

dependents

A Republican plan



By David B. Hill

An independent is a guy who wants to take the politics out of politics.

—Adlai E. Stevenson, 1955

The 2000 election promises to be an extraordinarily close contest, producing perhaps the closest popular vote since Nixon-Kennedy in 1960. The upcoming election is also notable in that both parties have apparently chosen their nominees with a minimum of rancor and conflict. Most partisans seem satisfied with their respective party choices. In a Gallup poll taken just before the conventions, Bush was attracting 90% of the Republican vote, and Gore was getting 87% from the Democrats.

Partisans are not the only ones happy with the choices being offered in 2000. A *Washington Post*/ABC News poll taken in late July found a majority of independents characterizing themselves as very satisfied (11%) or somewhat satisfied (46%), “with the choice of candidates for president available... in the upcoming election.” Just 15% of independents said they were “very dissatisfied” with the choices available.

One might venture to guess that the presence of two “third-party” candidates stokes this surprising independent endorsement of the menu choices. But that seems not to be the case. In the same poll, 75% of independents chose to cast their ballots for Bush or Gore, versus only 20% who chose one of the alternatives to two-party hegemony.

Perhaps independent contentment with the 2000 election springs from a realization that the closeness of the Bush-Gore contest bestows on non-partisans a full measure of importance. While getting out its base vote and core supporters will be a major “To Do” for each party, wooing the independent or swing voter will take on equal importance as the parties

shape their strategies for November. Given the closeness of the partisan split in America, neither party can win without a majority of independent voters. From Labor Day to Election Day, independents can expect to be courted with flowers and candy. Their response will be decisive.

Who are these independent kingmakers of the 2000 election? Based on an evaluation of various polls taken over the past two years, (along with a small dose of artful interpretation), there would appear to be six categories of independent voters.

The first segment of independents are the “disinteresteds,” those who may have an influential role on the election but do not seem particularly interested in doing anything about it. Fully 21% of independents interviewed in a recent *Washington Post*/ABC News poll indicated that there was less than a 50-50 chance they would vote in November. Forty-nine percent said they were absolutely certain to vote. By comparison, two-thirds of all Democrats and Republicans polled said they were certain to cast a ballot.

Many independent voters may be characterized as being devoid of any serious interest in politics. While the precise composition of this apathetic faction is unclear, younger voters as well as the poorest and least educated independents are most likely to swell the ranks of the disinteresteds. This demographic profile seems to justify the “know-nothing” label often affixed to independents. Without resorting to such name-calling, it is fairly safe to say that Republicans would be ill-advised to target this group. One day the younger voters may become partisans, and the winner of the 2000 contest could shape that choice; but between now and November, the disinteresteds should be mostly ignored.

Another segment of independents are “anti-partisans,” frequently angry voters who actively dislike most mainstream political leaders. Somewhat similar to

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populists (the next group, below) in their demographic profile and ideological outlook, the anti-partisans are distinguished by a distrust of most government institutions and programs that is not necessarily reflective of populist ideology. This distrust is not a particularly enlightened position. It is both viscerally castigatory and punitive in its origins. “Self-serving politicians, greedy special interest groups, and beady-eyed bureaucrats” are anti-partisans’ targets of choice. Many supporters of Ross Perot and the Reform Party typify this strain of anti-partisans. Many anti-partisans imagine themselves as patriots bent on rescuing their beloved country from the mischief of faction and partisanship, as well as the tyranny of bureaucracy and special interest politics.

The alienation that afflicts many anti-partisans drives some of them away from the two major parties altogether, into the arms of third-party candidates like Perot or Pat Buchanan. Others leave the electoral scene completely, choosing not to sully themselves in the political process. But still others seem to keep one leg in the tent of at least one major party, belying their appreciation for the long odds of success that face minor party candidates. Some one-time Perot supporters are already slinking back to the Republican fold, for example, rather than vote for Buchanan.

The pickings in 2000 are slim for anti-partisans. Pat Buchanan is too much of an opportunistic politician for this crowd, and Ralph Nader is, well, *too* green. Al Gore also seems too partisan to make the grade here. Only Bush seems to have an angle on these voters. His limited office-holding experience and sometimes casual personal demeanor seem to hold genuine appeal for some anti-partisans. But if the Bush campaign becomes a “typically Republican” partisan affair in which the candidate embraces old platform totems and spends too much time swapping endorsements with other politicians, particularly congressional Republicans, many of these alienated independents may see him as no real alternative and feel they have no choice but to sit out the 2000 election.

Populists are the next segment of independents. As suggested above, populists are close to the anti-partisans in many of their views. But populists are older and generally hold a more favorable view of New Deal social programs. Populists are also less contemptuous of politicians. While they may dislike a wealthy, pompous, or dynastic politician, they have a healthy respect and admiration for a barefoot champion of “the people.” In the end, the populists will be a tough sell for Bush, the son of a wealthy, eastern establishment clan. Bush’s sometimes libertarian-laced and accountability-driven critique of social programs and schools may also turn off many populists. Southerner Al Gore seems better positioned to pick up these votes.

