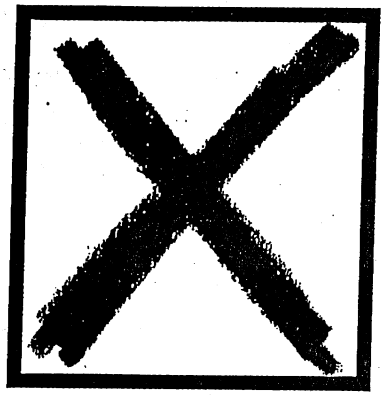
Rogers, J. "What's Next ... A Winning Strategy for Progressives," *The Nation* 263 (November 18, 1996): 11-18. With B. Colburn.

ARTICLES

WHAT'S NEXT?



WBMG

BEYOND THE ELECTION

BY BRUCE COLBURN AND JOEL ROGERS

Progressives are losing out in American politics. Despite the good advocacy and organizing work we do, the facts of falling wages, rising inequality, millions of impoverished children, rotting cities, environmental degradation and elections controlled by private money speak louder than our occasional success. Whatever the dimensions of this month's Democratic victory, our core idea of using public power to build a genuinely democratic society—in which free and equal citizens set the basic terms of social life—has receded to the point of vanishing as a practical political ideal.

There are many reasons for the loss of progressive political power, from deep changes in the structure of our economy to organizational rivalries within our ranks, tactical mistakes and abject failures of leadership. At least during the campaign season, however, the most important reason is also the most obvious: As a movement, we are not serious players in the electoral game. Those

Rogers, Joel and Bruce Colburn. "What's Next?" *The Nation* 263 (November 18, 1996): 11-18.

aren't our candidates up there on the tube; that's not our program they're running on; they are in no way accountable to us. And in truth, there is no good reason we should expect them to be. As a movement we talk a good game of getting close to the people, the only democratic source of power. But in fact we have almost no organized presence where people are—this November and the next, and the one after that—which is at the polls.

Progressives lack an electoral strategy—a shared plan for getting, exercising and keeping government power. We vote, of course. We give candidates cash and other support. We sometimes throw ourselves into a campaign—usually dedicated to advancing someone not recruited or trained by us, running on a platform not constructed by us, not thinking of themselves as part of a movement bigger than themselves, not responsive to us once they get in office—and wonder afterward where all the money went. More often, we simply wait for the Democrats to nominate someone and then we go out and vote for them. This is not a strategy for achieving a disciplined progressive electoral presence but approximately its opposite. It confirms us as bystanders, boosters and whiners after electoral contests—not as their architects.

Lack of an electoral strategy has served to confirm progressives as bystanders, boosters and whiners in races—but not as their architects.

Progressive focus on forging an electoral strategy is recommended not just because we are losing without one but because with one we could win. Really. More clearly than at any time since the thirties, a mass base for progressive politics in fact exists. Along the way to making politics ugly, cynical and vapid, a generation of economic decline and failed government responses has also generated enormous implicit support for the signature issues of a revived progressive politics: greater social control of the economy, and a democracy strong and supple enough to realize it under globally competitive conditions. There is great popular demand for imposing some standards on corporate behavior, for making human values matter in how we run our economy and distribute opportunity and reward. Look at the dozens of "living wage" movements breaking out across the country, the resonance of the populist elements in Pat Buchanan's primary race and the huge response to the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s "America Needs a Raise" campaign. And there is great demand for a more responsive and effective government—public authority and institutions more truly by and for the people. Look at the prairie fire of support for campaign finance reform; the ever-growing movements for school reform, local government accountability and community "visioning"; and the endless public-private initiatives—all offered as ways of getting power aligned again with purpose—in education, land use, regional economic planning and much else.

For years, of course, most progressives didn't think our electoral ineptitude was a problem. The idea was to build popular organization outside the state and count on Democrats to support us within it; all we needed to do was show up at election time and provide some votes. But this division of labor makes sense only if the Democratic Party is in fact prepared to fight for our values, and at present it is not. The party's funding base has long since shifted to the right. Its leadership is not interested in mounting a clear progressive program, much less mobilizing the mass support needed to enact it over business opposition. And as an organization, even if it had the will, the party doesn't have the way. Its clubs are shells, its precincts captainless, its state organizations moribund. It lacks the strength and financial resources needed to discipline its millionaire donors and candidates. This pudding lacks theme, and what it has isn't our song.

