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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

A  
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

**"INDEPENDENT VOTERS" ARE THE  
POLITICAL EQUIVALENT OF  
ECTOPLASM—THEY ONLY APPEAR ON  
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BY  
JAMES VEGA

**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:** “Independent voters” are the political equivalent of ectoplasm—they only appear on devices specially designed to measure them and are invisible in everyday normal life.

*By James Vega*

According to one major narrative of the 2010 election, the key to Democrats setbacks was the fact that they “lost the independents.” The election supposedly confirmed that these voters had rejected Obama’s agenda, become more conservative and turned to the Republicans.

In this perspective, independent voters are invariably pictured as thoughtful and cautious political moderates, fearful of excessive government and seeking a “sensible center” between Democrats and Republicans. Here is how **David Brooks described them**<sup>1</sup> last January:

Americans, with their deep, vestigial sense of proportion, have reacted. The crucial movement came between April and June, when the president’s approval rating among independents fell by 15 percentage points and the percentage of independents who regarded him as liberal or very liberal rose by 18 points. Since then, the public has rejected any effort to centralize authority or increase the role of government.

And **again in April**:<sup>2</sup>

As government grew, many moderates and independents... recoiled in alarm.... As government has seemed more threatening, moderates and independents have also fled from the Democratic Party. Democratic favorability ratings have dropped by 21 points over the past year, from 59 percent to 38 percent.

Clearly, this is a distinct, coherent and self-aware political group being described, one that deeply fears and rejects excessively active government and which decisively turned on Obama when he went beyond their moderate political agenda.

But here’s the odd thing: in the real world of ordinary, everyday life these “independents” are completely – and I mean completely – invisible. One never sees such normal indications of political sentiment as bumper stickers or yard signs, for example. Think about it, when was the last time you saw a yard sign or bumper sticker that said something like “I’m an independent and I vote” or “proud Independent voter” or “Independent voter – and proud of it” Around election time how many slogans did you see that said “Independents for Obama”, “independents for McCain” or “Independents for such-and-so for Senator”.

None, right? Absolutely none.

And then consider this: one never actually meets people who explicitly call themselves “political independents” during casual conversations at soccer matches, PTA meetings,

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19brooks.html?\\_r=1&ref=davidbrooks](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19brooks.html?_r=1&ref=davidbrooks)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/opinion/23brooks.html?ref=davidbrooks>

neighborhood zoning debates, garage sales, street fairs, church events, bake sales, holiday parties, Boy Scout trips and so on. In white, suburban neighborhoods one will frequently meet many perfectly nice middle-aged people who will define themselves politically as “moderate Republicans” or “Conservative Democrats” but one rarely meets people who describe themselves as “a moderate Independent” or “a conservative independent” or people who define themselves politically by saying things like “Me? I’m an ‘independent’ voter.”

The fact is inescapable: in the world of ordinary daily life where people actually talk to each other about politics a distinct and coherent political formation of “independent” voters simply does not exist.

*(Note: many people will indeed describe themselves as either cynical or indifferent to political parties in general – saying things like “I vote for the particular candidate, not the party”, “I make up my mind about each race”, “I don’t really pay much attention to politics” or “they’re all assholes” – but just being cynical or indifferent to political parties is not the same thing as having a specific “independent” political identity as an ideological centrist or anti-partisan philosophic moderate)*

There is no mystery about why the huge group of “independents” who are measured on opinion polls are completely invisible – or more accurately simply don’t exist as a distinct and coherent political force. The vast majority of “independents” are actually weak or dissatisfied partisans – Democrats who are unhappy with their party or Republicans unhappy with theirs and who describe themselves as “independents” on opinion surveys in order to express this sense of distance and dissatisfaction. Only a very small minority of “independents” continue to resolutely deny that they generally “lean” toward one party or the other when a “lean” option is offered.

This is a very widely shared, even near-consensus view among political scientists. Here, for example, is how [leading political scientist Alan Abramowitz explained it](#):<sup>3</sup>

If you’ve been reading the opinion columns in the newspaper or watching the talking heads on television, you probably know that political independents are the largest and fastest growing segment of the American electorate. You also know that independents don’t care about party labels, vote for the person instead of the party, and hew toward the center rather than the poles of the ideological spectrum. And you know that appealing to this growing bloc of independent voters is the major goal of modern political campaigns.

Unfortunately, almost everything that you’ve read or heard about independent voters recently is wrong.

The reason, Abramowitz says:

True independents actually make up a small segment of the American public and an even smaller segment of the electorate; the large majority of those who call themselves independents actually have a party preference....

