

The New Business of Progressive Politics:

Adapting Corporate Strategy to Civic Disengagement and Electoral Defeat

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Spring 2006

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“The world of politics and policy is immensely complicated, and knowledge of that world is very unequally distributed. When knowledge is limited and unequal, middle-of-the-road voters have a hard time holding politicians accountable... If accountability has declined, it is not because voters were once highly knowledgeable and now are not. It is because the world of politics and policy has become less transparent and the role of intermediate organizations has declined. For this reason, the strengthening of encompassing groups that combine material resources, social networks, and reputations for trustworthiness can play a central role in restoring electoral control for ordinary voters. Encompassing organizations are vital for empowering the vast multitude of citizens who will never pay more than intermittent and limited attention to politics.”

- Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson¹

Introduction

During the first day of the 2005 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in Washington, D.C., a roundtable discussion was convened to address the recently published research of nineteen preeminent political scientists on the topic of civic engagement. These nineteen scholars had banded together under APSA’s nonpartisan “Committee on Civic Education and Engagement” to collectively write a book titled *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do About It*. The book concludes that large numbers of Americans have turned away from political participation due to the failed engineering of our civic institutions and it calls for an agenda of reform to address what its authors perceive as an unfolding democratic crisis. The publication of *Democracy at Risk* and the subsequent attention that it received at the annual meeting of “the leading professional organization for the study of politics,”² illustrates broad consensus among scholars that there has been a marked decline in American civic participation over the past fifty years – a phenomenon that, among other things, has muddied the role of citizenship.

¹ (Hacker and Pierson 2005:217)

² <http://www.apsanet.org/>

The response to this profound political and social transformation has been uneven within American's two leading political factions. (Hacker and Pierson 2005:187) The Republican Party³ has been much better at adapting to declines in traditional civic engagement, while the Democrats⁴ have continued to operate as if little has changed over the past fifty years – as if the country were still comprised of a significantly unionized workforce⁵, as if the laws governing campaign finance have remained constant, and as if economic policies have not produced a growing gap of power and wealth between the richest Americans and everyone else. Thus, it is not only the decline in overall civic engagement that has taken place in American that is cause for alarm. (Skocpol 2003:254) The bigger problem has been the uneven political response to such a decline and the unequally distributed impacts of the shift. (Hacker and Pierson 2005:5)

Coinciding with the transformation of traditional civic participation, there has been a major shift in the role and practices of political parties in America. New models of organizing have been developing on both the Right (Krencicki and Wilson 2005) and now the Left. While the Right was quicker to adapt to shifting cultural trends, the Left, in the wake of the 2000 electoral defeat, is now beginning to seriously address the need for organizational reform. While much has been written about the successful adaptation strategies of the Right, including a major

³ For the purposes of this paper, I will use the following group of words interchangeably: “Republican,” “Right,” and “Conservative.”

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will use the following group of words interchangeably: “Democrat,” “Left,” and “Progressive.”

⁵ In 2004, the percentage of salaried workers belonging to unions in the United States had fallen to 13.8 percent. This is compared to the 1950s, when over 30 percent of all wage earners were union members. (Hacker and Pierson 2005:196)

paper that I coauthored in the Spring of 2005 (Krencicki and Wilson 2005)⁶, very little has been written on the emerging debate about creating an “infrastructure” on the Left.

This paper begins by summarizing some of the major changes in American civic culture over the past fifty years, tying together the research of a significant group of political scientists, with the aim of providing the context for the transformation of the role of the country’s two major political parties. It will then give a brief overview of the shifts within the conservative movement, followed by a much more comprehensive discussion of the reorganization currently underway within the Progressive movement. The paper will conclude with a series of recommendations for how Progressive leaders could *effectively* and *democratically* restructure the Progressive movement to address the changes brought about by America’s newly transformed civic culture.

A New American Citizenship

“I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”

– Thomas Jefferson⁷

Social Transformations: Declining Civic Participation

The Decline in Social Capital and Political Participation

The authors of *Democracy at Risk* define civic engagement to include “any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity,” (Macedo et al.

⁶ An excerpt of this paper, “Lessons from the Right: Saving the Soul of the Environmental Movement,” was published in the Spring 2006 edition of *Earth Island Journal*. A full PDF version of the paper is available online at www.lessonsfromtheright.org.

⁷ (Bergh [1907:278] cited in Macedo et al. [2005:12])

2005:6) and, as this paper will suggest, the evident decline in traditional civic engagement has profoundly transformed the American political landscape over the past few decades. Of the nineteen scholars discussed in the introduction, Robert Putnam of Harvard University is perhaps the best known of the bunch – having gained popular notoriety for his pioneering research into the study of America’s declining “social capital.”⁸ According to Putnam,

“Active involvement in face-to-face organizations had plummeted, whether we consider organizational records, survey reports, time diaries, or consumer expenditures...During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps 10-20 percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades...Most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations – we’ve stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officials, and stopped going to meetings. And all this despite rapid increases in education that have given more of us than ever before the skills, the resources, and the interests that once fostered civic engagement. In short, Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally.” (Putnam 2000:63)

Given Putnam’s conclusion about declining civic participation, it is logical to see that such trends would have measurable impacts on American politics. The authors of *Democracy at Risk* conclude, “Given increasing education and wealth, voting and other forms of political activity are far lower than they should be.” (Macedo et al. 2005:18) In his discussion of political participatory trends, Putnam concludes,

“...Since the mid-1960s, the weight of the evidence suggests, despite the rapid rise in levels of education Americans have become perhaps 10-15 percent less likely to voice our views publicly by running for office or writing Congress or the local newspaper, 15-20 percent less interested in politics and public affairs, roughly 25 percent less likely to vote, roughly 35 percent less likely to attend public meetings, both partisan and nonpartisan, and roughly 40 percent less engaged in party politics and indeed in political and civic organizations of all sorts.” (Putnam 2000:46)

