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TITLE:WHY WE NEED AN INDEPENDENT POLITICS, AND HOW TO BUILD IT

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The bottom line of Michael Kazin's potpourri of political hunches, reportage, and prescription ("Alternative Politics," Winter 1996) is that progressives should support Democrats in 1996--hardly an item of controversy among this or other readers of Dissent.

Kazin's broader argument is that supporting Democrats is the only thing that electorally minded progressives should do, now and forever. On his view, there is no progressive "alternative" politics--operating on or near a ballot line but independent of the Democratic party--that is not stupid or hopeless or worse. To advance their values, sensible progressives must first declare their loyalty to the Democratic party and then work only within it.

I think this broader argument is wrong. Indeed, coming from as thoughtful an observer of the American political scene as Kazin, I find its narrow sense of current political choices a little strange. When good people make bad arguments, it is usually because they are asking the wrong questions. Kazin's question is whether progressives should work inside or outside the Democratic party. I think the right question is, "Not knowing now just where the Democratic party is heading, what sort of electoral organization should we be building now to advance our values?"

Kazin's Democrats-or-bust conclusion follows from his dim assessment of the chances of various "third parties"--the New Party among them. What he has to say about the New Party is usually mistaken: that we concentrate on nonvoters, that we think they are everywhere more progressive than the active electorate, that our municipal work is inattentive to program, that we are based in "liberal enclaves," that we have no more interesting a view on the current requirements of governance than making big government even bigger. Even casual inspection of our literature, membership, or actual program activity would show the inaccuracy of all this. I wish he'd called before sitting down to write.(FN*)

Kazin also seems unaware of New Party success in ballot initiatives on campaign finance, "living wages," and other signature concerns of precisely the progressive politics he endorses. And he misses (the news came after he wrote) the New Party's recent success in restoring the "fusion" option to American politics--the right of a minor party to nominate a major-party candidate on its own ballot line, with votes cast on that line counting against rivals. Such crossnomination permits minor party voters to declare their principles at the ballot box without sacrificing their prudence--to show support for a minor party and the "lesser of two evils." Critical to the success of those nineteenth-century third parties Kazin properly regards as serious, fusion has long been banned by the major parties for just that reason. Now the New Party is bringing it back--most recently, in a unanimous decision of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit striking down state bans on the practice--in litigation that will fundamentally change the rules of the American electoral game.

But forget about "third parties" for the moment. The real issue is not what we call an "independent" (that is, value-centered, organizationally self-sufficient) progressive electoral politics, but that we do it. The real harm done by Kazin is not to the New Party's reputation but to the effort to discuss how that might be done. The most important problem to be addressed is how to attract the resources and technically adept players (often now in both uncomfortable and close relations to the Democrats) it needs to work. And the beginning of wisdom in solving that problem is to reject the notion that building something independent of the Democrats means building something that will wreck them.

The fact is that nobody knows quite what the Democratic party will look like in ten years' time. Maybe it will turn into a social democratic party, maybe it will continue its rightward drift. What we do know is that progressives are now losing, that we need an electoral vehicle, that the Democrats do not now provide the right one, and that however distinct the termini of the traditionally competing projects of electorally minded progressives--realigning the Democratic party, starting a serious third party--they require much common work at their beginning that is not being done and should be.

Let me defend these propositions in turn.

* We "progressives"--defined almost however you like, but certainly to include all those still enamored of the idea of government by and for the people--are in the fight of our lives and losing badly. What's at stake now in Washington are not just the programs of the New Deal or Great society, but the very idea of a democratic society in which ordinary citizens exert some real control over the terms of social life. Whatever the ebb of Republican fortunes or flow

of Democratic ones, that basic democratic idea has receded in American public policy. Whatever the many successes of progressive organizing, the fact that we have falling wages, rising inequality, millions of impoverished children, rotting cities, rollbacks in environmental and consumer protections, and "democratic" elections bought with private money demonstrates overall failure.

* This failure is unnecessary, because a mass audience for progressive politics in fact exists. A generation of economic decline and failed government response has not only made American politics ugly. It has also created an enormous potential base for our signature issues--greater social control of the economy and a democracy strong enough to enforce and enable it under competitive conditions. There is vast implicit demand for imposing some standards on corporate behavior, for making values matter in how we run our economy and distribute opportunity and reward. And there is vast demand for a more responsive and effective "government"--public authority and institutions more truly by and for the people, tailored to present circumstances, accountable to popular aims. Satisfying these demands could be the basis for a new mass democratic politics--a politics that would get progressives out of their marginal ghetto and into the business of running the country.

