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No Labels group raises alarms with third-party presidential preparations

It has money and name-brand political backers, and declines to describe either President Biden or Donald Trump as acceptable candidates



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Former senator Joe Lieberman knows better than most the impact third-party bids can have on presidential [elections](#). His 2000 Democratic campaign for vice president fell just 537 Florida votes short of victory, in a state where Ralph Nader, the liberal activist and Green Party nominee, won more than 97,000 votes.

But that didn't stop the Connecticut Democrat turned independent from joining a meeting Thursday in support of plans by the centrist group No Labels to get presidential ballot lines in all 50 states for 2024. The group calls its effort an "insurance policy" against the major parties nominating two "unacceptable" candidates next year.

Asked if President Biden, his former Senate colleague, would be unacceptable, Lieberman said the answer was uncertain.

“No decision has been made on any of that. But we’re putting ourselves in a position,” Lieberman said. “You know, it might be that we will take our common-sense, moderate, independent platform to him and the Republican candidate and see which one of them is willing to commit to it. And that could lead to, in my opinion, a No Labels endorsement.”

Uncertainty over the \$70 million No Labels ballot effort has set off major alarm bells in Democratic circles and raised concerns among Republican strategists, who have launched their own research projects to figure out the potential impacts. As Lieberman spoke, the Arizona Democratic Party filed a lawsuit to block No Labels from ballot access in that state on procedural grounds. Matt Bennett of the centrist Democratic think tank Third Way has argued that the plot is “going to reelect Trump,” and Adam Green of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee has accused No Labels of wanting “to play the role of spoiler.”

“The only way you can justify this is if you really believe that it doesn’t really matter if it is Joe Biden or Donald Trump,” said Stuart Stevens, a former presidential campaign strategist for George W. Bush, John McCain and Mitt Romney, who now works with the anti-Trump Lincoln Project. “So it is sort of a test. If you live in a world where it doesn’t matter, this is kind of harmless. If you live in a world where it does matter, it is dangerous.”

Splits have also emerged inside the organization. William Galston, a Brookings Institution policy scholar, said last week that he would separate himself from No Labels, which he helped found, over its 2024 planning for a third-party campaign to challenge Biden and Trump.

“I am proud of No Labels’ record of bipartisan legislation, and I know its leaders want what is best for the country. But I cannot support the organization’s preparation for a possible independent presidential candidacy,” he said in a statement. “There is no equivalence between President Biden and a former president who threatens the survival of our constitutional order. And most important, in today’s closely divided politics, any division of the anti-Trump vote would open the door to his reelection.”

No Labels chief executive Nancy Jacobson said Galston had added a lot to the No Labels cause. “We’re sad to see him go,” she said in a statement.

Among the group’s advisers is former North Carolina governor Pat McCrory, a Republican who just lost a Senate bid in the face of Trump opposition; former director of national intelligence Dennis Blair; and Benjamin Chavis Jr., a former executive director of the NAACP.

“I just wanted to emphasize on the spoiler question: I would not be involved if I thought in any account that we would do something to spoil the election in favor of Donald Trump,” Chavis said at the meeting, which was attended in person or via Zoom by 16 No Labels staff and supporters, including Blair and McCrory. “That’s just not going to happen.”

Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.), who has not declared whether he will run for reelection next year, and former Maryland governor Larry Hogan (R) are also supporters of the effort, and both said they have not ruled out participating in a No Labels presidential ticket, if it happens.

“If enough Americans believe there is an option and the option is a threat to the extreme left and extreme right, it will be the greatest contribution to democracy, I believe,” Manchin said in an interview. When asked whether he would participate in a No Labels ticket, he said, “I don’t rule myself in and I don’t rule myself out.”

“I think it is really important to have that option. Because we have never been at the point we are today in America,” Hogan added. “The vast majority of people in America are not happy with the direction of the country and they don’t want to see either Joe Biden or Donald Trump as president.”

The group has already gained ballot access in Arizona, Colorado, Alaska and Oregon, with signature-gathering efforts underway in many other states. Jacobson, a former Democratic fundraiser, said the organization has until March 2024 to decide whether to field a presidential ticket. It would pick one Republican and one Democrat as presidential and vice-presidential nominees, she said, with an announcement of their identities coming no later than April 15 of that year, when a No Labels convention is planned in Dallas.

Jacobson has not revealed the identities of the donors funding the effort, saying she is shielding them from public attacks, and would not discuss possible names of potential candidates. The group, which helped start the House Problem Solvers Caucus, was founded in 2010 as a policy antidote to rising polarization. It later established political fundraising efforts to support candidates that backed its agenda.

Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-N.J.), a co-chair of the Problem Solvers Caucus, distanced himself from No Labels 2024 planning. “This is not an effort I’m personally involved with or supportive of,” he said in a statement.

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.), the other co-chair, said he supports more voices in U.S. politics. “If our 247-year-old American experiment is to survive, there must be a centrist voice at the table in this conversation,” he said.

Jacobson has left open the possibility that No Labels could use its ballot lines to field third-party candidates for Senate or House races, a potential nightmare scenario for some Democrats given the recent decision of Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-Ariz.) to leave the party.

“It could happen, but no plans at this time,” she said. “It is one ticket, one time. We are not a political party.”

The group plans to roll out a “common-sense policy agenda” this summer to rally the country around bipartisan solutions to the nation’s problems, such as pairing more border security with a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children.

