

■ DON'T WHINE—ORGANIZE!

Out With the Old Politics, In With the New Party

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American politics is a mess. It doesn't promote the general welfare. It's a sewer of corruption and privilege. In most elections, it's not even interesting enough to motivate most citizens to vote.

What's fundamentally wrong with American politics is not just who is in it but how it is *organized*—or better, *disorganized*—by our present political party system. Parties are what you need to make a democracy sing and shout. Strong, competitive and inclusively representative parties, linking politicians to one another and to voters and citizen organizations, are what you need for coherence and accountability in government. Parties organize debate, formulate alternatives and educate and mobilize ordinary citizens, who are short on time and money, to make meaningful decisions about what they want done. In a world in which politics is materially conditioned and most people don't have a lot of material, such parties spread the blessings of liberty by spreading the benefits of political organization.

But, as everybody knows, we don't

really have the right kind of parties in the United States. What we do have are two business-dominated parties that are understandably little interested in broad and informed citizen mobilization and that are too weak, diffuse and disconnected from their voting base to articulate or compete on, much less deliver, coherent policy programs of general benefit. They are old, very old, the oldest parties in the world—formed well before most Americans were allowed to vote, before trade unions were legal, before light bulbs—and they've never quite gotten themselves into the twentieth century. As organizations, they have exceptionally weak linkages between leaders and (a vanishingly small number of) members, and little cohesion among the leaders themselves. At present, the parties are overrun by capital-intensive campaigners accountable to no one but themselves and their personal networks of funders (in Ross Perot's case, all rolled into one). Ideologically, they are exceptionally uncomfortable even talking about, much less addressing, the needs of (dare we say it) the working class—defined here simply as the 80 percent of the work force that are production and non-supervisory employees.

These political dinosaurs, nearly everyone agrees, are getting increasingly hazardous to our public health. That people agree is evident from public opinion polls, which show that a majority of the public is disgusted with both parties. Or from Ross Perot's all-expenses-paid high-tech talk-show Bonaparte-from-Texas independent (not "third party") campaign for President, which is scattering major-party operatives like barn rats before an Uzi. This reaction is quite rational—the country is really very screwed up, and our

parties, at least as presently organized, are unlikely to be much help in doing what needs to be done to straighten it out.

Over the past generation, the American economy dissolved into a world economy, the majority of adult women entered the paid labor force, environmental destruction became global, we came to an almost infinitely greater appreciation of the importance and difficulty of achieving racial and gender justice, living standards stagnated and income inequality soared, and the cold war suddenly ended. The result is a whole new set of problems and choices, which the passing of a few more laws (something even our decrepit parties can do) can't possibly address.

What's needed is a rethinking of basic institutions like the family, firm and state. What's collective security? What's an environmentally sustainable economy? What's fair trade with impoverished nations? What's real consumer protection? What say should employees have in the corporation? How should work be reorganized to accommodate family life, "traditional" and not? What, after four centuries of oppression, is this country's obligation to black Americans? How will we achieve a genuinely multicultural democracy? What's a fair distribution of income? How could everything be reorganized so little girls have the same chance in life as little boys?

Answering these questions in democratic ways, even asking them effectively, requires active discussion among what are sometimes called *real* people, not just policy elites, and some political heavy-lifting to implement what gets talked about. Who's going to convene that discussion? Who's going to carry it out? Nobody should believe that our major parties will do either. Which means that a lot of people are going to go down the tubes.

It's here—on this sour and despondent note—that most critical discussions of American politics end. What more can be said? Our parties basically stink, but we can't reinvent them operating only from within. We need an organized alternative from without—something new and different and genuinely popular and democratic that shows how things should be done and forces the old parties to shape up. But conventional wisdom, backed by a lot of evidence from history, suggests that we can't get that. There are all sorts of structural barriers to a new party's emergence—like the absence of proportional representation in our "win-

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ner take all," single-member-district election system; the absence of parliamentary discipline that promotes accountability within parties and distinctions among them; the corruption of our financing system, etc. Conventional wisdom holds, firmly, that we're a two-party country, and these are the two we've got. If you don't like what they're doing, find something else to like about the country, because its politics are never going to make you proud. Get a hobby. Get a life. Save for the kids' education. Basically, do nothing, because nothing's going to change, at least not for anything but the worse, at least not in ways that *you* can do anything about.