⁸ Putnam defines *social capital* as “social skills and institutions that allow people to work together toward common ends.” (Putnam [2000] as cited in Hacker and Pierson [2005:196])

With this evidence, we can see that the documented decline in civic participation extends well into the territory of political participation in general and party activism more specifically. While education levels have increased, a trend that typically indicates increased voter turnout, Americans have peculiarly stayed away from the ballot box and turned their noses up at party activism. (Putnam 2000)

The Decline in Participatory Membership Associations

It is not just the overall decline in civic and political action that is so astonishing. Research has also taken place to investigate *why* these unusual trends have occurred in America. One of Robert Putnam's colleagues at Harvard, Theda Skocpol, has taken an initial stab at answering this question. Through Harvard's "Civic Engagement Project," Skocpol has spent the past decade researching why there has been declining participation in voluntary membership organizations. Her research has unveiled that, beginning in the 1960s, professional advocacy organizations began to slowly displace the formally ubiquitous participatory membership groups like Elks and Rotary Clubs. (Skocpol 2003) As Skocpol points out, it was the gradual professionalization of politics and advocacy that has eroded our civic culture,

"The most important changes did not happen incrementally; nor did they simply bubble up from below. Government offered new opportunities and obstacles to civic activists. Social ideals changed. And new technologies and sources of funding created fresh opportunities and incentives for civic organizers. Suddenly, mobilizing fellow citizens into dues-paying, interactive associations that met regularly no longer made sense for ambitious elites, who could instead run professionally managed organizations able to gain immediate access to government and the national media...Leading Americans withdrew from cross-class membership federations and redirected civic energy toward professional advocacy, private foundation grant making, and institutional trusteeship." (Skocpol 2003:220)

Skocpol also explains why this shift has been so detrimental to Americans' involvement in politics, "...membership federations inculcated the core values underpinning republican citizenship. In their rituals and programs virtually all voluntary federations stressed basic values of charity, community, and good citizenship." (Skocpol 2003:113) As Hacker and Pierson point out in summing up Skocpol's work, "For those of modest means...large-scale voluntary organizations no longer have the presence in citizens' lives, or the role in linking politics with everyday life, that they once did." (Hacker and Pierson 2005:196) Skocpol ultimately concludes that Americans must find new ways to link democratic governance with civic associations that involve large and representative numbers of citizens. (Skocpol 2003:290)

Interestingly, the authors of *Democracy at Risk* point out that, "Until the initiation of our project, the APSA has not encouraged the formulation of a set of public policy or reform recommendations since 1950." (Macedo et al. 2005:16) While not all of the political scientists involved in the project reached agreement on all details of civic decline, they collectively issued the forceful sentiments in their report,

"We agree that Americans are less involved in civic life than they should be and that inequalities of involvement reflect persistent hierarchies of wealth and privilege to a disturbing degree...the overall health of our democracy has been compromised by a decline in participation across a broad range of activities." (Macedo et al. 2005:17)

A number of prominent political scientists are alarmed by the disturbing trends towards disengagement. Before looking at the specific adaptation strategies of the country's two major political parties, it is important to examine some of the institutional transformations within American politics that have occurred in tandem with the decline of civic life.

Institutional Transformations in American Politics

In addition to the patterned social changes that have taken place over the past fifty years, there have also been several structural transformations that have further eroded widespread involvement in American politics. Perhaps the most obvious institutional impact has come from the transformation of the political parties themselves. There is debate within the political science community as to whether parties have become more or less powerful since the 1950s, but there is consensus that they have undergone significant changes and that their role has shifted over time. Two of the major transformations in parties have come in the form of campaign finance reform and in the rise of candidate-centered politics – two distinct, yet intertwined concepts. Another significant institutional change to occur within American politics, the rise in importance of foundations and grant-making institutions, should also be acknowledged.

Campaign Finance Reform & the Rise of Candidate-Centered Campaigns

Perhaps the logical way to start examining the shifts within political parties is to look at some of the major campaign finance reforms since the World War II era. Beginning with the 1940 amendments to the Hatch Act, which limited yearly spending by a party committee to \$3 million and curbed individual contributions to both parties and candidates at \$5,000, efforts have been made to lesson the impact of wealthy individuals on American politics. (Corrado [1997:30] as cited in Green and Herrnson [2002:83]) But, as you will see, the 1940 legislation was only the beginning of modern campaign finance reform.

In response to both Richard Nixon's 1972 controversial campaign and the Watergate scandal, Congress authorized "the one comprehensive attempt in American history to reform

campaign finance,” the 1974 amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA). (Sorauf [1988:chapter 2] as cited in Green and Herrnson [2002:84]) According to Green and Herrnson, “The law that Congress wrote in 1974 clearly reflected the electoral politics of its time, especially its candidate-centered politics. The candidate was its singular focus, with limitations placed and disclosure forced on all money flowing into and out of the campaign.” (Green and Herrnson 2002:84) The specific limitations imposed by FECA on individuals included a \$1,000 contribution limit per candidate per election cycle and a \$25,000 total annual contribution limit. Limitations were placed on Political Action Committees (also known as “PACS” or “nonparty committees”) at \$5,000 per candidate per election cycle. FECA also placed limits on the amount that candidates could spend on their own campaigns. (Green and Herrnson 2002:85) As mentioned above, the FECA reforms were written to address the most pressing political scandals of their day. Although it was clearly a laudable effort to lessen the impact of big money on politics, the unintended consequences of FECA – unlimited *soft money* contributions – became truly severe for future federal campaigns.