Most progressives accept all this but resist its natural conclusion—that we should build a more independent politics—for fear of doing harm. We know that Democrats are unstable allies at best, but we don't want to help the Republicans. The concern is felt most deeply by organized labor—which has as many reasons as any other group to be disappointed with the Democrats, but unlike others commands the resources that could make an independent politics viable. Labor cannot afford to say a flat goodbye to the Democratic Party, which shields it from Republican attack. And for generations labor—and the rest of the progressive community—has concluded that because of this it can't be *independent* of Democrats, either.

Yet the premise is faulty. A constructive independent electoral strategy *is* available, and it's high time we came together again, as a movement, to build it. The elements of that strategy are: a simple, attractive message about who we are; a practical program reflecting our values; trained people to run campaigns and ballot initiatives; and some ongoing organization whose support and sanction can keep candidates honest and keep us in touch with them. These elements are easy enough to assemble, assuming the resources can be found. And the resources can be found if we agree to look for them together, beginning immediately after the elections. We should do that.

The Message: American political opinion is conventionally mapped on a liberal-conservative axis running from hypertolerant big-government do-gooders at one end to hard-nosed, heartless free-marketeers (joined by some ungodly fundamentalists) at the other. Progressives are conventionally defined, and accept definition, as the left wing of this axis—as the all-time redistributionist social liberals, unconcerned with contribution or social order. That definition insures our defeat by insuring defensiveness about failed policies and cultural distance from the general public. And the liberal-conservative axis itself misses the real conflict in politics today—which is not so much a battle between left and right as between bottom and top—between those favoring stronger democracy and corporate accountability (the majority) and those opposed to both (the tiny rich minority and their apologists). This fight is the one we should declare as our own. Taking sides with the majority, we should wage the "democrat versus anti-democrat" and "worker-consumer-citizen versus irresponsible corporate power" struggle. It will be an exceptionally nasty fight, but this is one we can win.

The Program: There is far more agreement among progres-

Bruce Colburn is secretary-treasurer of the Milwaukee Labor Council, a member of Progressive Milwaukee and president of Wisconsin Citizen Action. Joel Rogers, a Nation *contributing editor, is national chair of the New Party.*

sives than we admit. Consistent with the democracy/corporate-accountability focus of our message, we would offer the following as a radical, practical, majoritarian program for democratic and economic renewal: Reform tax and industrial policy to close off the "low road" on industrial restructuring and promote high-wage/low-waste domestic investment and business organization. This means increases in the minimum wage, higher environmental standards on businesses and effective modernization and training services to give workers and companies stuck on the low road the ability to walk the high one. Revitalize our metropolitan economies as model regions of advanced production, taking advantage of the natural economic benefits of cities now obscured by our endless gasoline and highway subsidies to sprawl. (Speaking of which, build trains—lots of trains, high-speed trains. They're capital and labor intensive, they're good for the earth and people like them.) Make "equal opportunity" real by wedding it to resources—declaring a "Bill of Rights for America's Children," providing them all with a "starting even" package of daycare, health insurance, parental income allowances, recreation and advanced, high-quality education. Declare America a "lifelong learning" society, first, by fundamentally reforming primary education—get its funding off local property taxes to more general revenues, impose high standards on teachers and students and provide links to work for those who don't go on to college—and second, by insuring lifelong learning opportunities for adults through individual training accounts paid off through future earnings. Restore government accountability—beginning with public funding of elections. Strengthen the organizing rights of workers, consumers and communities, while explicitly assigning them a greater role in devising and administering "public" programs for economic upgrading and community renewal. Complete some semblance of a modern welfare state through single-payer health insurance. Simplify and integrate our tax system to tax both private and social income on a progressive basis. Declare the budgetary peace dividend we've already forfeited so many times to an enemy that no longer exists. Declare the environmental dividend in energy and other savings that mass application of current technologies would permit. Forge a new internationalism centered on "leveling up" international worker rights and wages, rather than the leveling down associated with GATT.

A progressive version of the Christian Coalition and GOPAC would give coherence and punch to what are now largely wasted assets.