Well, let's start a different discussion. Taking full measure of all the barriers and problems, we think it is in fact possible to develop an appealing, democratic, third-party alternative in America. We think a lot of people—not just self-identified "progressives" but people who never think of themselves as such—would actually support this alternative if it were internally democratic, diverse in its representation, progressive but not sectarian in its politics, and not wasteful of their votes. If somebody like Ross Perot can reach across classes and constituencies, a democratic party certainly can. Most Americans don't want regressive taxes, lousy jobs, bad education, gross inequality, racial and sexual injustice, impossible conflicts between work and family, declining living standards or a definition of America's international purpose as standing tall on the backs of the poor of other lands. Most Americans are disorganized, confused and scared, but they are not indecent. And their basic decency provides some hope for doing something different. So we, along with a bunch of others, have decided to build a new party—which we're simply calling the New Party (don't worry, we can change the name later).

Here's the basic idea: We want the New Party to be locally based, with local and state organizations enjoying substantial autonomy in the development of their activities. It should combine campaign work with cultural and educational activities and support for non-electoral organizing. It should confront accountability issues and the power of money head on by being based in a dues-paying membership with the power to run the show. It should respect the nonparty organizations on which any democratic party needs to draw by making membership

available to groups as well as to individuals. Knowing the many ways in which even seemingly "neutral" organizations exclude women and people of color from power, it should build representative guarantees for both within its basic rules of operation. And, obviously, our party should be open to people with no time for anything but voting as well as people who want to spend their lives building it.

Ideologically, we want the New Party to be broadly "social democratic" in its orientation. That is, it should recognize that capitalism needs to be regulated if it's not going to kill us, and that government "by the people" and "of the people" can be more than rhetoric (and government can be significantly more satisfying and efficient) if the "people" get organized. At the same time, it should recognize that traditional social democracy needs to be reinterpreted in light of the "new" social movements of racial pluralism, feminism and environmentalism. Drawing on all these movements, the New Party should get beyond the single-issue politics no one is happy with. It should be the party of labor but not just a labor party, a party of environmentalists but not just a green party, a party of racial pluralism and justice but not just a black or Latino party, a party of feminists but not just a feminist party. Rather, within a framework of commitment to sustainable development, distributive equity, racial justice, gender equity and collective security and development, the New Party should convene popular discussion of how *all* these things are mutually and practically achievable, and then set about competing for and using state power (though not necessarily government bureaucracies themselves) to help achieve them.

How do we propose to build a third party in a system with "winner take all" election rules and other barriers designed, with great success, to throttle third-party efforts? In part, by working to change those laws themselves. America is overdue for a re-examination of the basic rules of its electoral system, many of which are substantially worse than a century ago, and we look forward to challenging many of them. In the meantime, however, we need a solution to the great bugbear of all third-party efforts: the "wasted vote" syndrome, or fear that votes for a third party will be "wasted" on candidates with no chance of winning, or worse, "spoil" the election by splitting the progressive vote.

The only solution to the problem is the simplest: *Only run our candidates where*

we can win. Where we cannot win, we will simply abstain or, where the law permits, endorse on our own party line the most progressive major-party candidates we can find (with their permission, of course). Under such cross-endorsement, votes for major-party candidates on the New Party line would still count toward their election total, so nothing would be "wasted" or "spoiled." This is what third parties did in the nineteenth century, and what the American Labor Party did in New York in the 1930s—and it worked.

Start local. Think long term. Don't waste people's votes.

Where can we win? In local arenas—where progressives have been successful time and again. This leads us to favor a "from the ground up" strategy of building from local races to higher elective office, rather than building on air from the top down. We're quite happy with this necessary point of departure. After all, it is only by starting from the grass roots that a party will ever be accountable, and it's only in real communities that the prospect of building an honest-to-God party (as against another collection of candidates) is also real.

Start local. Think long term. Combine non-electoral work with campaigns. Don't waste people's votes or act as spoilers. That's our strategy. It won't change the world today. Short term, what it can do is provide a more unified progressive presence in local electoral arenas and a way of uniting self-identified progressives with those who share their convictions but have never been to a meeting. And long term, maybe, it can transform the United States into a working democracy. We know this is the work of a lifetime. But we're committed to staying at it as long as we are making progress, and so far we're making it. We think this approach is more sensible than rival strategies, familiar to progressives, for dealing with electoral politics.

One such strategy is to withdraw from electoral politics entirely. Maybe vote, maybe not, but devote all real political energies to non-electoral or nonpartisan community or other organizing. Such work is vital. Most of the people building the New Party do it already. And one

reason we are building the New Party is that we think it will make that work more effective. But we don't think that such work is enough. It doesn't put activists directly into government, which is an obvious and important source of power. And it doesn't link them to those who share their convictions but will never be activists, who only vote and never march. For most people, electoral politics *is* politics. To reach them, we need an electoral presence.