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2009/08/are\\_independents\\_overrated\\_as.php](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2009/08/are_independents_overrated_as.php)

Abramowitz cites the evidence from the 2008 American National Election Study, and pinpoints the reason for the mistaken belief in the power of Independents as an electoral demographic:

...The 2008 NES appears to show that independents make up the largest segment of the American electorate. About 40 percent of respondents identified themselves as independents, which was considerably more than the 34 percent who identified with the Democratic Party or the 26 percent who identified with the Republican Party. However, when these independent identifiers were asked a follow-up question, nearly three-fourths of them indicated that they usually felt closer to one of the two major parties. Only 11 percent of the respondents were “pure independents” with no party preference. And because these pure independents turned out at a much lower rate than either regular or independent partisans, that number shrank down to 7 percent among those who actually voted.

The study showed that party preferences of many self-described Independents were strongly reflected in their votes, and “these independent partisans think and act almost exactly like regular partisans”: Not only did the large majority of independent identifiers readily acknowledge having a party preference, but the evidence ...shows that independent partisans behaved almost identically to regular partisans when it came to choosing candidates for President, House of Representatives, and Senate: independent Democrats voted overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates and independent Republicans voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates.

This jibes exactly with everyone’s real world experience – that a distinct political force of “independent voters” is simply nowhere to be found. In fact, literally the only place that a substantial number of American voters will explicitly describe themselves as “independents” is on forced choice opinion surveys where the only options they are given is to call themselves either Democrats, Republicans or Independents.

As a result, the conclusion can’t be dodged. The opinion poll category “independent” is not a reflection of a political allegiance that actually exists in the real world. Metaphorically speaking, it is a political mirage, one that disappears when one tries to approach it. In more technical terms, it is an artifact – an artifact that is created by the opinion device being used to measure political views.

This conclusion is directly supported by [Ruy Teixeira’s recent analysis of the 2010 poll data](#).<sup>4</sup> His analysis shows that the thrashing about of “independents” and “moderates” between 2006 and 2010 is an internal process occurring among people who are basically Republicans, not one that is occurring within some third “independent” force in American politics. As Ruy says: “we’re shifting Republicans around between straight identifiers and leaners and both straight Republican identifiers and leaners have become more conservative over time ...there is no big ideological shift here viewed across registered voters as a whole. It’s overwhelmingly an intra-Republican story.”

In fact, there is a deep irony in David Brooks’ conception of independents – the poor fellow can’t seem to keep his story straight. In the two columns quoted at the beginning of this piece

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/11/is\\_the\\_electorate\\_moving\\_to\\_th.php](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2010/11/is_the_electorate_moving_to_th.php)

Brooks describes independents as a powerful, highly judicious and thoughtful political force, one whose carefully considered rejection of Obama's agenda determined the 2010 election.

Shortly after the election, on the other hand, he described independents as a force that does not yet exist.

Here's Brooks' latest effusion:<sup>5</sup>

The country is restive and looking for alternatives. And before the next round of voting begins, I suspect we will see another mass movement: a movement of people who don't feel represented by either of the partisan orthodoxies.... The coming movement may be a third party or it may support serious people in the existing two.... It will have to restore the social norms that prevailed through much of American history... when competition between the parties was limited and constructive, not total and fratricidal.... Most important, this movement will have to develop a governing philosophy and a policy agenda. Right now, orthodox liberals and conservatives have their idea networks, and everybody else is intellectual roadkill....

Confused? You should be. On the one hand Brooks says we have a uniquely thoughtful and judicious independent political movement – one that is so pivotal and powerful that it determined the result of the 2010 elections. But at the same time it is a political force that in everyday real life doesn't actually exist – It has no vision, no agenda, no plan, no name, no organization and no leaders. You cannot find this movement's grass-roots supporters and advocates anywhere in your local neighborhoods, places of work or community events. Nor can you see its views expressed on any yard signs or bumper stickers.

It is, in short, a “movement” that is the political equivalent of ectoplasm – a vast “mass movement” that contains neither mass nor movement.

As a Zen paradox for politicians to meditate upon in their spare time this contradiction is actually mildly entertaining; as a framework for analyzing the 2010 elections, on the other hand, it is simply gibberish. Both the practical field ethnography of ordinary daily observation as well as Ruy Teixeira's analysis of the polling data makes this utterly, entirely and abundantly clear.

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<sup>5</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/12/opinion/12brooks.html?\\_r=1&ref=opinion](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/12/opinion/12brooks.html?_r=1&ref=opinion)