Any major disagreements yet? We doubt it. And what is distinctive about this program is that a majority of the public also supports all its planks. More distinctive still is that, despite that popular support, neither major party is systematically moving to implement any part of it.

The People: Recruiting from our own ranks, and learning from the right, we should train thousands of people in campaign work—as candidates, campaign workers, precinct leaders, signature-gatherers for ballot-initiative petitions, and more. Such training should cover the nuts and bolts of electoral action: how to run a meeting, how to cover a door, how to target a precinct, how to write a press release, how to do list management, how to speak in public. And it should cover the ambitions and programmatic emphasis of the electoral movement we wish to build: what we propose to do, how it's different from what is currently offered, why it is rational and practical as well as just. We should seek economies of coordination and scale in campaign infrastructure: list management, polling, media, speakers, materials of all kinds.

We can start with the widest and most accessible target: the tens of thousands of local nonpartisan offices that dominate the electoral landscape and generally feature similar sets of issues. Imagine a training academy for X-thousand people we recruit to run for school boards, city councils and county boards—where they learn about regional industrial policy, metropolitan taxation schemes, effective school reform, sensible land use, the best responses to federal cutbacks and all the rest that they will have to deal with or could deal out after getting into office. Imagine model legislation, speeches, talking points, Op-Eds and other platforms turned over to them en masse. Imagine running these candidates for local office—with these supports and a sophisticated local targeting and get-out-the-vote operation also supplied by us—on condition that they adhere to the program or we'll run someone against them next time. The New Party has been running candidates principally in these sorts of races over the past few years. Operating with almost no resources, we've elected two-thirds of the 150 candidates we've put up. Since it's clear that we can win with our values intact, operating with almost no resources, why not take the effort to scale?

In partisan races, we should of course issue report cards on available electoral choices, giving voters instruction on whom they should vote for if they share our values. But also, depending on the strength of our local organization, we should enter Democratic primaries with our own candidates or—assuming the New Party wins its "fusion" lawsuit (see sidebar on page 16)—cross-nominate our favored candidates on our own ballot lines, or run our own people on those lines where we think we can win. Our philosophy throughout should be to do no harm and not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. Intent on increasing our own capacity to win, we should—where we don't yet have that capacity—support the lesser of the available "evils." We should advertise ourselves as what we are—builders, not spoilers.

Learning from the right—as the PIRGs, NECARC, ACORN and other organizations are doing now with campaign finance—we should use state and municipal ballot initiatives and referendums to frame debate and to change policies that corrupt legislatures won't. We should sponsor ballot initiatives on campaign finance reform in term-limited states, where thousands of seats will open up in the next few years—and thus turn the right-wing plan to obliterate incumbent Democrats into an opportunity for us. We should spur more living-wage campaigns that either increase the minimum wage directly or ban government grants and contracts to employers paying poverty wages; "children first, prison last" initiatives on state spending; "take you out of the ballgame" initiatives directed at stadium owners getting public subsidies, declaring that if they try to move we'll work to seize their assets; "maximum wage" initiatives stating that no company will get public subsidies or be allowed to count executive salaries as a business cost if its C.E.O. makes X times its entry-level workers.

The Promise of Fusion Politics

In nonpartisan races, there is no organizational bar to independent politics. A "Progressive..." could be formed in most American towns and cities tomorrow—running people for office on just the terms suggested here and coordinating with other "Progressive..."s around the country in doing so—without ever declaring itself a political party. When it comes to partisan races, however, there is a problem for any progressive coalition that cannot win on its own—the "wasted-vote syndrome." Even voters who support its values may be reluctant to vote for its candidates, for fear that their vote will be "thrown away" on candidates with no serious chance of winning.

How to beat this problem? Proportional representation would be the best way. But until that comes, the American answer has always been "fusion" politics: Permit the minor party to ally with a major one behind joint candidates, with votes cast on either party's ballot line counted toward those candidates' totals. This allows supporters of the minor party to express support without wasting their vote on hopeless candidates. And it permits the minor party to "fill in its dance card" with cross-endorsements in races it can't win on its own but that are important to its supporters.

