

**TESTIMONY BY SARAH LYONS BEFORE THE
PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION ON ELECTION ADMINISTRATION**
AUGUST 8, 2013
DENVER, CO

Good afternoon Chairs, members of the Commission.

My name is Sarah Lyons. I'm the Director of Communications for IndependentVoting.org, a national association of independent voters based in New York City.

The president of our organization, Jackie Salit, has submitted a formal request to provide expert testimony at your next hearing. I deeply hope, and thousands of independent leaders around the country hope, you will extend an invitation to her.

An important event just occurred here in Colorado, which is a fitting backdrop to today's meeting. Unaffiliated voters – we call ourselves independents by the way – just surpassed the numbers of registered Republicans and Democrats in Colorado. There are 1,056,300 registered independents, 993,650 registered Republicans, and 964,303 registered Democrats.

This means that a plurality of registered voters in this state have declined to affiliate with any political party, in spite of the fact that the Democrats control the legislature, the Governor's seat and both U.S. Senate seats while the Republicans claim the Attorney General and Secretary of State offices and hold the edge in the Congressional delegation.

I highlight this fact to the Commission because it is actually an important statement being made by the voters on the very subject that President Obama mandated your Commission to consider – namely, *is the way we run our elections maximally responsive to the inclusion and participation of the electorate?*

These independents will face some significant road blocks along the way. They won't be allowed to vote in the presidential caucuses in 2016 and in order to vote in state and local office primaries, they will have to give up their independence and become Democrats or Republicans. But they still chose to be independent – because that status is important to them.

This situation, simply put, represents the conundrum or contradiction that you face. You've been charged with the job of recommending ways to make the electoral system more efficient and participatory. That's good, that's important. But it's also important to see that the voters, by their choice of being independents, are saying that there are many things about the way the system functions – even when it functions efficiently – that they don't approve of, that they think falls well short of how our democracy needs to work.

Colorado is not alone in this regard.

I live in New York City and I work at the national headquarters of IndependentVoting.org. Over the last 10 years, there's been a major political battle there that's been largely unreported in the press in New York and certainly nationally. That battle has been to bring nonpartisan elections, a top two system, to New York City.

In New York, I'm a leader in the Independence Party. We're the party that elected Mike Bloomberg. For 10 years we've been trying to bring about a simple reform. The net effect of the reform would give 1 million New Yorkers the opportunity to vote in the first round of voting. A simple efficiency that would make the system fairer and more participatory.

I had been a political activist for a long time prior to this battle. I was involved in progressive causes, environmental cases and considered myself to be knowledgeable and experienced in the fight for democratic rights. But when we began efforts in conjunction with the Independence Party and Mike Bloomberg to enact this reform—by the way more than 85% of American cities conduct their municipal elections in a nonpartisan manner—I witnessed the most bitter, ferocious and desperate campaign by the two major parties to prevent this basic democratic reform from being enacted.

We had endless debates about the mechanism of how things would or wouldn't work. And it was easy for this issue to be turned into a set of pragmatic questions about whether the Board of Elections had the technology or staff readiness to handle such a system. Meanwhile, though, the voting rights of independents, 20% of whom are African American, 24% Latino and 11% Asian – were hanging in the balance.

So with due respect, I'm not here to tell you how to wade through the mountain of information being presented. Whether it's coming from experts from Harvard or some state capital or Secretary of State office.

But I will tell you this, any election system that does not address the full inclusion of all Americans no matter how they designate themselves, can't call itself a true democracy.

I believe some of you, in your heart of hearts, know this to be true, And perhaps you are struggling with how to perform your duty and fulfill the mandate of this commission, while still speaking to the deep concerns of the American people, to whom this democracy belongs.

I hope you can find a way to do that.

Thank you for your time.