Bush’s message for the independent voter—at least for those independents who can be influenced—must be focused more on candidate image than on issues.

The fourth group of independents are “interest groupies,” whose primary political loyalty is to a particular interest group, not to one of the two major political parties. These voters feel more allegiance to the Sierra Club or the NRA, for example, than to the Democrats or Republicans. Although their secondary affinity for party causes these voters to declare themselves independent, most are still sufficiently partisan that they behave in elections pretty much like their Democrat and Republican counterparts. And I would speculate that a decisive majority of interest groupies leans toward the Democrats. The predominance of environmental, conservation, abortion rights, union, teacher and similar left-leaning groups in this category makes it a poor prospect for campaign efforts by Bush and other Republicans.

But some interest group independents may lean toward Bush. The biggest of these groups are gun rights advocates. A 1999 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 28% of independents describe themselves as NRA supporters. Similarly, a July 2000 Zogby poll found that independents prefer better enforcement of current gun laws (69%) over passage of more gun control laws (25%). Bush’s staunch support for the death penalty and other crime control measures is also important to some conservative interest groupies.

A plurality of independents is fundamentally middle-of-the-road in its politics. These centrists do not necessarily hold complex belief systems or systematically crafted positions on complex issue agendas. Rather, they are conflict-reducers who want to find a middle or compromise position between the strident extremes they see on the Democrat left and the Republican right. These independents consciously like to split their tickets, likely accounting for split outcomes in some states. As some of them like to boast, they are in the “radical middle,” a position that is hard core in its distaste for partisanship. These voters consciously look for and respond to politicians who make overt appeals to concepts like “bipartisan cooperation,” “spirit of compromise” and “putting principle ahead of party.”

Rhetoric and symbolic gestures count for much with centrist voters, often for more than substance. Centrists are especially interested in language that defies conventional categories of partisanship or ideology. George Bush's explicit appeals for "compassionate conservatism" and his "big tent" philosophy hold him in good stead with these voters. Centrists are also struck by Bush's demonstrated commitment to bipartisan cooperation during his tenure as governor. The large number of elected Texas Democrats who are crossing party lines to support the Governor impresses even the most skeptical among them. Centrists will be especially crucial to Bush and could account for more than one-half of the support he needs to garner from independents to defeat Al Gore.

Finally, one segment of independents has adopted the non-partisan label as a fashion statement. In some business and social circles—mostly near the top of society—partisanship is simply out of style, like bell-bottoms, Nehru jackets, or double-knit suits. The independent moniker confers a kind of desired status on the person who wears it. It says, "I am too smart or sophisticated to be taken in by a bunch of politicians." Independents of this ilk are very unreliable, whether for turnout or predictable partisan support. They probably account for much of the swing-voting that causes electoral support to shift from one party to another, and that changes from one election to the next. In general, these voters are likely to conclude from the media that the Democrat is the more fashionable candidate choice.

But not always. Sometimes, often for unfathomable reasons, a Republican can capture his or her fair share of the status-seeking vote. George W. Bush seems to do a credible job of

courting the media and Hollywood while still remaining true to his principles. Meanwhile, Al Gore has always had some difficulty connecting with the crowd that values good performance skills. So, with a little luck, Bush should be able to get a decent share, if not the majority, of the fashionable independent vote in 2000.

A critical factor in the success of Bush's quest for the independent vote could be his wise use of Senator John McCain, his vanquished primary opponent. McCain and his crusade for "reform" hold powerful symbolic appeal for several groups of independents, particularly the quirky anti-partisans and fashionables. These groups believe that McCain reflects many of their values, even if they are a little vague on the details.

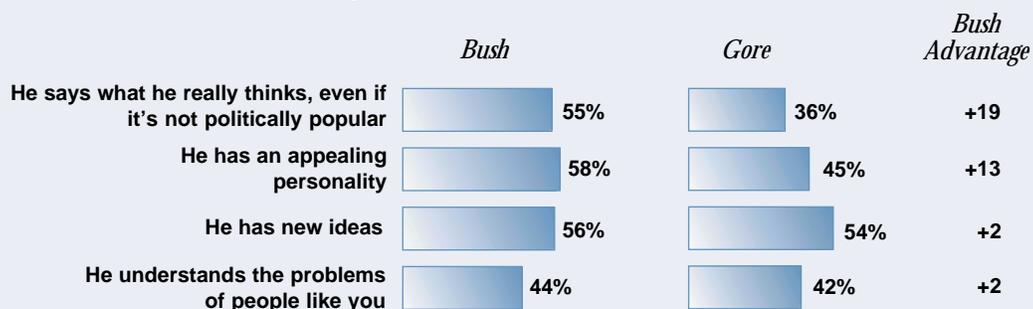
The art of using McCain will come in the execution. If he goes around appearing with Bush at staged and carefully choreographed "endorsement" rallies, the desired effect is unlikely to be achieved. The Bush-McCain alliance may appear to be little more than the traditional partisan arrangement ("I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine") that turns off independent voters. Alternatively, if McCain fires up his Straight-Talk Express for a solitary foray on behalf of Bush, dropping into heavily independent ports of call, the benefit for Bush might be enormous. And the fact that the two men, whose relationship is obviously strained, won't be forced to appear together, would be a bonus.