Thus, the major problem with FECA was not in its regulatory structure, but, rather, in what it declined to regulate. The legislation did not address “soft money,” or national party funds spent on a particular campaign without a candidate’s direction or knowledge. In addition, Green and Herrnson point out that, “As the FECA defines money – money raised under its limits and thus hard money – there is really no limit to the aggregate sums candidates can accept from all PACs and individual contributors so long as they can win the support of more and more of them.” (Green and Herrnson 2002:85) Essentially, FECA left open significant loopholes in campaign finance by ignoring soft money and allowing candidates to accept unlimited funds for

their war chests. FECA was also gutted as it went under immediate attack in the courts, on charges that it violated the free speech provisions of the First Amendment.

In the landmark *Buckley v. Valeo*⁹ case, the Supreme Court “equated campaign spending with free speech.” (Hacker and Pierson 2005:190) While the court did uphold the various *contributions limits* mandated by FECA, it simultaneously struck down *spending limits*, including limitations on overall candidate spending, limits on candidates’ use of their own money, and limits on independent expenditures – on grounds that such spending limitations violated the First Amendment. As Green and Herrnson point out, “what had been a regulatory system placing limits on all transactions in a campaign became one resting only on limits on contributions. The main impediments to escalating campaign costs had fallen.” (Green and Herrnson 2002:86) Hacker and Pierson agree, saying that *Buckley v. Valeo*, “has not prevented campaign finance reform, but it has seriously constrained what reform can do. Because of its broad conception of spending as a form of free speech, the Court’s decision rules out a variety of approaches to campaign finance that have successfully curbed the influence of big donations in other democratic societies.” (Hacker and Pierson 2005:190) By the 1990’s, many of the FECA limits left alone by the Court had also been circumvented by clever party strategists. The parties had turned their focus towards raising soft money (still outside the realm of FECA) and by indirectly spending on campaigns through issue ads and independent expenditures. (Green and Herrnson 2002:89)

The saga surrounding American campaign finance reform regained footing in 2002, at which point the bipartisan McCain-Feingold legislation¹⁰ emerged from the halls of Congress. The major outcome of McCain-Feingold was that it prohibited the parties from accepting soft

⁹ 424 U.S. 1 (1976)

¹⁰ McCain-Feingold is known officially as the “Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act” (BCRA)

money contributions. However, as was the case with the FECA legislation, the real impact of these reforms can be seen in what they did not attempt to regulate – in this case, the 527.¹¹ Political operatives were quick to employ this previously ignored genre of independent political groups, nicknamed after the section of the federal tax code in which their legality is placed. (Bai 2004) According to the head of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Andy Stern, “This is like Yugoslavia. We used to have a strongman called the party. After McCain Feingold, we dissolved the power of Tito.” (Bai 2004) As will be evidenced later in this paper, the institutional impacts of McCain-Feingold on American politics have been substantial – causing an explosion of issue-based advocacy organizations to replace much of traditional party organizing.

Rise in the Power of Foundations

Coinciding with Skocpol’s conclusion that the professionalization of politics and issue-based advocacy has had a direct impact on declining civic participation, the institutional role of foundations must also be considered. According to investigative reporter Mark Dowie, “Over the twentieth century as the institutions they created grew in size and number, philanthropists have concentrated their power, developed a prominent professional cadre, and significantly advanced the fine art of leveraging influence.” (Dowie 2001:xx) Dowie is fearful of the recent

¹¹ According to the Center for Public Integrity, “A 527 is a non-profit organization formed under Section 527 of the Internal Revenue Code, which grants tax-exempt status to political committees at the national, state and local level. Over the past several years, the term has come to refer to a new form of political organization operating in a gray area of the law. These groups actively influence elections and policy debates at all levels of government, but do not advocate explicitly for election or defeat of candidates. For this document, the definition of ‘527 organization’ is a political committee that files its most complete set of reports with the Internal Revenue Service, not with the Federal Election Commission or its counterparts in the states.”

historical drain of policy determination away from democratically accountable institutions and towards private philanthropic organizations. Increasingly, the power to determine policy outcomes has shifted away from ordinary citizens and representative governmental bodies and towards wealthy philanthropists and foundation officers. Dowie succinctly sums this point up, “Every year, at every level of government, public policy is determined less and less through democratic processes. And when it is, the constitutionally elected officials responsible for it are all too often the virtual handmaidens of powerful economic interests opposing the very policy that is needed.” (Dowie 2001:xxxii) While much of the work being done by foundations may be fruitful for communities in need, such programs are not constructed or approved by elected officials accountable to the public.

In addition to being unaccountable to the polity, Dowie and others suggest that philanthropists have an inherent bias towards maintaining the social and economic status quo, “Brilliant and constructive as some of their [foundations’] work has been, much of it has also been fruitless, uninspired, and designed to do little more than perpetuate the economic and social systems that allow foundations to exist.” (Dowie 2001:xx) This discussion of modern American philanthropy is surprisingly akin to the logic that Edward Said pointed out in his 1970s critique of Orientalist narratives, in which he points out that Western scholarly accounts of the East often served to reinforce colonial biases. (Robbins 2004:63) Michael Lerner, the head of the Jennifer Altman Foundation, further supplements the idea that, “Philanthropy grows with our increasing disparity of wealth, and muffles systemic efforts at political reform.” (Dowie 2001:xxi) It is a logical possibility then, that the increased power and visibility of foundations has further dissuaded ordinary Americans from actively participating in traditional civic affairs like voting

or writing elected representatives – as such acts, as related to the shaping of social policy, are increasingly futile.

