

Learning to Walk before We Run: Social Movements and Electoral Politics

By Andrew Lichterman*

The Democrats have chosen their presidential candidate. We are confronted again with a three way race between a frightening Republican, a Democrat with not much of an agenda beyond not being the frightening Republican, and a progressive candidate viewed by many as a “spoiler.”

Like many, I believe that the Nader candidacy is not a good thing. However, my main worry is not that a Nader will take votes from the Democrats. Rather, I am concerned that marginal progressive third-party efforts in general elections, and similar campaigns in Democratic Party primaries, take money and organizing resources away from long-term grassroots work for a more peaceful, fair, and ecologically sustainable world, without expanding the capacity of progressive movements in the long term. I am not arguing that either a determined effort to take back the Democratic party or a third-party campaign is intrinsically bad (and which of the two offers more promise for significant social transformation is a different debate). My contention is that national electoral campaigns of either sort are premature. Under current conditions, such campaigns take far more away from efforts to develop alternative institutions that would constitute the foundation for any genuinely progressive political alternative on the national level than they put back.

I agree with Nader that the two major parties today largely are a political cartel, content to contend over a shrinking electorate composed almost entirely of the economically comfortable and constituencies that can be delivered reliably by large organizations posing no real challenge to the order of things. Both parties, unfortunately, agree that real democracy is to be kept to a minimum, and that mobilizing the millions whose needs and demands can be satisfied only by significantly changing the distribution of wealth, democratizing the workplace and technology choices, and turning away from global empire and pervasive militarism is to be avoided at all costs. Yet it is precisely the mobilization and empowerment of these politically homeless constituencies, not just for the electoral season but for the long term, that must be the central focus of any genuinely “progressive” politics.

It is here that I believe that not only the Nader campaigns, but the primary campaigns of most “progressive” Democrats in recent memory, have failed decisively. They have done so because they have been conventional political campaigns, with a preeminent focus on raising the national profile of an individual politician or, at best, the issues that politician can articulate. Candidates dash around the country, try one or another combination of sound bites to attract the media, and grab for whatever money and organizing capacity they can cobble together, largely from already existing organizational sources and channels. Resources are diverted from long-term organizing efforts for a genuinely different vision of human security, often at critical times when those efforts are beginning to coalesce. Yet looking back over the past quarter century, little has been accomplished for peace, social justice, or the environment through national electoral campaigns. None of these efforts, either inside or outside the Democratic Party, have even come close to disrupting the climate of complacency among politicians of both major parties, who are confident that there will be neither a significant challenge nor even a damaging withdrawal of consent from the corporate-militarist status quo.

The organizations and coalitions that are the building blocks for significant social change begin for the most part in local struggles, with people first moved to action by the impact on their lives of a social order that is unjust, violent, and ecologically out of balance. They tend to grow slowly for many reasons, ranging from the problems of establishing trust among people in a diverse and fragmented culture to the difficulties of building alternative institutions in a corporate, market-dominated economy. Progressive candidates on the national scene largely treat these local and regional organizations and coalitions as an inheritance that they are entitled to draw money and organizing power from as they please, with little attention to preserving, much less expanding, those precious political structures for the future.

Neither Nader’s past campaigns nor those of any of the contenders in the Democratic primary seem to have been conducted with any thought of building movements for the long term. Even in the San Francisco Bay Area, one of the most progressive regions in the country, I saw little evidence that significant numbers

of new people are being drawn into politics by the primary campaigns, nor any sign that the campaigns were structured to help build or sustain permanent organizing efforts. Instead, I saw people already committed to working on issues and to local coalition building taking time out to work on campaigns that likely will leave nothing in the way of new organizing capacity for progressive causes in our region once they are over. The September 11 attacks and the Iraq war did mobilize many people with little previous political involvement. These people, and promising new coalitions largely rooted in local and regional organizing work (such as United for Peace and Justice) sustained the massive outpouring of opposition to the Iraq war. Several candidates attempted to jump in front of this non-violent “army” and claim it for their own. None showed much understanding of the kind of work needed to sustain these still-fragile coalitions for the future.

When election day comes, it still may make sense to pick the best of a largely unacceptable “electable” lot. But we need to stop putting our time and money into top-down campaigns that do nothing to build the movements and alternative institutions that are a precondition for having real, rather than false, choices. There is no politician whose career is more important than building a broad-based progressive movement, and still no political party that can claim to represent one. What we need instead from candidates and parties is a serious commitment to building movements for the long term, rather than repeated attempts by politicians to grab whatever meager organizational resources and structures have been assembled by others to leverage their “progressive” campaigns.

In the last century, waves of reform in the U.S. have been preceded by expansions of the electorate, entailing either extension of voting rights or significant increases in those who find participation in electoral politics worthwhile. And before this can happen, there need to be social movements that can convince millions of people that a better future is possible and that the electoral process can bring meaningful change. To the extent that there are “progressive” constituencies in this country, we largely are living off organizing efforts that peaked decades ago.

For the past twenty years, the progressive base those movements built has been taken for granted by politicians and organizations that focus on electoral politics and lobbying. Far too few resources have been devoted to sustaining the local and regional coalitions and organizations that are the foundation for social change. And this social base has been badly eroded by redistribution of wealth upward and the ceaseless dislocations characteristic of global corporate capitalism. The technicians of electoral and legislative politics can only market candidates and cut deals that are within the limits of “politics as usual,” dominated in ordinary times by concentrated wealth and other forms of institutional power. The task of social movements is not to cut “doable” deals, or support the least objectionable electoral choice, but to change the limits of the possible.

