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Aiming for the Political Middle

By **MONICA LANGLEY**

Associated Press

Panera Bread founder Ron Shaich is one of the backers of No Labels, a group seeking to fight "hyper-partisanship."

An alliance of centrist Republicans and Democrats is seeking to organize a grass-roots movement targeting the middle of American politics, a political sphere depopulated by the midterm elections and a vital tool for any potential third-party presidential candidate.

The group, called "No Labels," has drawn support

from supporters and advisers of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the country's most powerful independent politician, raising questions about his national political ambitions. Mr. Bloomberg has been invited to attend the group's Dec. 13 launch.

Political analysts see a potential Bloomberg bid if Washington's divided government turns into gridlock, if the economy doesn't improve, and if former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin and President Obama are the likely nominees. Mr. Bloomberg said he wouldn't consider running in 2012. "I have the best job in the world," he said.

No Labels (www.nolabels.org) is led by Democratic fund-raiser Nancy Jacobson and Republican strategist Mark McKinnon, who were introduced to each other by Kevin Sheekey, Mr. Bloomberg's political adviser.



The group has raised more than \$1 million to seed its effort against what it calls "hyper-partisanship." Backers include co-chairman of Loews Corp. Andrew Tisch, Panera Bread founder Ron Shaich and ex-Facebook executive Dave Morin. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, as well as U.S. senators Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Michigan's Debbie Stabenow, will attend the New York launch.

Associated Press

No Labels has drawn support from advisers to New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, above. Republican strategist Mark McKinnon, below right, is one of the group's leaders.



Associated Press

The group's goal is to start a centrist equivalent to the tea-party movement on the right and MoveOn on the left. It sees an opportunity based on the defeat of liberal Republicans in recent years and the heavy losses taken by conservative Democrats in 2010.

"I've never seen such a wide opening for a third force in American politics," says William Galston, a Brookings Institution fellow and No Labels adviser.

Third-party movements of the center, including most recently Unity '08, have a poor track record if they aren't associated with a strong candidate, such as Teddy Roosevelt in 1912 or Ross Perot in the 1990s. Even then, no third-party candidate has ever won more than 27% of the popular vote.

"Kumbaya moments and puppies are great, but you need more meat to get real support," said Peter Angerhofer, an executive at a hospital-billing firm and recent Republican candidate for the New Hampshire state senate at a recent No Labels gathering. "If you want to create a third party and carve out the middle, that might work, but be clear about it."

But for a potential third-party candidate, who has to overcome a litany of structural impediments, such groups can provide much-needed ground operations. "These efforts aren't important; they're invaluable" if Mr. Bloomberg decides to run, said a top Bloomberg adviser.

Mr. Bloomberg personally donated to a successful ballot measure in California to change the process of Congressional redistricting to prevent gerrymandering.

Through the deputy mayor, Howard Wolfson, Mr. Bloomberg quoted his predecessor Fiorello La Guardia as saying "there's no Democratic or Republican way to clean up the streets," adding, "The same is true on a lot of other big issues, but partisan gamesmanship keeps the two parties from working together."

No Labels founder Ms. Jacobson says the group has purposely not asked Mr. Bloomberg for money and doesn't support any candidates yet.

No Labels is testing its message across the country, most recently in New Hampshire last week. In a living room full of politically active citizens in Portsmouth, No Labels' organizer John Avlon, an expert on independent parties, called it, "a rebellious idea for the politically homeless."

For its launch in New York City next month, more than 1,000 people have committed from 50 states.

Key to the group's future success is appealing to voters and lawmakers who feel alienated from the current tone of political discourse. In a recent meeting in Portsmouth, prospective "citizen leaders" were training on how to organize No Labels in their home districts.

"Hi, I'm Jun Choi, and I lost because I wasn't extreme enough," said the Democratic ex-mayor of Edison, N.J., who was opposed by unions in a primary.

"Hi, I'm Maggie Hassan, and was defeated because I was too moderate," said the New Hampshire state senator.

Darnell Goldson, a New Haven, Conn. alderman, said his house was egged for having yard signs supporting one Democrat and one Republican. "I didn't toe either party line, and got threatened."

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