Partisan Responses to Social and Institutional Transformations

“...The drying up of...social glue has not had equal effects across the economic spectrum. Nor has it been neutral in its political effects. The economically privileged start with plenty of the most traditional sort of capital – namely, money. And they have continued to vote, contribute, and participate in high numbers. The same is not true of less affluent Americans. Precisely because they are disadvantaged with regard to material resources, they need social capital more than the well off, and they need organizational backing the most. Faced with limited information, a clamor of competing messages, and a media that does little to help sort things out, relatively inattentive voters often must rely heavily on ‘cues’ they receive from organizations and associates they respect and trust. But the signals that ordinary citizens once received from affiliated organizational networks, and the leverage these associations once provided them to act on these signals, have steadily weakened.”¹²

– Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson

While it is accurate, as Hacker and Pierson point out in the above quote, that all Americans have not evenly felt the impacts of declining social capital, it is also true that the country’s two major political parties have not evenly responded to the changes. Until very recently, the Right has been unquestionably ahead of the Left in strategic adaptation to the new political landscape, carefully filling in the crevices hollowed out by declines in traditional civic participation. Their techniques have been flexibly molded around long-term movement building and they have come up with fresh ways to communicate to increasingly disengaged citizens about politics. The Right has carved out a cadre of innovative methods for succeeding in the new political arena, the most important of these being the strategic framing of their message coupled with the construction of a comprehensive political infrastructure for delivering it. (Krencicki and Wilson 2005) The Progressives, on the other hand, have been slow to adapt to

¹² (Hacker and Pierson 2005:196)

major societal shifts or to respond to the innovations on the Right. Much has been written about the rise of Conservative power in recent years, so this paper will only touch briefly on the Right before plowing into the more infrequently examined and relatively newer transformations taking place on the Left.

The Conservative Response: A Brief Overview

Conservative Infrastructure

Coinciding with the societal shifts mentioned above, Conservatives have been systematically building a comprehensive political movement since Barry Goldwater's failed presidential campaign of 1964. (Bradley 2005) According to skeptic Mark Schmitt, the former policy director at George Soros's Open Society Institute, "The story of the Rise of the Right is the great fable in recent American politics..." (Schmitt 2005) In discussing the nuts and bolts that prove this "fable," the details of the Conservative political infrastructure, Hacker and Pierson provide insight into its successful operation,

"From the base of the grassroots up to the pinnacles of power in Washington, D.C., the informal ties that bind conservatives have grown tighter and denser. The Republican base is the foundation of this remarkable structure of political authority, but the glue that binds the structure is a small group of elites – figures like Karl Rove, Tom DeLay, Dick Cheney, and anti-tax activist Grover Norquist..." (Hacker and Pierson 2005:11)

The Right has been able to successfully bring together leaders and activists from a diverse group of issues areas who possess broad ideological and policy agendas. They have created this infrastructure through a very top-down, authoritarian process – exemplified by Norquist's notorious "Wednesday Meetings," which have been convened since 1993, and where conservative leaders come together on a weekly basis to strategize, hammer out compromises,

and agree on a unified message and agenda for the week. According to UC Berkeley sociologist Tom Medvetz, the regular participants of the Wednesday meetings include, “Representatives from conservative advocacy groups, think tanks, lobbying firms, and news media organizations, campaign strategists, political pollsters, elected officials, and candidates for political office, as well as informal delegates from the White House, Congress, and various federal agencies.” (Medvetz 2005:3) About eighty people are in attendance on any given week and meetings are by invitation only. (Lakoff 2004:16) and (Clark and Van Slyke 2005) Disagreements are sorted out behind closed doors so that the Conservative movement can march into the public each week with a unified agenda and a clear message.

The Conservative Messaging Strategy

The conservative message and media strategy has allowed the Right to speak to a disengaged citizenry through a complex marketing strategy, with a message originating from venues like the Wednesday Meeting and then being cast out, by a diverse group of elites, into various social channels. This strategy is quite complex and impressive. According to the nonprofit watchdog group, Media Matters for America,

“When misinformation is propagated by the conservative media machine – a multibillion-dollar network of talk radio shows, cable television, heavily subsidized newspapers and magazines, political pundits, partisan think tanks, and high-traffic Internet sites – into mainstream media venues, conservative messages achieve undue dominance in public discourse and skew the media playing field to the right.”¹³

UC Berkeley linguistics professor George Lakoff, who has popularized the concept of framing in American politics, agrees,

“Over a period of forty years, the radical right and its rich patrons had invested many hundreds of millions of dollars in think tanks, young talent, spokespeople, and

¹³ www.mediamatters.org

communications capacity that had essentially transformed the language of American politics. And when you control the language, you control the message, and the corporate media does the rest.” (Lakoff 2004:xii)

There is much evidence to support Lakoff’s description of immense power within the Conservative media. Right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh, for instance, currently provides 22% of Americans with their primary source of news. (Brock 2004:3) An astonishing 80% of the political pundits on television are actually from Conservative think tanks. (Lakoff 2004:16) The same messages that are churned out by think tanks are then echoed in churches, on Conservative talk radio, and spouted out by the GOP. Through their powerful message and communications strategy, the Right has been incredibly adaptive to the new social order – providing civically-disengaged Americans with an easily accessible dose of, albeit biased, political knowledge.

Where Progressives Stand

“The questions that will loom over the Democratic Party will be the same ones that have resurfaced regularly since the end of the Great Society: what, beyond a series of disconnected policy proposals, is the party’s reason for being? What does it stand for in the era after big government?”

-- Matt Bai¹⁴

Progressives have been very slow to respond to the civic disengagement of the American public. David Sirota, columnist for *The Nation* and Co-Chair of the Progressive Legislative Action Network (PLAN), captured much of the current Progressive sentiment this past August in a speech to members of the United Steelworkers Union,

“Right now, America is being held hostage by one very conservative movement, and there is not an equally strong alternative force to counter it. That means there is a

¹⁴ Bai, Matt. “Wiring the Vast Left-Wing Conspiracy,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2004.

genuine thirst in our country for a new grassroots political movement that doesn't use divisive social issues to pursue an elitist's economic agenda..." (Sirota 2005)

It is important to notice Sirota's use of the word "movement" in his speech, as this is clearly an expansive term – not focused exclusively on an individual, charismatic candidate, as was the case with Progressives during the Clinton era, nor is it focused only on strengthening the Democratic Party. A movement is something larger than either candidate or party – something that is, perhaps, necessary to capture the imagination of a civically apathetic public. Sirota goes on to say,

"It is time for critical pieces of the progressive coalition to reconnect with our movement history, to become comfortable embracing an ideological agenda and to focus on true grassroots progress, even if it means angering politicians from one party or another. Because the hard truth is this: We can only win with an ideological movement that captures Americans' hearts and minds, and we will never win if we just put our thumbs to the wind and pander for votes every four years." (Sirota 2005)

Sirota's call for the construction of an ideological movement is being echoed throughout the Progressive community.¹⁵

¹⁵ For purposes of this section of the paper, I feel that it is important to state an explicit definition for the term "Progressive." I borrow my definition of "Progressive" from an article by Garret Keizer in the November 2005 issue of *Mother Jones*. According to Keizer, a Progressive is, "Someone who dares to hope. A progressive believes that society can be made better, that it can be made better by informed people acting in concert, and that it can be called 'better' only when it's better for everybody."