We need to be telling both candidates and parties, “ask not what your social movements can do for you, ask what you can do for your social movements.” We don’t really need “candidates” in the conventional sense at this stage. We need people with some public visibility who are willing to use their prominence, their access to various constituencies, and the heightened interest in “politics” surrounding elections to help build the movement that might make genuinely progressive candidates viable in the future. We need them to use their positions--as elected officials with progressive constituencies or as prominent activists--to go around the country asking the various elements of progressive movements, “what can I do to help build the movement in your area? How can my presence make your organizing efforts more successful? Can I help you raise money? Can I bring together various groups in your region that rarely interact--for example, labor and the peace movement--to start talking about strategies for long term change?” This would not be a strategy for electing any particular progressive candidate in this cycle, or probably even the next-- but no one who would consider such an approach is “electable” in the near term anyway. But it is far more likely to bring new people into politics, and make genuine change possible, than an endless doomed procession of conventional campaigns for marginalized progressive candidates.

Even if we believe that the first priority, once the general election comes, is to elect the least awful candidate, it does not follow that the best way to achieve this is to work directly for that candidate. I am firmly convinced that money and time dedicated to creating a permanent progressive presence in communities across the country does as much or more to promote better electoral outcomes, even in the

near term, as do resources devoted directly to backing the somewhat less awful choice. It does so by helping people understand why issues that seem abstract and far away are important, and by providing a context for the local impact of big issues that people feel, but may find hard to understand. Many people come to politics because something has happened to them or someone they know, or a place that they love, and they want to do something about it. Local and regional institutions, and the kinds of coalitions that can be built only through work in concrete, visible issues over years and decades can both provide people with a broader, deeper, and less reactive political vision and help them understand how voting can affect their lives, even if only a little bit at a time.

In addition, in the United States, as everywhere, most of the pain and fear is inflicted on those with the least power. Progressive politics begins by providing a place where they can work with others to transform their hurt or fear or anger into a shared vision of how the world could be different, and better. The authoritarian politics prevalent today works best when we are isolated and passive. It uses all the sophisticated tools in the modern propaganda arsenal to reach past our conscious awareness to manipulate our emotions. Settings where we can talk, reflect, and work with other people on issues we care about strengthen our ability to resist propaganda of all kinds, and help us learn how to think and act democratically, together, for ourselves. To counter the concentrated wealth and huge organizations that strive ceaselessly to shape our opinions and control our lives, we need far more than a politics limited to watching, voting, or at most sending a message to our elected “representatives”—a message that is often pre-chosen and pre-written by “expert” political operatives thousands of miles away.

Finally, we should think long and hard about how and where our resources are best spent. “Progressive” is a fuzzy term, and it is easy to underestimate the depth and breadth of a constituency that has been systematically marginalized by the mainstream media and by the major political parties for decades. But the hundreds of millions of dollars flowing into the political process from those determined to keep things more or less as they are dwarfs the amount that can be mobilized for more than cosmetic change on issues like the environment, the distribution of wealth, the control of the workplace, the scope and fundamental purpose of a military establishment bent on global dominance, or the role of money in politics itself. Our money should go where it is most likely to make real change. Moveon.org, for example, was willing to shell out \$875,000 for a thirty second Superbowl TV spot, which no matter how clever would have been just a small discordant note in the product propaganda, gender stereotyping, flag-waving, and military flyovers that make the commercials and action of that annual passion play of organized aggression a spectacular, integrated whole. And once the mighty Wurlitzers of the corporate-driven presidential campaigns crank up, the chances of buying enough time to be heard grow smaller still. That same \$875,000 could put at least ten organizers in U.S. cities for a year, working on issues with local impacts and educating people about larger contexts and connections. It is more than likely that these organizers could generate at least as much free media during that year, even by conventional measures of total homes reached per unit of media time, and in the infinitely more valuable form of news stories. And this would be only a small, and by no means the most important, part of the work that these organizers could do.

The same holds true for the time of progressive activists. It is at least as likely that continuing to work hard on “issue organizing”—labor struggles, particular environmental campaigns, ongoing work for peace—will contribute to getting people out to vote in a Presidential campaign as going to work for a candidate, particularly where the work is done in face-to-face settings where people are hearing from people like themselves, and seeing at the same time that something more than passive participation in politics is possible. The day-to-day organizing work reminds people how all of the issues that the campaign ads reduce to sound-bites actually might affect them, and also that there is a way of talking and thinking about politics that goes beyond focus-group driven media manipulations. Amidst the increasingly ugly tide of propaganda, sure to be more unconnected than ever from any recognizable truth this time around, it reminds us why we should care.

When election day comes, I will vote in a calculated way, to make the best difference that can be made with that one small act. That may mean voting for the Democratic presidential candidate, or it may mean voting for a third party choice, perhaps because I know my state is going to vote against the frightening Republican by a wide margin, and I want to send at least a small message that my part of the Democratic

Party “base” can’t be taken for granted forever. But until then and after, I will devote my time and money to strengthening genuinely progressive institutions and coalitions in my own region and elsewhere, building towards the time when we can really make our own choice, rather than choosing among choices made by others.

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