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Figure 1

Independents' Views of Bush and Gore

Questions: Please tell me whether the following statement applies to... (Bush/Gore), or not.



Note: Responses of independents.

Source: Survey by ABC News/Washington Post, July 20-23, 2000.

Swing independents are very sensitive to the nuances and symbols of candidate imagery, and they presently have a mixed view of Bush's strengths *vis-à-vis* Gore. Currently, Bush holds a great advantage over Gore on candor and personality, two critical factors (see Figure 1). But Bush barely edges Gore on having new ideas and understanding the problems people face. In fact, neither candidate is doing particularly well in these two areas, which creates an opening for either to capture the advantage. Disinterested, anti-partisans and populists are apt to be especially sensitive to the empathy factor, and in many recent elections, it proved decisive in influencing undecided voters. Bush can hug as well as Clinton. He genuinely enjoys being around and with people of any social status, even the down and out. This side of his personality should shine through early and often as the campaign unfolds.

To the extent that there is an issues focus in the quest for independent voter support, it must be more philosophical than detailed in its outline. A mid-July *Washington Post*/ABC News poll asked independents whether they favored "smaller government with fewer services or larger government with many services." A 59% majority chose smaller government, while just 35% favored larger government. This fundamental divide is a crucial one for Bush to exploit. Democrat Al Gore's clear penchant for larger government constitutes a clear Bush advantage.

But while Bush must frame the issues debate along those lines, he can still advocate more active governmental efforts in some areas. One potentially promising area is that of conservation and the environment. In a 1999 survey by the Pew Research Center, 47% of independents described themselves as environmentalists, compared with 46% of Democrats and 33% of Republicans. The use of environmental or conservation issues would enhance Bush's appeal to independents by signaling his willingness to cross traditional party and issue boundaries to embrace a typically Democratic issue. Innovative proposals in education and health care would serve a similar purpose, but these issues do not necessarily have the same punch with independents.

George W. Bush has been pleasantly open about his Christian faith and values. His expressed choice during a primary debate of Jesus Christ as his "favorite philosopher" doubtless figured prominently in his successful pursuit of the GOP nomination. But in his quest

for independent votes, Bush's faith may turn off some non-partisans. A 1999 Pew Research Center poll found that fewer than one-half of independents describe themselves as "religious." By comparison, 57% of Democrats and 61% of Republicans think of themselves in that way. In a similar vein, only about one-third of all independents are "pro-life" in their abortion views, according to several polls. These observations are not made to suggest that Bush should hide his faith or values, but, rather, his discussions of these beliefs should not appear judgmental of those for whom religion is less important.

In seeking the independent vote, Bush must also be adept in handling his relations with Republican congressional campaigns. Most polls show him leading Gore among self-described independents, while the same voters give the generic congressional Democrat a slight advantage over the generic GOP candidate or show the congressional races too close to call. In close contests, many Republican candidates for Congress will doubtless seek a front-running Bush's full endorsement and campaign support. What should he do? Decisions of this nature are unquestionably situational, with the correct answer contingent on numerous factors, ranging from the closeness of a particular congressional race to Bush's personal relationship and rapport with the GOP candidate. In general, though, Bush might be advised to be sparing in how he exercises his partisanship during the forthcoming campaign. In seeking independent support, it is clearly neither in Bush's best interest, nor in that of his GOP colleagues, for there to be a presidential endorsement conferred at every whistle-stop. Such overt partisanship could make both GOP candidates less authentic targets for independent support.

But as was implied when Bush picked Dick Cheney to be his running mate, the Republican nominee may be as interested in governing as campaigning; so Bush may want to seek a GOP-led Congress. If so, his appeals for support for GOP candidates for Congress should focus on the accountability aspects of GOP control of both the executive and legislative branches of government. Bush should tell independent voters—many of whom are accustomed to splitting their tickets—that divided government makes it impossible for even an enlightened electorate to know who should be held accountable when gridlock occurs or muddled policies become law. Bush would thus be appealing simultaneously to independents' desires to curb the mischief of faction and to hold partisan politicians accountable for their actions, something difficult to do in the divided government we have seen prevail over much of the post-World War II era. ●