Calls for a Progressive Infrastructure¹⁶

In a March 2005 op-ed in the New York Times, former New Jersey Senator and Democratic Presidential candidate, Bill Bradley, concluded,

“If Democrats are serious about preparing for the next election or the next election after that, some influential Democrats will have to resist entrusting their dreams to individual candidates and instead make a commitment to build a stable pyramid from the base up. It will take at least a decade’s commitment, and it won’t come cheap. But there really is no other choice.” (Bradley 2005)

With widespread agreement on what Sirota and Bradley, two influential Progressives, have addressed, a kind of Progressive revolution has started to sweep through the American political landscape.

While the Right was busy building a movement over the past forty years, the Left has remained relatively inactive. One logical explanation for the lack of a vibrant political movement on the Left is most simply the institutionalization of power. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, “Between 1932 and 1994, Democrats controlled the White House or one house of Congress. They established programs, Social Security and Medicare chief among them, that radically altered the scope and aim of government.” (Burek 2005) While the Conservatives were operating outside the realm of government to build a movement, the Progressives were busy trying to work within the system of democratic institutions to affect change. When the Republicans swept Congress in 1994 and George W. Bush assumed the presidency in 2000, the Left found that its agenda lacked basic access to the institutional

¹⁶ What I call “movement” (a term commonly used in academic literature – particularly in the fields of political science and sociology); individuals and organizations active in Progressive politics largely refer to as “infrastructure” or “coalition.” In some writings, this term is also expressed by the word “meta-structure.” (Krencicki and Wilson 2005) In this paper, I will use the terms “movement” and “infrastructure” interchangeably.

channels previously available to it from within the federal government. The Democrats woke up to find that the nation suddenly looked very different from when they had assumed power under FDR. There had been a transformation in civic culture. Attentions spans and support for complex social policies had dwindled.¹⁷ (Hacker and Pierson 2005: 177) Many Progressives were also shocked to realize that the Right had not been asleep for all of those years – Conservatives had been actively building a political movement, the likes of which this country has never seen. (Krencicki and Wilson 2005) There are, for instance, two Conservative think tanks for every Progressive one, and those Progressive think tanks that do exist are outspent by a factor of three-to-one. (Burek 2005) The Left has a lot of catching up to do.

A New Funding Model for the Left

Leading up to the 2004 presidential election, a cadre of Progressive leaders and, perhaps more importantly, Progressive donors, began to wholeheartedly address the concept of “movement.” Journalists Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke offer insight into why Progressive funders have been previously blind to the importance of movement building on the Left,

“For decades, liberal foundations and individual donors have failed to recognize the need for building long-term capacity in progressive media and affiliated organizations, and thereby create a progressive ‘echo chamber’ that can begin to counter the right’s media machine. Progressive foundations, with their roots in the reform movements of the early 20th century, have focused on funding social work and single-issue groups.” (Clark and Van Slyke 2005)

¹⁷ According to Hacker and Pierson, “During the presidential campaign of 1968, candidates could expect to speak on camera for an average of forty seconds without interruption; two decades later, the average is just *nine* seconds. Not surprisingly, detailed discussions of policy that would allow voters to get a better sense of the stakes in ongoing political conflict fare especially poorly in this environment.” (Hacker and Pierson 2005:177)

Although Progressive donors have shied away from movement building in the past, this is certainly not the case today, as an increasing pool of resources is being directed towards creating an infrastructure on the left. Many of the individuals leading this effort are, interestingly enough, coming from inside the donor community.

George Soros, a billionaire through his work as an international investor, is perhaps the most notorious of all major Progressive donors, having given over \$13 million in contributions to Progressive 527s to defeat Bush in the 2004 presidential election. (Bai 2004) Considered to be one of the largest political donors in American history, Soros has helped to spearhead the new Progressive funding model,

“The real significance of Soros’s involvement in politics has little to do with the dollar amount of his contributions. What will stand out as important, when we look back decades from now at the 2004 campaign, will be the political model he created for everyone else. Until this year, Democratic contributors operated on the party-machine model: they were trained to write checks only to the party and its candidates, who decided how to spend the money. But by helping to establish a series of separate organizations and by publicly announcing that he was on a personal mission to unseat Bush, Soros signaled to other wealthy liberals that the days of deferring to the party were over.” (Bai 2004)

Building off of a loophole in the 2002 McCain-Feingold campaign finance legislation, Soros halted his donations to the Democratic Party and, instead, worked to create several 527 groups to serve as mouthpieces for his political views – the largest of these being America Coming Together (ACT).

