

“We’re Not Being Heard”:

Independent Voters Speak Out in Ohio

Independent voters are a key to the 2010 election in Ohio and they are very unhappy with the political system. This unhappiness has the potential to threaten incumbents of both political parties and raises questions about the legitimacy of the political process beyond the outcome of the election.

Numerous polls clearly demonstrate the frustration of independents. For example, a Akron Buckeye poll taken early in the campaign found that seven in ten reported low satisfaction with Ohio politics and nearly three-quarters expressed a low level of trust. These figures were higher among independents than for Democrats or Republicans—hardly a happy lot.

A focus group of such independent voters provided details on the political frustrations of Ohio independent voters. The loss of jobs was a crucial concern, but just as importantly, these independents felt that the political system was unresponsive to the public—and especially on the economy. As one participant put it, “we’re not being heard.”

This widely shared perception took many forms. Some participants thought politicians were self-serving careerists, while others saw them as arrogant and insulated from the problems of the public. There was strong agreement with the statement “a politician, is a politician, is a politician.” Corruption was a common allegation, symbolized by the large sums of money raised and spent in the campaign. One participant said that like NASCAR drivers, politicians should “wear patches on their suits from their

sponsors.” Other participants were more alienated from the political process, arguing that public officials were “puppets” of special interests and conspiracies to increase the power of the federal government over its citizens.

Most participants had a negative view of President Obama’s job performance, ranging from sharp disagreement with his policies to a critique of his management of the government. Participants said the President’s agenda “was different than that of the average American” and that he had “wasted the country’s money.” Even those who felt that Obama meant well and “we should let him keep trying” expressed disappointment with the administration. This sentiment was especially strong among independents who had voted for Obama in 2008.

Views on the Congress were uniformly negative. Several participants argued that the institution needed to be “revamped,” and one said that “anything is better than the system we have now.” The unresponsiveness of members of Congress to the participants and the public at large was a common complaint. One participant said “we just need new people” in government. Such negativity was echoed with regard to the major political parties. The parties were viewed as “hell bent on their agenda,” with the parties “too far apart on every issue” and thus “it takes years to get anything done.” Participants argued that the parties needed to “put America first” and “stay more to the Constitution.”

The idea of a “third” or “fourth” political party to “keep the system honest” appealed to the participants. Wide agreement was expressed for a “common sense party,” focused on reviving the economy and limit the growth of government. But there was also skepticism about whether new political parties could be competitive and not just a forum

for “lunatics.” There was mixed reactions to the tea parties, with some participants skeptical of their agenda and others more supportive.

The two most popular political figures among the participants were Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Other favorites were Dwight Eisenhower, Jesse Ventura, and Ron Paul.

Anger, frustration, and distrust were strong motivations for political activity among the participants. Many agreed that such problems were in large part “our fault” for not being involved in politics. One participant that the “people need to exercise their power” and another said “it is time for a revolution.” The participants showed a determination to have their voices heard in the upcoming election, “Americans need to get out there and make these changes.”

When asked what would engage them more in politics, several participants responded that there “needed to be more free access to politicians,” including more and regular town hall meetings, quick and thorough responses from contacted officeholders, and a greater presence of politicians in the community. One participant said being a politician should not be seen as “a job choice but more as a service to the country.” Such suggestions reflect the strong sense of being ignored by the government among independent voters.

Methodological Note