans, being a “second rate economy” has real meaning. It is frightening to confront the fact that Americans are some of the least self-sufficient (most dependent on globalization) people in the world, while millions face permanent unemployment.

The banking crisis has been followed by a state and local government crisis that has huge implications for a relevant organizing strategy. The December 19, 2010 report by 60 Minutes, “State Budgets: The Day of Reckoning”⁵¹ includes an important interview with Meredith Whitney, who became one of the most respected financial analysts on Wall Street, after warning, long before the 2008 collapse, that the banks were in trouble. Whitney says that though “most state governments will be able to honor their debts”, we are likely to see “50-100

⁵⁰ No Labels can be found here: <http://nolabels.org/about-us/founding-leaders/>.

⁵¹ The 60 Minutes report can be found here: <http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/60minutes/main3415.shtml>.

or more sizeable municipal defaults amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars.” The day of reckoning is coming in the next twelve months, says Whitney (with slightly differing time tables, depending on the state, region and city), because state and federal governments will not be able to bail these cities out.

So Who Will Organize Independents?

Most ordinary people do not have the time, resources nor desire for full-time engagement in politics. But they *will* come together in a crisis. Out of these crises can come outcroppings of populist, cross-partisan unrest -- and with it more independent-minded politicians and new political activists who then attempt to take up the cause.

Historically, third parties in American politics have forced the burning issues of the day that the major parties have refused to handle. Republicans and Democrats then move to co-opt those issues and render their third party competitors irrelevant. This cooptation process then leads to change (however you wish to define it). There is a serious question as to whether either party is capable of co-opting the demands that are likely to arise in the upcoming period.

As mentioned earlier, we are not advocating for a third party. Our experiments point us towards a lean central organization that consciously positions itself within the evolving network of identity conscious “tribes” or “nodes of active citizens” as they push up from the bottom against the corporatist state and corporatist parties. Local grassroots groups will manifest themselves in response to each unfolding crisis, as they did with the TTC. By creating and sharing value with these organizations, as well as already existing ones, we can form and shape a movement that defines itself actively, as opposed to via the tired, polemical, alienating politics and partyism of the past.

The eventual goal of this network building is to foster independent candidacies from “people of conscience” both inside and outside the major parties. Who are these “people of conscience”? They might be very mainstream politicians who understand, perhaps better than we, how much our political system is broken, who are as tired of the political mess as we are. They must have appeal to voters who lean towards either party or both. In short, independents need to be on the radar screen to attract good people -- if we build it, they will come.

Who will organize independents? The independents of course - with help from thousands of lean independent outfits that know how to lead and follow at the same time.

About the Author

Linda Curtis is a longtime independent political activist who began organizing at age 19 in the state of Florida in 1969. In 2001, Curtis helped found Independent Texans at www.IndyTexans.org and in 2008, formed ChangeAustin.org with Brian Rodgers. Go [here for Curtis' bio](#).

What's Next?

We have a business plan we will make available to potential donors upon request.