ACT can be seen as the unification of two very important trends in Progressive politics – the utilization of the new funding model combined with the trend towards movement building. It was founded by a diverse group of political actors representing a variety of Progressive factions,

including labor, environment, and women's issues.¹⁸ ACT worked on the ground in seventeen swing states, canvassing and organizing to build grassroots support for Kerry, while its sister organization, the Media Fund¹⁹, worked to produce and air anti-Bush ads in coinciding media markets. As the 2004 election approached, America Votes (AV), a related coalition group, was formed to bring together over thirty major Progressive organizations to share strategies, staff, and resources to defeat Bush. According to the AV Web site,

“America Votes brought together the broadest coalition of progressive organizations ever assembled to register, recruit, educate, mobilize and turn out a record-breaking number of voters in the 2004 elections. America Votes partner organizations worked together efficiently and effectively in battleground states, sharing data and research on voters, recruiting and mobilizing volunteers, and designing and executing joint GOTV²⁰ programs.” (America Votes 2005)

It is clear that Progressives have begun to learn the lessons of movement building, but there have been some major problems with their tactics, which have become all too apparent the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election.

One of the major lessons learned by Progressives in the wake of the Bush reelection, was that the large-scale collaborative efforts, exemplified by ACT and America Votes, must become much more structured around long-term movement building, rather than focused on a single election cycle. Data from the Center for Public Integrity indicates that ACT raised \$54,251,097 in 2004 alone, almost all of which was earmarked specifically for that particular election year. (Center for Public Integrity 2005) Many donors and Progressive organizers are beginning to see that movement building is about something much bigger than any single election. It is about

¹⁸ Founding members of ACT include: Ellen Malcolm of Emily's List, Carl Pope of the Sierra Club, Andy Stern of SEIU, and Steve Rosenthal of the AFL-CIO.

¹⁹ Veteran Democratic operative and former Deputy Chief of Staff to President Clinton, Harold Ickes, managed the Media Fund.

²⁰ GOTV is a commonly used acronym in electoral politics and stands for “Get Out the Vote.”

creating a large-scale and long-term infrastructure on the Left. The new funding model is being revised to reflect this realization.

Since the 2004 election, the Left has encountered the emergence an even newer funding model. Three innovative donor-centered organizations – Democracy Alliance, New Progressive Coalition²¹, and Progressive Donor Network²² – have all emerged onto the political landscape to announce their goal of matching Progressive donors with viable, long-term-minded Progressive organizations. These three groups are ingeniously working to funnel money directly from donors, both large and small, to a variety of grassroots, political, and media organizations that demonstrate significant promise to long-term Progressive ideals. In the words of *New York Times* writer Matt Bai, “Underneath all the now-tired mantras, there remains a vacuum at the core of the party, an absence of any transformative worldview for the century unfurling before us. Into this vacuum rushes money – and already it is creating an entirely new kind of independent force in American politics.” (Bai 2004) Progressives must use this money wisely if they are serious about countering the Right and responding to the emerging societal problem of declining civic engagement.

Infighting in the Movement

While the new funding model on the Left should be a hopeful sign for Progressives, there is a very troubling caveat to this development. There has been, and continues to be, tremendous competition for funding, as well as struggles over turf, legitimacy, and leadership among Progressive groups. While the Right is organized hierarchically, with a very top-down,

²¹ <http://www.newprogressivecoalition.com/>

²² <http://www.progressivedonor.net/>

authoritarian structure, the Left is not. One of the new funding model's chief organizations, Democracy Alliance, has spurred quite a buzz among Progressive organizations seeking sizeable donations – yet the Alliance is structured in a way that alienates many on Left. It is chaired by retired investment banker Steven Gluckstern, and was created in early 2005 to bring together the wealthiest of all Progressive donors – those who were frustrated by the outcome of the 2004 election and who were willing to make a serious financial commitment towards reinvigorating the Left. According to the *Washington Post*,

“The Democracy Alliance will act as a financial clearing house. Its staff members and board of directors will develop a lineup of established and proposed groups that they believe will develop and promote ideas on the left. To fulfill their million-dollar pledge, each partner must agree to give \$200,000 or more a year for at least five years to alliance-endorsed groups.” (Edsall 2005)

The goal of the Alliance is to raise over \$200 million for Progressive groups, with the ultimate goal of modeling the infrastructural development of the Right. This tactic is troubling to some among the donor community. According to *AlterNet's* Don Hazen,

“One donor who sits on the board of a progressive foundation...is worried that the ‘top down’ nature of things so painfully obvious in the 2004 election could be perpetuated by Stein²³ and other funding efforts like those of billionaires like George Soros and Peter Lewis. ‘It is so important to get resources down to the grass roots,’ says the donor, who wished to remain anonymous. ‘One of the major failings of these big donors meeting with each other and deciding where all the money should go is they reinforce each other. Where is the fresh thinking? They think one big idea should get all the money or one or two leaders should be the gatekeepers. That is not going to work. Putting all that money in the ACT basket certainly didn’t do the trick in the past election, nor will giving it all to Podesta and Center for American Progress help build progressive infrastructure at the local level where it is needed, particularly outside of the Democratic Party.’” (Hazen 2005)

²³ Rob Stein, a Democratic strategist who spent years mapping the successful strategies of the Right, infamously put together a PowerPoint presentation called “The Conservative Message Machine Money Matrix” and traveled around the country to educate major Progressive leaders and donors about why the Left was failing in election after election. It was Stein’s presentation that spurred creation of Democracy Alliance in early 2005.

Some Progressives are fearful that mimicking the Right, as Democracy Alliance was established to do, will undermine the grassroots component of Progressive politics. This is a severe accusation and Progressive leaders would be wise to seriously consider the consequences of promoting any authoritarian-structured organizational model. Expanding, thus democratizing, the funding base is one potential alternative that some Progressives are starting to promote. At this point, it's too soon to tell what form the new Progressive funding apparatus will take. One thing we know for sure is that the donor community is not the only place of infighting among the Left's leadership.