“Americans like choices,” said Ryan Clancy, a No Labels senior adviser. “We are heading down a road where both parties could be looking at the public and saying, ‘Yeah, two-thirds of you don’t want this choice but too bad. It’s your only choice and you’ll like it.’ We think we can do better.”

At the center of its strategy is a controversial reading of opinion polls, including extensive surveys that No Labels has commissioned from HarrisX, a company whose corporate parent is overseen by Jacobson’s husband, Mark Penn, a former adviser to Hillary Clinton who has distanced himself from the Democratic Party. Clancy said Penn is not involved with No Labels.

In a slide deck presented at the meeting Thursday, the leaders of No Labels argued that high levels of economic concern, growing independent voter identification and the conviction among many people that the country is on the wrong track all set the stage for a third-party bid to be more successful than at any time in recent history.

The group also cites clear majorities of voters who say they do not want either Biden or Trump to be the respective nominees. The group’s polling concludes that about 6 in 10 voters are open to considering an unnamed “moderate, independent” candidate if Trump and Biden run.

Dritan Nesho, the chief executive of HarrisX, said national modeling of those voters reveals that a No Labels ticket would need to win 61 percent of the 6 in 10 voters open to considering a moderate alternative to win the electoral college — or about 37 percent of the popular vote. The group has produced a hypothetical electoral college map that shows the states No Labels would win under that scenario, including Republican states such as Texas, Nebraska and Florida, Democratic states such as Virginia, Illinois and Washington, and swing states such as Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

The group’s polling from December 2022, which was shared Sunday with The Washington Post, found that the unnamed “moderate independent” candidate was supported by 20 percent of registered voters, compared with 28 percent for Biden and 33 for Trump. In a two-way contest between Trump and Biden tested in the same poll, Biden was supported by 42 percent and Trump by 43 percent of registered voters.

Nesho acknowledged that the polling might change once No Labels announces the people who will be running on the ticket. The group’s leadership said they would test the named candidates in polling before launching a bid.

“We don’t know the name that is going to be on this ticket if there is going to be a ticket,” Nesho said. “But what we do know is that there’s such dissatisfaction in the electorate that there’s a clear opening.”

Third-party bids for president are common in U.S. politics, with little track record of success. In the 2020 election, Starbucks chief executive Howard Schultz explored an independent bid based on similar research, noting in a “60 Minutes” segment that 40 percent of Americans identify as independents. A poll in early 2019 by CNN found that two-thirds of voters said they were unlikely to support him, facing greater resistance than potential Democratic contenders such as Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) or former congressman Beto O’Rourke (D-Tex.). He ultimately decided against running, in part for health reasons.

Norman Ornstein, an emeritus scholar at the American Enterprise Institute who has previously worked with No Labels, said the reason has to do with how independents behave at the ballot box. A [2019 study by the Pew Research Center](#) found that although 38 percent of the electorate identified as independent, only 7 percent identified as independent without leaning toward one of the two major political parties.

“What we know is that people who say they are independent but lean to the Democrats or Republicans behave just like Democrats or Republicans,” Ornstein said. “There is a zero, or near zero, chance that an independent candidate is going to win enough support to win the presidency.”

It is more likely that a robust third-party campaign could win some share of the electorate, as the Green Party did in 2000 and 2016, or a minority of the electoral votes, as Alabama Gov. George Wallace did in 1968. If no candidate won a majority of the electoral votes in 2024, because of a three-way result, the U.S. House in 2025 would be tasked with voting for a new president, with each state delegation in the new Congress casting a single ballot. Currently, 26 states have a majority of Republicans in their delegation.

Clancy said the group had begun to prepare for such an outcome, in part by exploring state laws around the unbinding of electors, which would allow parties to broker for a majority of electoral votes before a vote in the House. He said No Labels believes that a generic No Labels ticket, without named candidates, would pull evenly from Trump and Biden.

Cross tabs of a June 2022 HarrisX poll show Democrats, liberals and urban voters to be more open to a moderate independent candidate than Republicans, conservatives or rural voters. Nesho said that in a larger poll after the midterm elections, the spreads narrowed.

A No Labels ticket would only run to win, Clancy added, unlike the protest campaign of Nader in 2000, which had a goal of earning a single-digit percentage of votes to qualify for matching funds.

“We have very tight guardrails around this effort,” he said.

In the meantime, the group continues to be critical of Biden and Trump. A memo prepared by No Labels argues that Biden, who has said he intends to run for reelection, is a weakened candidate, despite the nearly unified support of his party.

“Behind closed doors and the safety of anonymous quotes, most of Washington knows 2024 is a disaster waiting to happen,” it reads. “Democratic leaders are privately wringing their hands about Biden and a few Republican leaders still hope to stop Trump.”

McCrary, who describes himself as a “strong Republican,” declined to answer a question about whether he was concerned that the No Labels effort could help elect Trump to a second term.

“I want to let the process work and see what the American people have to say, because I think there’s a voice that’s not being heard among the American people,” he said.

Mark McKinnon, a Republican strategist for Bush and McCain who now hosts “The Circus” on Showtime, was also part of the early group that helped found No Labels. He said he trusts the group’s current leadership.

“I believe them at their word when they say it is a ‘break glass in case of emergency’ strategy,” McKinnon said. “I have faith in the end that they will do the right thing.”