* Success in that politics, however, requires that progressives get their electoral act together--that we build electoral organizations at least as competent and inventive as the retail organizing and public interest advocacy that currently preoccupy us. We must be visible and active in electoral areas for several reasons: because for most Americans "politics" is voting, and we will never be able to demonstrate popular support for progressive values unless the ballot box provides an opportunity to do so; because we need direct power in the state to improve things, including the terms of our organizing outside the state itself; because only a progressive movement disciplined (as elections do) by the need to win mass support is likely to say anything sensible and believable about program (about how we propose, under different economic and social conditions than those of the 1930s or 1960s, to restore democratic values to the self-governance of this society). Our electoral activity also needs to be based in an ongoing organization--not just another or a series of one-shot campaigns--because only such an organization will have the incentive or ability to recruit and develop candidates, support and hold them accountable once in office, or develop such a program.

* Whatever it once was or may become, the Democratic party is not now that organization. In part, this is because the ideological center of the party has shifted distinctly to the right--a point evident from a glance at Clinton or the marginality of folks like Paul Wellstone. In part, it is because the party itself is too weak and disconnected from its mass base to mount a coherent progressive alternative, hold members accountable to its pursuit, and mobilize the mass support (often against substantial business opposition) needed to carry the day. Whatever the innovations at the Democratic National Committee, there is very little "there" there. Very little connection to constituency organizations outside the electoral cycle, very little mass training or ideological support of candidates of the sort that would get them to want to act together, very little pooling of party resources to offset the endless defections and self-indulgence of millionaire donors and candidates.

So we progressives have a serious problem. We need a progressive, values-based, technically adept, at-scale electoral vehicle to organize and promote a new progressive program appropriate to our times ... and we don't have one.

What to do? Kazin and others urge reforming the Democratic party from within, and only from within. Welcoming their ends, I disagree on means. After all, progressives have pursued the "reform from within, and only from within" strategy for sixty years, and they have failed; after billions of dollars and millions of votes, labor and blacks and other loyal Democratic constituencies don't have a hell of a lot to show for their efforts. And while there is very little evidence that the party itself has the resources or inclination to engage in the organizational and programmatic revival needed, there is much evidence that its corporate gatekeepers do have veto power over anyone attempting such revival within the party's structure.

I conclude that without some sort of organization of their own--eventually, an organization capable of mounting a credible threat of exit from the Democratic party--the votes and dollars of progressive constituencies will be taken for granted by the Democrats, we will never get significant numbers of accountable people running for office, and we will never get our programmatic act together. So I favor building that organization.

The question, of course, is how to do this in a way not poisonous to Democratic health vis-a-vis the Republicans--how to keep the perfect from becoming the enemy of the good. Call this the "Do no harm" constraint.

Well, here's how. Start by inviting some of those progressive constituencies together to articulate a popular

program focused narrowly on the issues on which we all agree--essentially, social control of the economy and a democracy strong enough to achieve it. Enter important nonpartisan races (school boards, city councils, county boards--where the number of offices is almost limitless, but the issues are nearly identical across sites). Do mass candidate trainings and slate campaigns based on a common program, integrate union and other progressive voter lists at the local level, and win. Supplement these candidate races with initiative campaigns on issues like living wages. Take over the city councils of most of the nation's biggest cities, and show what popular economic reconstruction might look like. Take over the school boards, and show what high quality public education might look like. And, along the way, generate a huge number of worthy potential candidates--drawn more extensively from our own ranks, and accustomed to working as part of something bigger than themselves--for higher level office.

This would be a lot of good work, with a lot of result. And since the races are non-partisan, it could all be accomplished before even engaging arguments about the wisdom of a "third party."

As regards partisan races: "Do no harm" requires that we not run against Democrats (unless they are truly as bad as the Republicans) if we cannot win. Disciplined by that rule, let the ability to win independently develop where state chapters want to develop it; otherwise just run people inside Democratic primaries. But run people. Run our people. Build the machine. And notice that in a fusion environment the only-in-the-Democratic-primary vs. on-our-own-ballot-line choice is substantially moot, since we can always cross-nominate Democratic party nominees (whether we've helped make them that or not) on our own ballot line.

Such an organization wouldn't impede progressive support for progressive Democrats. But it would ensure that we have something of our own after we helped elect them: an electoral organization dedicated to our values, that would help unify the now fractious progressive community, provide a distinctive programmatic voice, and demonstrate our strength at the polls.

I say do this work and do it well for a couple of years, and then reenter the deep discussion of "Whither the Democrats?" Whatever the conclusion of that discussion, we'll be in much better shape to act on it than we are now.

That is all the New Party is attempting to do. Instead of confusing such a practical effort with something else, I'd invite Michael Kazin, the new leadership of the AFL-CIO, the readers of this magazine, and millions of other disheartened progressives to join it, shape it, and make it a success. If we need to change the name of the effort for that to happen ... let's change it. If we need somehow to get better protection for institutional players now dependent on the Democrats' goodwill ... let's work that out. Whatever. But let's do it, and let's do it together for a change. Let's build an independent progressive political machine.

Added material

FOOTNOTE

* The New Party may be reached at: New Party, 227 West 40th Street, New York, NY 10018 (212) 302-5053 or on our web page: <http://www.newparty.org/>.