Widely barred in this country since the 1890s, electoral fusion survives today in only a handful of states. Most prominent of these is New York, where it indeed has the effect of keeping a lively minor-party tradition alive. But fusion may be about to come back to the United States, big time. Later this fall, the Supreme Court will hear the New Party's challenge to state-level bars on the practice, in a case reviewing an Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals decision declaring them flatly unconstitutional. If the Court sides with the New Party, fusion will suddenly be legal throughout the country. The rules of electoral politics will have fundamentally changed.

Minor parties could form without fear that the endeavor is hopeless or destructive of relations with progressive Democrats. Labor-backed electoral coalitions could get ballot lines (qualification for ballot lines is relatively easy; it's ballot maintenance that's the big problem), announce their program and intent to endorse candidates based on it and be ready for business in time for the 1998 Congressional elections. Just imagine the greater respect labor and other progressive forces would get from liberal Democrats if we showed a responsible willingness to support them on our program and a threatening willingness to leave them if they leave us. For once, we could show the strength of the labor-community-environmental coalition (count the votes on our ballot line!) and use it in bargaining for our program.

For more information on the Supreme Court case and the usefulness of fusion to progressive electoral forces, contact the New Party at (212) 302-5053/(800) 200-1294; newparty@newparty.org; http://www.newparty.org/. B.C./J.R.

Assert the people's voice. Change the rules of the game. Show our values and our base. Have some fun along the way. All at relatively low cost.

The Organization: Eventually, this work should yield a mass-membership organization with a national executive consisting of representatives of organizations that provide some stated measure of ongoing support. This executive will gradually be joined by elected representatives from states where we achieve some specified significant level of membership. But it could begin simply as a coalition, with list-sharing and other coordination on joint projects. It should not, however, be another "one letterhead, one vote" coalition. Power should be proportionate to contribution—in members, money or some other recognizable currency. Any alternative is not democratic, and will fail for want of commitment by those with something real to offer.

Who's allowed in? Anyone and everyone who agrees to work together on these terms. Along with millions of unaffiliated individuals, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and its member unions, the New Party, Citizen Action, ACORN, Greenpeace, Clean Water Action, US PIRG, NECARC, the N.A.A.C.P., NOW. A range of groups obviously big enough to stand for something—and for once standing together—in the electoral space where the general public can find them.

A formation like this—an electoral alliance of progressive forces, a progressive version of the Christian Coalition and GOPAC—would not solve all the problems of progressives. But it would begin to give some organizational coherence and punch to what are now largely wasted assets: our millions of votes and the millions of votes of those who agree with us even if they'd never call themselves "progressives." It would permit us to take some power and show that our values work—in sustainable development, school reform, campaign finance. It would vastly increase the supply of trained operatives and potential future candidates. It would, by making our electoral activity real, force us to improve our thinking about program and message. And, not to be slighted, by giving ongoing life and purpose to some shared activity among all of us, it would vastly improve our relations with one another.

All in all, a beautiful thing. So why haven't we done it?

Well, there is what we consider confusion—the belief that even something as benign and useful as this would mysteriously make things worse, that it would get in the way of "real organizing" or "movement work" rather than help it, or that a movement that collectively spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year on non-electoral work (not to mention the 20-30 percent of the population, collectively earning $1 trillion a year, who regularly describe themselves as "progressive") could not find the several million annually needed to make it happen.

There's opposition to doing anything, even closely allied with progressive portions of the Democratic Party, that might ever show any sign of life outside it. This too, in our view, is a form of confusion—about how progressive change ever happens, and about how hopes for the Democrats should affect our current action. It is clear that the natural direction of the Democratic Party is not toward this sort of politics. It is clear that to push the Democrats toward our values requires organization among us. So let's get organized. If the Democrats respond to our organization by becoming a genuinely progressive party, great. If they don't, we can

take our work to a higher level of independence. But we should not let uncertainty about the future keep us from starting to build one. There is much work to be done now—again, much of it nonpartisan, and thus not even raising the specter of third-party-building—to build the independent politics all of us should recognize as necessary. We should do that work and see what happens, confident that whatever occurs we'll be stronger than we are now.

But mostly there is habit. The habit of not working together on anything until we agree on everything, of staying clear of electoral politics because it's daunting or distasteful, of championing protest over governance and opposition over power. The habit of losing. We should break it. ■