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U.S. independent voters crucial to elections, though often ignored: experts

by Matthew Rusling | 2012-04-27 15:08:26

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Xinhua) -- Independent voters are set to play a crucial role in November's U.S. presidential elections, but often go unnoticed by the U.S. media and two increasingly polarized parties, U.S. experts said.

Over the last four years, 40 percent of independents -- 2.5 million Americans -- have left the Republican and Democratic Parties, the highest rate of defection since the Gallup polling company began keeping track half a century ago.

"Independents are the largest voting block in the nation and they're really tired of being ignored and unrepresented," said Linda Killian, senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center, at a Cato Institute panel discussion on Wednesday.

Independents are known as the swing vote for a reason, as they tend to roll back and forth like a pendulum until finally deciding on a candidate.

In April 11-15 Gallup tracking, Republican challenger Mitt Romney was up 45 percent to U.S. President Barack Obama's 39 percent among independent voters. But on Monday the figures shifted, with Obama edging up 45 percent to Romney's 43 percent among swing voters.

Killian, author of the recently published book *THE SWING VOTE: The Untapped Power of Independents*, thinks the figures can shift again.

"I don't think that's permanent, I think this is anybody's race," she said. "How these voters are going to go is definitely up for grabs."

Still, she is convinced that swing voters will decide the outcome of the elections, she said.

Others, however, believe history makes a strong case for the direction in which swing voters will take.

Appearing on TV station Fox News last week, Dick Morris, former White House adviser under the Clinton administration, noted that seven out of the last eight presidents have lost the independent vote.

"Even when the (challenger) was discredited, tarred, feathered, and crucified, like Barry Goldwater in '64, like George McGovern in '72, like Jimmy Carter in 1976...even in those cases, he got the undecided vote," he told pundit Bill O'Reilly.

WHO ARE INDEPENDENT VOTERS?

Killian has identified four groups of voters who she believes make up the independents.

One is what she terms the "Facebook generation" -- voters under 35 who believe the government should not play a role in social issues. They do, however, have concerns about the economy in this still harsh recovery from the worst downturn since the Great Depression.

The group is a natural constituency for Obama, whose personality resonated with them in 2008, although they have become somewhat disillusioned and the president may have trouble motivating them to show up at the polls.

The second group is working class male voters, who are conservative on trade and economic issues. A third is socially moderate but fiscally conservative Republicans, who were turned off by former President George W. Bush's big spending but also don't like Obama's health care reform and big government approach. The last group is suburban voters.

IGNORED BY THE MEDIA

Despite the group's importance, Killian said swing voters are often overlooked by a U.S. media obsessed with second-by-second updates on the candidates.

"The media is concerned with the horse race," she said. "They don't get into the concerns of the swing voters."

Polls show that many Americans have been tired of this. Polling company Rasmussen reported Wednesday that 87 percent of likely voters believe the media is more interested in candidate controversy than in the issues, with an overwhelming majority of voters viewing such coverage as media hype.

Killian told Xinhua after the panel discussion that the media is invested in the system and places too much emphasis on the parties. Media often believes independents do not matter all that much because they are not involved in the day-to-day running of the system.

Obama on Tuesday kicked off a mini-tour of college campuses in North Carolina, Iowa and Colorado -- three swing states crucial to the November elections -- to talk about student loans and educational costs in a bid to court the youth votes.

Ryan Prucker, president of Imagelight/Personality Driven Media, a media consulting company, told Xinhua Thursday that candidates' appeal to the center will broaden as the elections move closer.

"A primary is about shoring up your base, and then they begin to widen out as we move toward the general election," he said. "We're seeing that both candidates are going to start

appealing to those independents because year after year the independent swing vote is what traditionally seals the deal for a candidate."

But Killian said that while candidates move toward the center during election season, they go right back to their base after the dust clears.