

Introduction

It is an extraordinary act for Americans to vote for a third party candidate. . . . To vote for a third party, citizens must repudiate much of what they have learned and grown to accept as appropriate political behavior, they must often endure ridicule and harassment . . . they must pay steep costs . . . and they must accept that their candidate has no hope of winning.¹

S. J. Rosenstone, R. L. Behr, and E. H. Lazarus,
Third Parties in America: Citizen Response
to Major Party Failure

The movement of African Americans into and out of the Republican party was never blind or random but was based on a realistic assessment of which party would best further black political and economic interests. . . . Blacks have tended to be loyal to the two major parties. However, specific circumstances have led to active African-American support for third parties. When the two major parties reject African Americans' political goal of inclusion, African Americans seek other political allies.²

Michael C. Dawson, Behind the Mule:
Race and Class in African-American Politics

African Americans have inserted themselves into the balance of power at various points in the history of the United States by building third parties and independent political movements. In doing so, they have helped advance some of the most basic yet farthest-reaching changes in the republic: the abolition of slavery, the expansion of the right to vote, and the enforcement of civil rights. Today, increasing numbers of African Americans are part of the tens of millions of men and women, from a range of backgrounds and ideological perspectives, who view themselves neither as Democrats nor as

Republicans, but as independents.³ National opinion polls taken by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and the Pew Research Center indicate that between 20 and 30 percent of African Americans of voting age identify themselves as politically independent.⁴ These Americans have become part of a discernible movement linking African Americans with white independents—a black and independent alliance—rallied around the insurgent candidacy of Illinois Senator Barack Obama in his bid to become president of the United States.⁵

Increasingly less tied to the Democratic Party, black voters have been looking for new electoral options in the face of bipartisan failures at home and abroad. Sixty-six percent of all Americans believe that the nation is on “the wrong track”; 89 percent disapprove of the job being done by Congress; 71 percent disapprove of the job being done by the president.⁶ Among African Americans, the feeling and experience are even stronger. Whether people are concerned about the failure of our public schools, our health care system, or the war in Iraq, there is widespread recognition that the two-party establishment is either unwilling or unable to address the current state of affairs in a developmental or democratic manner.⁷

Over the last twenty years, African Americans have expressed their political independence in a number of ways. In 1988, when Rev. Jesse Jackson ran as an insurgent presidential candidate for the nomination of the Democratic Party, two out of three African Americans who voted for him in the primaries reported that they would have voted for him as an independent had he decided to run as one.⁸ He did not, but that year another African American did: Dr. Lenora Fulani, a developmental psychologist and educator, became not only the first African American, but the first woman, to get on the ballot in all fifty states as a candidate for president. She ran as an independent.⁹ Four years later, in 1992, the *New York Times* reported that 7 percent of black voters had cast their ballots for H. Ross Perot, a white Texas billionaire who, like Fulani in 1988, defied the two major parties, but, unlike the black independent, had a \$73 million war chest with which to advance his campaign.¹⁰ Nearly twenty million voters, or approximately 19 percent of the electorate, would cast their votes for Perot—the largest number of votes cast for an independent in U.S. history—of which over half a million votes came from African Americans.¹¹ A CBS News poll conducted in May of 1992, during the primaries, found that upwards of 12 percent of African Americans said they would vote for Perot over the Democratic and Republican candidates, reflecting surprising support for an independent presidential candidate among black voters at that point in the presidential race; the *Los Angeles Times* reported Perot drawing up to 18 percent support among African Americans in California.¹² In New York, Rev. Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem (a position previously held by the late Democratic Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr.,

who had been elected with the support of the American Labor Party), gave an early endorsement to Perot, commenting that the independent represented “a viable alternative for black voters.”¹³