A similar splinter can be seen within organized labor. On July 25, 2005, two of America's most sizeable and influential unions resigned from the AFL-CIO over what they claim to be "the AFL-CIO's ineffectiveness in stopping the long-term decline in union membership and [their failure at] making labor more relevant to the challenges of the modern workplace." (Edsall 2005) The split involved the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which at 1.7 million members was the largest single union within the AFL-CIO, as well as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, comprised of 1.3 million members. Like the fundamental concerns among donors over the tactics of Democracy Alliance, the defection within organized labor was largely ignited by a philosophical disagreement over strategy – Andy Stern's SEIU claimed that John Sweeney's AFL-CIO was too focused on winning particular elections and not seriously committed to long-term membership building and mobilization. This split, which radically ruptures the fifty-year old labor federation, is projected to have negative consequences on Progressive politics and the ability of organized labor to work in concert.

Overall, the Left has some serious challenges to overcome – from infighting among labor to the lack of a clear set of Progressive principles needed to mobilize a new social movement.

There have been serious concerns raised about whether the Left can, or even *should*, model the strategies of the Right. This paper contends that the business world offers some important insights for Progressive leaders trying to sort out these very questions.

Business Models for Change

The considerable social and institutional changes that have occurred in America over the past fifty years have had significant impacts on the efficacy of various techniques within both partisan politics and participatory democracy. While the Right has been able to cleverly adapt to declines in traditional civic behavior, the Left has been slow to respond to these shifts. As some members of the Progressive community have gradually awoken from their collective daze (brought on by the stunning Republican resurgence), many Progressive leaders have started to suggest that building a new Progressive movement will be a necessary precursor to regaining political power in an age of citizen apathy and Republican control. Because the Left is not accustomed to the authoritarian structure of the Right, innovative ideas, such as those borrowed from business, could prove useful in the newfound efforts to build a Progressive movement. This paper suggests that the concepts of **branding** and **certification** lend themselves well to political efforts, and could potentially become valuable strategies for Progressives in the coming years.

Developing and Marketing a Progressive Brand

“A brand...is a complex thing. Not only is it the actual product, but it is also the unique property of a specific owner and has been developed over time so as to embrace a set of values and attributes (both tangible and intangible) which meaningfully and appropriately differentiate products which are otherwise very similar.”

-- John Murphy²⁴

Progressive leaders in Washington are buzzing about the term “branding.” In a recent meeting at the Center for American Progress, one senior staff member casually remarked that she would be pleased to make it through a single day without having to talk about branding.²⁵ The buzz around this concept is certainly not without merit. A Progressive brand has the potential to become a very powerful force in American politics, as iconic brands often take on mythic power within our society. According to Oxford Marketing Professor Douglas Holt,

“Iconic brands function like cultural activists, encouraging people to think differently about themselves. The most popular iconic brands are prescient, addressing the leading edges of cultural change. These brands don’t simply evoke benefits, personalities, or emotions. Rather, their myths prod people to reconsider accepted ideas about themselves. The value of a particular myth resides not in the myth itself, but in its alignment with society’s incipient identity desires.” (Holt 2004: 9)

Thus, branding encompasses much more than mere symbolism for a product, service, or idea – it conveys a narrative of value and a sense of identity. Professor Holt points out that branding also conveys a sense of history,

“Consider a new product that a company has just introduced. Although the product has a name, a trademarked logo, unique packaging, and perhaps other unique design features – all aspects that we intuitively think of as the brand – the brand does not yet truly exist. Names, logos, and designs are the material markers of the brand. Because the product does not yet have a history, however, these markers are empty. They are devoid of meaning.” (Holt 2004: 3)

If goods and services in the marketplace can be branded, it seems quite logical to apply branding techniques to political ideas. A Progressive political movement could substantially benefit from a branding campaign, and to some extent, it already has.

²⁴ (Murphy 1990: 2)

²⁵ This meeting took place on December 14, 2005 at the Washington, DC headquarters of Center for American Progress.

The concepts of branding are very similar to those of “framing.” George Lakoff has made waves in Progressive politics with his call for a strategic use of message framing in order to capture public sentiment. According to Lakoff,

“Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing *is* social change. You can’t see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the ‘cognitive unconscious’ – structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense.” (Lakoff 2004)

Framing, like branding, taps into something deeply personal and emotional with the public. It is a component of branding that has recently been applied to politics, yet it does not completely encompass all that branding seeks to accomplish.

In discussing the incredible power of iconic brands, Professor Holt points out the ability of branding to transform individual emotions into collective identities,

“Iconic brands provide extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation. We experience our identities – our self-understanding and aspirations – as intensely personal quests. But when scholars examine consumer identities in the aggregate, they find that desires and anxieties linked to identity are widely shared across a large fraction of a nation’s citizens. These similarities result because people are constructing their identities in response to the same historical changes that influence the entire nation.” (Holt 2004: 6)

The utilization of branding to effectively capture the collective identities of aggregate consumers is well documented, but can this technique really be transferred from the marketplace to the polling place? Professor Holt believes that it can and he goes on to say,

“Cultural branding also applies to other marketed entities that people rely on to express their identity. The most obvious examples are other culture industry products, such as film and television stars, musicians, heroes in novels and on screen, and even cartoon characters. In addition, NGOs, tourist destinations, other places (nations, cities, neighborhoods), social movements, and politicians are all prime candidates for cultural branding.” (Holt 2004: 5)

If branding can work in politics, why have Progressives failed to recognize this potential strategy until now? Why are the current efforts at Progressive branding insufficient?

A major problem with Progressive branding has been that organizations within the movement have tended to support their own niche issue areas above and beyond a collective Progressive identity. In competition for funding, media attention, and interest from elected officials, organizations on the Left have spent considerable attention on marketing campaigns that set them apart from other Progressive groups. Not only do environmental groups compete with other environmental groups for access and money, they compete with groups from all over the Progressive spectrum -- labor groups, choice groups, and social justice groups are just a few examples. There are identifiable reasons for carving out niche identities with the Progressive movement,²⁶ yet research on branding suggests that there are powerful incentives to coalesce into a single marketing identity. To sift through these ideas, it is useful to step outside of the political sphere and look, oddly enough, at the American dairy industry.

