



INDEPENDENTS, ORGANIZED

Sunday, November 8, 2009

Every week CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist/philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, November 8, 2009 after watching selections from "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" and "Hardball with Chris Matthews."

Salit: Independents are the talk of the town. So, let's talk about how independents are being talked about. The analysis of the vote on Tuesday is that the Democratic Party lost the independent vote. They're looking at the Virginia governor's race and the New Jersey governor's race where Democrats lost. Charlie Cook, the pollster and analyst, says 'Well, forget about all this stuff that the Republicans are saying, about this being a referendum on Obama. It wasn't a referendum on Obama. It really had nothing to do with Obama. What it did have something to do with, though, is the Democratic Party.' A solid admonition, in my view, since the Democratic Party higher ups were so sure that Obama's victory meant that Democrats had won the hand of independents in perpetuity. Charlie went further though. He said, 'Independents are independent for a reason. They're not rooted in a political party.'

Newman: They actually don't like political parties.

Salit: They don't like political parties, correct. A few years ago I met with Cook and we had a fight about this very issue. At the time, Cook took the position that many Beltway people continue to take, which is that there's no such thing as an independent. I told him there is and that people who call themselves independents do so for a reason. He didn't buy it. His argument, roughly speaking, was 'People might call themselves independents, but they are really Democrats or Republicans, because that's who they vote for.' Anyway, here it is several years later and Charlie is now saying something different about independents. He's saying what we taught him. To me, that's one of the most interesting things to come out of Tuesday's election, that Charlie Cook is noting that 'Independents are independent for a reason. They're not rooted in a party.'

Newman: And the general posture within the major parties is *The hell with independents*.

Salit: Yes. Though the "takeaway" from people like Cook and others is *Ignore them at your peril, Democratic Party, ignore them at your peril*.

Newman: That's what we've been saying for decades.

Salit: We've been saying it to both political parties.

Newman: Yes. But we've seen a very acute example of Democratic Party arrogance towards independents in New York. Their attitude is *We have a majority*.

Salit: And, *We don't need anything else. We don't need the independents.* What you're saying about the New York City story, obviously, is monumental, where the Independence Party supported Mike Bloomberg. This is a fusion state. Independence was a major theme in the campaign and a popular way to vote in this election. The Independence Party produced 142,817 votes on its line.*

Newman: New York is more than a fusion state. It's an organized state.

Salit: Yes. Independents are organized.

Newman: You put those two together and you produce a breakthrough of the kind we had in New York City. That's not true yet in many parts of the country. Unlike the way these traditional pundits see it, the independent vote is up for grabs – from an organizing point of view. And, it's the organized independents which are a major factor.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: The punditocracy's analysis doesn't know from organized and unorganized. That's not one of their categories. They don't understand the meaning of the process of grassroots organizing, of something "becoming."

Salit: I buy that completely.

Newman: There's a methodological error in the way that they report, for the most part. They want to speak of the independents, of what the independents are doing, but the way that they define independents is solely on the basis of who they vote for.

Salit: Correct.

Newman: So, there's a contradiction there, because they don't identify independents as anything other than the way they vote. So, then, what is the meaning of the sentence *The independents voted this way*, if, on the pundits' definition independents are who they vote for,.

Salit: Why bother to call them independents at all?

Newman: They don't believe in the concept of independents having independent existence. And that means they don't believe in the process of independents becoming organized. That's why they never cover that. They don't think it will turn into anything unless a Ross Perot comes along and turns it into something. They don't see anything separate from that.

Salit: My experience of listening to these commentators talk about all of this is that on the one hand I'm struck by nuanced changes in Charlie Cook's political geography, but

* For more details on the IPNYC vote for Mike Bloomberg, go to www.IPNYC.org.

on the other hand, it's another universe from what is happening in terms of the process of independents becoming organized. Hundreds of independent activists from over 40 states come on my national conference calls and most of them are involved in organizing independents, in fighting for their inclusion and leveraging their emergent power.

And so, when I hear the "trending" analyses by the punditocracy, I'm interested but I'm not sure it has anything to do with what's going on, on the ground. I know it's post-Election Day and it's what they do. They look at the trends. Maybe there are new trends that you can point to, maybe not. One of the more interesting things that happened on Tuesday, as somebody pointed out, was the number of young voters who stayed away that had participated in the Obama election.

Newman: Who were saying, quite obviously, we love Obama. We don't like the Democratic Party.

Salit: Exactly. That's part of what prompts the pundits to say *Well, the Democrats have to pay attention to this. They ignore this at their peril.*

Newman: They're wrong. Obama has to pay attention to this.

Salit: Alright, say more about that. That's obviously about the distinction between Obama and the Democratic Party.

Newman: Which the independents were very tuned in to. That's what they saw in Obama. He was taking on the most traditional liberal Democrats, meaning Hillary and Bill, and they came to view him as an independent.

Salit: That's why so many independents voted for him.

Newman: Yes. But it's very hard to function in Washington as an independent once you're elected. So he's between a rock and a hard place.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: He's personally very popular still, But people see that he's governing like a Democrat even though he ran as an independent. He has to figure out what to do about that.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I don't know what he will do about it, but he better figure out something.

Salit: We're organizing on the ground as rapidly as we can. My experience is that there's so much out there to be organized. And, when I think about Obama, I think, if

our movement were bigger, not just bigger quantitatively, but if it had more power, he would have something to go up against the Democratic Party with.