Within days of Butts’s endorsement, the pastor came under heavy criticism from New York’s black Democratic leadership, headed by Congressman Charles Rangel. Indeed, the attacks on Perot came from across the bipartisan establishment, black and white. From the beginning of his campaign, the Texan was ridiculed by virtually every major liberal and conservative analyst, who fixated on his personal attributes—his diminutive stature, “folksy” style of speaking, and ubiquitous graphs and charts—instead of seriously engaging the question of why millions of people were interested in voting for him.¹⁴ Whether “sick of the Democrats and Republicans,” stating that “the politicians are corrupt,” or offering more nuanced reasons for why they were voting for Perot, Americans, by casting their votes for him, were exercising their independence. In the months and years after the election, the two major parties would attempt to contain and dismiss the voter rebellion: the federal budget was quickly balanced through bipartisan agreement (one of Perot’s concerns was the federal deficit), and a “Contract with America,” containing sweeping promises of political reforms (the overriding message of his campaign), was issued by the Republicans. During the next election, Perot, the symbol of the 1992 voter revolt, was excluded from the national presidential debates.¹⁵

Throughout the 1990s, black and white voters continued to assert their independence—passing term limits wherever initiatives and referendums were possible, recalling elected officials, voting for local independents and third-party candidates, and withholding votes for major-party candidates.¹⁶ Beginning in Colorado, a largely unreported voter initiative was put on the state ballot to limit congressional terms (four terms in the House and two terms in the Senate). The measure passed with 71 percent of the vote in 1992. Subsequently, a movement under the direction of the organization U.S. Term Limits led to the adoption in fourteen states of term limits on congressional representatives, approved with an average of 67 percent support. According to exit polls in New York, “A clear majority of black voters want term limits.”¹⁷ At a black political convention held in Manhattan on April 8, 1995, three hundred African Americans, from a range of backgrounds and political perspectives, met and endorsed term limits for all elected officials and judges.¹⁸ There were other signs of discontent and expressions of political independence among African Americans. In the 1997 gubernatorial race in Virginia, the Democrat, Donald Beyer, received 80 percent of the black vote, rather than the usual 95 percent, and, as a result, lost to the Republican candidate.¹⁹ Former Democratic governor Doug Wilder, the state’s first African American governor, had refused to endorse Beyer, remaining neutral instead.

One of the clearest expressions of black voters' independence came in the form of disaffection from the Democratic Party during the 2005 mayoral election in New York City. In the fall of that year, media businessman and billionaire Michael Bloomberg—running a fusion campaign on the Republican and Independence Party lines—was re-elected mayor of the city with 47 percent of New York's African American vote.²⁰ Like Perot, he spent tens of millions of dollars of his own money to run. His most outspoken black supporter, Fulani, had helped establish the Independence Party in the wake of the 1992 election. With almost no direct backing from Bloomberg himself, she led volunteers across New York City to rally support for his candidacy. Concentrating in Harlem and parts of Brooklyn and Queens, the Independence Party called on African Americans to vote for Bloomberg on column "C" (the column on the ballot where New Yorkers could vote for Bloomberg as an independent—column "A" being Democrat and "B" being Republican). In 2001, during his previous bid for mayor, Bloomberg had promised the Independence Party, whose ballot line he sought, to push for an enactment of nonpartisan municipal elections using the city's initiative and referendum if elected. That year the Independence Party, with over 59,000 votes, provided Bloomberg his margin of victory. Keeping his promise, Bloomberg set up a series of Charter Revision commissions in which hundreds of New Yorkers had a chance to testify both for and against placing nonpartisan municipal elections on the ballot; the measure was ultimately defeated at the polls, largely at the hands of the Democratic Party, which strongly opposed it. But in 2005 the outpouring of support among African Americans would not only prove a serious indictment of the Democratic Party but point to the changing ways in which black New Yorkers were beginning to view themselves relative to both major parties.²¹ As John P. Avalon wrote in the *New York Sun*, "something is happening in the African-American community . . . the diversification of the black community economically and politically is changing the landscape. One recent sign of this is the surprising amount of support for Mayor Bloomberg among African-American voters. . . . A recent WNBC/Marist poll showed the mayor receiving 50% support from black voters." Avalon further noted, "The growing [independent black] trend is broad as well as deep—in 1998 only 5% of African-American voters between the age of 51 and 64 identified as independents, but by 2002 that number increased fourfold to 21%."²²