The now legendary “Got Milk?” campaign has been credited with reversing a fifteen-year decline in milk consumption. Rather than marketing their individual brands of milk in the marketplace, individual milk processors pooled their money together to finance a series of ads, which were commissioned by the California Milk Processor Board (CMPB) starting 1993. By collecting three cents for every gallon of milk produced, CMPB was able to budget \$23 million per year for marketing milk to Californians – on par with the per-capita advertising budgets for

²⁶ The primary institutional reason for the fragmentation of Progressive group identities is because of the lack of “block grant funding” to organizations within the movement. For more information on the strategic importance of block grants, please see “Lessons from the Right: Saving the Soul of the Environmental Movement.” (Krencicki and Wilson 2005)

the nation's largest pharmaceutical, beer, and automobile brands.²⁷ By branding the concept of “milk,” and marketing it above and beyond any particular milk producer, the CMPB was able to increase overall milk sales across the board.

The lessons associated with “Got Milk?” are important for Progressive politics. By pooling resources to create a common brand with a common feeling and a common set of principles, the Left can begin to overcome its problem of issue fragmentation. It can create a common story to tell to the American people. By identifying with the Progressive brand, organizations can promote their values and agendas by weaving them into a larger narrative. By increasing overall milk consumption, the individual dairy processors all profited from increased sales. By crafting a Progressive brand, the entire Progressive movement can benefit.

Certification: a Collaborative Organizing Tool

In addition to branding, the Progressive movement can learn lessons from the phenomenon of “certification.” Primarily used within the growing field of corporate social responsibility, certification has been a useful tool for linking market pressure to socially and environmentally responsible business practices. Certification has been able to provide companies with a common set of identifiable standards, bring together diverse stakeholders, employ collaborative decision-making processes, and coordinate across sectors. While various

²⁷ http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/case_histories/3000

certification regimes have achieved varying degrees of success,²⁸ the process of certification had unquestionably facilitated new types of relationships between business and civil society.²⁹

An initial attempt at certification can be found in the example of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Established in 1993, the FSC is a private body that offers a market incentive, in the form of a “stamp of approval,” to produce environmentally sustainable forest products. It has set up a system of ten basic principles that logging companies and landowners can commit to in exchange for becoming FSC certified. By willingly agreeing to a set of common principles, stakeholders are able to have access to an important sector of the market. (Cashore 2004)

In addition to embracing common operating principles, the FSC certification process brings together a diverse set of stakeholders to engage in collaborative decision making, across a series of sectors. The institutional structure of the FSC allows for equal representation among stakeholders from the North and South. It is comprised of a three-chamber structure, with environmental, social and economic chambers each having an equal vote in the general assembly. These institutional mandates help to ensure that no single faction within the forest sector can possess disproportionate power or decision-making capabilities. (Cashore 2004)

Forest certification offers some important lessons for non-governmental collaborative organizing. While the FSC is market-driven and Progressive political mobilization would assuredly be driven by other mechanisms (donors being one example), the institutional design of this certification program provides a useful model. By offering incentives for adopting a set of common principles (such as those defined by the Progressive brand), and structuring a

²⁸ Certification regimes have emerged or are in the process of emerging in the fields of forestry, tourism, mining, fisheries, food production, and coffee. (Cashore et al. 2004)

²⁹ Yale Professor Ben Cashore refers to this type of interaction as non-state market-driven governance or NMSD.

collaborative certification body around the concepts of equal participation, the FSC could serve as a very innovative structural model for the emerging Progressive infrastructure.

By combining the business lessons of branding and certification, the Left could create a collective and powerful social movement to counter two of its major enemies – the Conservative Right and, perhaps more importantly, the civic disengagement of the American public. By identifying a set of common Progressive principles and then promoting them through a sophisticated branding and marketing campaign, the Left could inspire broad political support for its agenda. Through crafting an organizational structure modeled on certification bodies, the Progressive movement could become a powerful, yet participatory, political force in American politics.

Conclusion

“There is no hope; but we might be wrong.”
– Slogan of the Ted Turner Foundation³⁰

As the above environmental mantra jokingly suggests, there are many causes for alarm within the Progressive movement and, indeed, within American democracy itself. Steady declines in civic participation have had major impacts on partisan politics and representative democracy and the Left has been slow to respond to these shifts. Over the past year, we have witnessed tremendous infighting among key donors and within the Progressive linchpin of organized labor. There is broad agreement that the Left needs to construct an infrastructure to combat that of the Right, but there is little agreement on what such an infrastructure would look like.

³⁰ The Turner Foundation is focused on environmental work. (Dowie 2001: 265)

This paper suggests that Progressives could learn some useful lessons from the business world. The careful application of branding and certification could pose an alternative path to the Democracy Alliance model of mimicking the authoritarian structure of the Right. Although it is much too complex to address in detail in this paper, the “Progressive Synergy Project”³¹ strives to facilitate the design of a collaborative certification program, aimed at building an inclusive and synergistic progressive coalition, as well as working to strengthen the coalition through the application of a collaboratively designed Progressive brand.

At this point, there is no way of knowing whether or not these business tools can be successfully applied to American politics. With all of the societal and institutional barriers to reinvigorating the Progressive movement, it is certainly easy to give up hope – but to quote the Turner Foundation, we might be wrong. We must remain open to innovative ideas because, like any reasonable hypothesis, we will not know whether or not the tools of branding and certification will work in politics unless we test them.

Regardless of what techniques the Left employs in constructing a new political movement, it must address the pressing problem of civic apathy in this country. Progressives must speak to the hearts and minds of the people and work to inspire public involvement and civic duty. They must work to craft a movement and they must do so above and beyond restoring their own issue-driven agenda. Democracy is a Progressive value – one that depends upon an active and engaged polity, and a collaborative Progressive movement with a clear and inspirational vision may be the best hope that America has for achieving a truly engaged citizenry.

³¹ www.progressivesynergy.org

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