Newman: I don't even know if the conditional language of "if it had more power" makes sense.

Salit: Because?

Newman: Because I don't know what "it" is and I don't know what "power" is in this context. Look, you have what you have. That's what you have. And you organize what you have.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: When I say I don't know what "it" is, I mean that it's still very embryonic, very new. And it's emerging at the rate that it's emerging at. And it does the things that it does. So, when you say that they're looking for trends, that's not quite accurate. They're looking for trends which they take to be comprehensible and possible, but only from a two-party point of view.

Salit: True enough.

Newman: So, they're not looking at trends at all. They won't look at our trends. They're not even looking at trends in the same way that we consider trends. We know that there are two dominant major parties. But we also know that there's something else going on. It's a "becoming," if you will.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And they don't consider that when they analyze what the elections are all about. It's all swing, swing, swing, swing. Last year they swung one way. This year they swung another. Well, what if what you're calling a "swing" is the emergence of a new kind of political movement?

Salit: I'd say it is.

Newman: Some interesting metaphors come to mind. Let's say you had a camera that allowed you to take time-elapsd photos over millions of years. And you're looking at the process by which chimpanzees turn into Homo sapiens.

Salit: OK.

Newman: It happens over millions of years. But even if you're looking at the millions of years, you could look at different points, different snapshots, of what's going on in this process of evolution, and perceive *That chimpanzee is swinging to the right or that chimpanzee is swinging to the left.*

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But at some point, while you're looking at the swing, you might say to yourself, *You know, I'm not so sure it's a chimpanzee any more.*

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But, if you want to stay with mainstream kind of thinking, that's not the reasonable way to look at it. But we're seeing something that's evolving, that's becoming and I think that's what's happening.

Salit: Yes. And it's not a third party.

Newman: Correct, and it's a misnomer to call it a third-party movement. It's as much an anti-party movement as anything, at this point in that process. But those are the trends that we're focusing on and those are the trends that the official pundits are either not interested in or not looking at, or both.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But there's a slight shift even in their talk, because these trends that we're talking about are happening in real historic time. They're taking place in discernible ways.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, some are saying, independents are delivering a message to Democrats. Why would you suppose that independents would be sending any message to the Democrats? They're not interested in the Democrats or the Republicans. They don't send messages. They're trying to make change.

Salit: That's closer to what we're seeing.

Newman: History includes having a way of understanding history. I think what I'm describing is a closer characterization of what's going on than simply the cyclical swing of a bloc of voters. And this means there is an historical/logical dilemma for these pundits. In some respects, they can't or won't or are not allowed to think in these terms.

Salit: I assume if they do, they'll be out of a job.

Newman: They only can see things in terms of parties. That's been the American conditioning process for people who do. And it makes sense. I'm not saying they're wrong or they've been brainwashed. I'm saying that's just what has happened. George Washington was against parties from the start.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But no sooner had Washington spoken out against parties than four years later, we had the dirtiest, most partisan election in the history of the United States of America.

Salit: Right.

Newman: He was trying to fight the anti-party fight and he lost, cold. And the parties took over, boom. And they've been entrenched for well over 200 years.

Salit: But that is going through a transformation.

Newman: Yes. But you don't so easily see transformations because most of the "looking" is based on what was there before. As radicals, we're trying to see this whole process, not abstractly, but while reorganizing it, from the vantage point of where we believe it's heading towards.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: That's important to understand. You said some things to Charlie Cook a few years ago. And history took care of the rest. And that's what I think is going to be going on or is going on or will continue to go on with different kinds of shifts. It's an organizing question.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And the critical issues in this organizing process, are the governance issues, because that's what's going to make it possible to see alternatives. And once it's possible to see alternative ways of voting for example, the result could be a deluge of independent votes, explicitly. I mean millions upon millions of people would shift in a second. I really think that's true. Because people just don't know. We see that. As soon as we tell people they can do something independent, they say *Oh, yeah, that's what I'm going to do.*

Salit: It's what we saw at the polls on Election Day in New York City. We had our Independence Party volunteers and poll workers out around the city running a kind of public information campaign, letting people know as they were on their way into the voting booths that they had the option of voting on the Independence Party line for Mike Bloomberg. And not only did people take that information and say *Oh, OK, I didn't know that. Can I do that?* They came out of the voting booth and thanked the person who told them. There were countless stories of this. 'Thank you for letting me know that. I didn't know that I could do that.'

Newman: Exactly. Maybe I'm expressing my own grassroots bias, but you say, and I know what you mean by it, that you were leading a public information campaign. But in

a way, it wasn't a public information campaign, because it wasn't coming from some institutional authority. It was coming from other human beings standing in the streets.

Salit: From organizers of the Independence Party. And, the deliverer of the message makes a huge difference in how the message is heard.

Newman: Absolutely. That's why, in this age of super advanced technology, I'm still a believer in grassroots organizing.

Salit: Me, too.

Newman: So, we're making headway. I think we made more headway in this New York City campaign than any campaign we've ever done.

Salit: This is why, as I told you, the exchange I had with a reporter at the *New York Times* really made me laugh. In a fairly succinct way I put in front of him a summary of the New York City results, and what, by any standard, was a momentous new development in the history of minor parties and in the performance of independent voters. It is, after all, a climate where everyone is saying, *It's all about the independents*. I got back a one-line response that said, 'I put it in, but they cut it.' I broke out laughing!

Newman: Disposed of by the stroke of a pen!

Salit: Or a "delete" button. Thanks, Fred.