It has taken the financial resources of white billionaire businessmen in conjunction with the grassroots organization of insurgent and independent black leaders for African Americans to help challenge the bipartisan establishment.²³ Millions of dollars are needed to run television and radio advertisements, conduct telephone banking, retain legal expertise, and carry out petitioning drives, all of which are necessary to begin to compete effectively in the electoral arena. The laws and related rules governing the electoral process

(written and passed by the two major parties' elected representatives) are specifically designed to keep the Democratic and Republican parties in power: restrictive ballot access, single-member districting, gerrymandering, inequitable campaign finance laws, and discrimination against non-major party candidates in televised debates combine to marginalize even the wealthiest citizens. Underscoring the state of American democracy, when Fulani was asked by a reporter to reflect on what was more difficult in her run for president—being black or being a woman—she poignantly noted “it was being an independent.”



Since the mid-nineteenth century, there has been an undercurrent of political independence among African Americans, even as most eligible black voters have aligned themselves with one of two major parties: the Republican Party from the time of the Civil War to the New Deal; and the Democratic Party since the New Deal, and especially since the height of the modern civil rights movement.²⁴ With enforcement mechanisms in place (albeit, at times, unevenly applied) to protect African Americans' right to vote, what meaningful choices are there in a largely bipartisan electoral system? That is, what political options are there if one is not in favor of the dominant policies or practices of the Democratic or Republican parties?

In 2004, independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader, the only antiwar candidate with national stature (Democratic presidential candidate Massachusetts Senator John Kerry had voted on congressional war appropriations), was, at the instigation of the Democratic National Committee, removed from the ballot in more than a dozen states.²⁵ The Democrats, along with their Republican counterparts, with control of the Commission on Presidential Debates, would also exclude Nader from the presidential debates. In an environment of such heavy-handed bipartisan rule, when independent and third-party candidates holding dissenting views are blocked from either appearing on the ballot or participating in televised candidate debates, political opposition to the major parties is marginalized to the point of virtual nonexistence.²⁶

Bipartisan constraints have consistently stymied the growth of third-party and individual independent campaigns since the early part of the nineteenth century, ultimately providing few options for voters. African Americans in the antebellum North who were somehow able to meet the property and residency requirements to be eligible to vote (as in New York, starting in 1821), or had not been excluded from the vote by statute (as in Michigan, starting in 1837, or Pennsylvania, starting in 1838), often had no choices in the electoral arena.²⁷ From the 1830s to the 1850s, the vast majority of candidates from the two major parties—at that time, the Democratic and Whig parties—were proslavery, or silent on the issue.²⁸ If one was against slavery, the electoral arena

was a limited venue for expressing one's views—that is, until black and white abolitionists forced the issue of slavery and its abolition onto public stages through mass campaigns by calling on candidates and elected officials to take a position. These abolitionists formed the antislavery Liberty Party, running candidates of their own. In the century thereafter, African Americans confronted a new bipartisan establishment, when the Democratic- and Republican-controlled government was largely unwilling to enforce the constitutional rights of black men and women in the Jim Crow South.

Today, despite the legal gains of the modern civil rights movement, which successfully pressed elected representatives to pass federal legislation reaffirming the civil and political rights of African Americans (the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965), elements of a new Jim Crow have become embedded in the political process. Independents in the twenty-first century, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or political ideology, face a kind of second-class citizenship in the electoral arena. They are legally and institutionally marginalized, not only in terms of ballot access but by their exclusion from televised debates through gerrymandering and the actions of bipartisan (as opposed to nonpartisan) election regulatory bodies—from the Federal Election Commission to the Commission on Presidential Debates—favoring the two major parties and their candidates.²⁹ Bipartisan restrictions to the ballot not only limit the choices available to voters but, as a consequence, determine the policies and practices that flow from having candidates elected from such a limited set of options. Such restrictions also discourage voter participation.