Another strategy is to work only within the Democratic Party. Our views on this are complicated. We recognize the Democratic Party as the large unhappy home of a lot of very good people, and we don't intend to build the New Party in a way that hurts progressive Democrats. But we also think working only inside that party is hopeless, as organized labor's generations-long alliance with the Democrats, and countless unsuccessful efforts at internal reform, attest. The Democratic Party has an abusive relationship with progressives. Democrats take our time and money, and then almost always move to the right. The best way to end an abusive relationship is to develop the ability to leave it. We need a meaningful threat of exit from the Democratic Party—a New Party that can punish unaccountable Democrats by running against them (and reward nice ones by not).*

A third strategy is to run progressive candidates for offices they don't have any serious chance of winning (e.g., for President) as a way of educating voters and "sending a message." We respect the fortitude of people who do this, but conclude it's better to spend time building support for credible races. The "message" sent by quixotic campaigns is often muted or subverted by their abject failure to win office. The candidates running without the organized support needed to succeed also commonly aren't accountable, which defeats the whole point of democratic politics.

The New Party was launched a few months ago, after a year spent discussing the idea with activists and raising enough money (from several hundred do-

* If the Democrats are as organizationally weak as we say, why don't we just take them over? The considerations here are also complicated, but they boil down to this: We don't just want more power in the existing Democratic Party. We want a different sort of party—more internally democratic, more tied to its voting base, more committed to doing non-electoral work as well as campaigning. And building a party of *that* sort we judge to be best done outside the shell of the old.

nors) to open a national office and hire a couple of organizers. We now have early organizing projects in a dozen states (Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Texas and Wisconsin), with more shortly on the way.

In each of these projects, people are getting themselves organized—having first meetings with area contacts, forming New Party organizing committees, drawing the boundaries of local chapters, beginning to target local races, drafting the structures of statewide organizations and, of course, signing up members, doing training and educational work, and otherwise building some presence for the party. Typical is the New Party organizing drive in the Rockaways in Queens, New York. That neighborhood is a predominantly black and Latino area where plans to develop luxury beachfront housing have met with strong opposition from local community groups and churches. Community organizations of public housing tenants, churches and some school reform activists have begun a voter registration and New Party recruiting drive. It's nothing fancy yet. Just house meetings, church basement educationals, rallies and street corner tabling. But it's the kind of organizing that pays huge dividends over time, as we prepare now for the 1993 New York City Council elections.

To see where this sort of work can lead, consider Progressive Milwaukee, a local coalition of greens, labor, women's groups, housing activists and peace and justice advocates, out of which a New Party chapter is now being organized. This past spring Progressive Milwaukee ran its own slate of five candidates for the twenty-five-member Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors. It elected four of them; immediately establishing a presence for progressive activists inside an important part of Milwaukee government. This fall, building on that experience, the New Party plans to target two State Assembly seats in Milwaukee. By 1994, we'd like to be competitive in a dozen or more State Assembly districts. Success there would give us measurable clout in state politics, a goal we'd like to reach in about a half-dozen states by that time. (It would be nice too, by 1994, to have a few New Party Representatives to keep Bernie Sanders company down in the pit, but we don't know yet where they'll come from, since this will depend entirely on local organizing efforts and judgments.)

Who's involved in all these efforts? No gigantic stars. No current candidates for

President. Not the head of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. But experienced activists who are serious. People like Gary Delgado, founder of the Center for Third World Organizing, now at the Applied Research Center; Marie Wilson, a former Des Moines City Council member, now executive director of the Ms. Foundation for Women; James Steele, longtime organizer in the African-American community in New York; Amy Newell, general secretary-treasurer of the United Electrical Workers; Jan Pierce, vice president, District 1, Communications Workers of America; Mark Ritchie, of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy; Denise O'Brien, a leader in the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition; Madeline Talbott, national field director of ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now); John O'Connor, of the National Toxics Campaign; and Harriet Barlow, longtime activist and founding co-chair of the now

defunct Citizens Party. We also have academic activists like Juliet Schor, who's long been active at the Center for Popular Economics; Frances Fox Piven, central to the current campaign to secure agency-based voter registration reform; and Manning Marable, who has long supplemented his academic career with writing and organizing. And more. At this point, several hundred more. By the end of the year, we expect, a few thousand.

It's a good group. There are black people and white people, Latinos and Asians, men and women, gays and straights, enviros, unionists, wage workers and professionals. It's a party in which diversity is both a principle and a strategy and in which disgust with politics as usual hasn't yet defeated the hope that we can change it for the better. We think the New Party is a plausible way of doing that. If you've got a better idea, great. If not, maybe it's time you joined us. □