Over the last twenty years, while overall voter turnout has hovered around 55 percent for national elections (and just below 35 percent for midterm elections)—with African American voter turnout generally reflecting the overall trend—the percentage of voters, black and white, liberal and conservative, who either describe themselves as independent or register to vote as unaffiliated or with a non-major party has steadily grown.³⁰ The percentage of voters who registered as neither Democrat nor Republican between 1984 and 2004 more than doubled, from 10.2 percent to 21.9 percent.³¹ Meanwhile, recent Gallup polls indicate that upwards of 38 percent of Americans self-identify as independent, up from approximately 25 percent a quarter of a century ago. So while the percentage of Americans participating in elections is largely holding at slightly over half of the electorate, even as the total number of voters increases—122 million people voted in the 2004 presidential election, as opposed to 111 million in 2000—*an ever larger percentage are positively identifying themselves as independents or registering as such.*³²

Regarding African Americans—who, as a whole, have proven to be the most loyal constituency to the Democratic Party, with the majority identifying themselves as Democrats since the mid-1960s—there appears to be a politi-

cal transformation underway. David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies notes, “The votes cast by African Americans in 2004 showed them to be less Democratic in their partisanship than they had been in 2000.”³³ While 14.8 percent of African Americans identified themselves as politically independent in 1997, by 2005 that number had increased to at least 25.9 percent. If we add the 5 percent of those who responded either “other” or “no preference” to the 25.9 percent of those who said that they were “independent,” the percentage of African Americans who did not identify with either major party was 30.9 percent.³⁴



Perceptible signs of dealignment among African Americans relative to the Democratic Party have prompted the examination in this book of the history of independent black politics and third-party movements. Not since Hanes Walton Jr.'s *Black Political Parties: An Historical and Political Analysis*, published over thirty-five years ago, has a book-length work been devoted to the subject of African Americans and third parties.³⁵ While a number of key studies on black politics in U.S. history have appeared since that time, including award-winning books by Michael Dawson and, more recently, Steven Hahn, none focus on third parties and independent politics per se.³⁶

The present study details how African Americans have used independent political tactics—creating or joining existing third parties, supporting insurgent or independent candidates, running fusion campaigns, and lobbying elected officials with the backing of various alliances, labor organizations, or other networks of support—to advance black political and economic interests.³⁷ Since the middle of the nineteenth century, third parties have provided a way for African Americans (among other disaffected and marginalized groups) to apply pressure on the ruling parties. Under ongoing, although not necessarily consistent, outside pressure, the major parties have, in turn, adopted policies initially raised and fought for by independents into their own party planks, and sponsored legislation accordingly. In the nineteenth century, members of the Liberty Party sought the immediate abolition of slavery; radical Republicans pushed for the extension of black voting rights; and Black Populists—through the Colored Farmers' Alliance and then the People's Party—demanded that the government provide economic relief and political reform. In the twentieth century, Socialists, Progressives, and Communists, each in their own way, helped (albeit under the authority of the Democratic Party) to usher in the modern welfare state with measures such as social security and a minimum wage enacted into law. Meanwhile the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, among other black-led organizations and parties, demanded that the government protect

African Americans' civil and political rights. Today, black independents, like many of their counterparts from the past, are calling for a level electoral playing field in order to address domestic and foreign policy issues of concern.

In this study, to the extent possible, the focus is on black independents and their associations. This is in contrast to the way American political history is usually studied, described, and analyzed, which is by focusing on the major parties and their political leaders. To be sure, building third parties and independent political movements have not been the only ways in which African Americans have effected legislative changes, including ending slavery, extending citizenship, gaining the vote, desegregating public facilities, gaining economic relief, and protecting black civil and political rights. Many African Americans have chosen to work solely within the major parties—and indeed, those parties have always had dissenting voices within their ranks—but it remains the case that without ongoing independent political pressure, progressive legislative changes would likely not have been made. The work of black independents (among other independents) in the electoral arena has therefore been an essential part of the development of American democracy.