

# After the Fall: An Autopsy of the Midterms

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Surveying the wreckage of his party's 2014 election campaign, Howard Dean, on the November 9th *Meet the Press*, was candid, with such sound bytes as, "'Where the hell is the Democratic party ... You got to stand for something if you want to win.'" The Republicans' message was, "We're not Obama." What was the Democrats' message? "Oh well, we really aren't either."

Translation: "Get my message; we need a message."

No matter how hard the Democrats tried to demonize their Republican rivals—the data in several states show a far higher rate of negative ads from Democrats—they couldn't match the Death Star ferocity of the GOP message attack: the failed presidency of Barack Obama. That energized the Republican base. Nothing so potent was tendered to bring out the Democratic base vote, especially among white workers.

In election eve comments, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka placed the blame on the victors' having "enough big-money backers to drown out the truth." He did see hope in a number of ballot issues that directly aid working people, especially raises in the minimum wage (Arkansas, Illinois, Nebraska) but also including mandating open school board meetings (Colorado), a right to vote amendment that proponents say precludes voter ID requirements (Illinois), guaranteed birth-control prescription coverage (Illinois), a millionaires' tax (Illinois), and repeal of the automatic gas-sales tax increase (Massachusetts). Many passed in the same states that swung to the Republicans.

"The defining narrative of this election was confirmation, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Americans are desperate for a new economic life," Trumka said. "In way too many elections, they got a false choice. In these very difficult times, they did not get a genuine economic alternative to their unhappiness and very real fear of the future. But when voters *did* have a chance to choose their future directly—through ballot measures—their decisions are unmistakable."

One such opportunity happened in Richmond, Cal., where the Richmond Progressive Alliance ran candidates for city office against a slate owned, in effect, by Chevron, the city's main employer. Chevron red-baited the progressives, spending \$3 million on a whispering campaign suggesting one of the insurgents was gender-challenged and another was "a dangerous anarchist" because he took part in nearby Oakland's Occupy action.

That pricey disinformation gambit didn't work; the Alliance is a group with a 10-year history of recognized successes, including being instrumental in raising the minimum wage; cleaning the air—largely by wrenching agreements out of Chevron; lowering energy bills; and ending the police practice of driver's license checkpoints. Among its many campaign issues: saving the local medical center, fighting for teachers' rights and better schools, and instituting job training for youth and other local residents at the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab. And what is singularly important: it's a 24/7 operation; they don't fold up between elections, but serve as the political base for elected officials committed to social change instead of corporate control. As the Alliance's basic literature says, "It is between elections that corporations and entrenched interests have the most influence in bending government to their way."

A giant October rally saw more than 500 attendees pack the Richmond Civic Center—to meet the candidates and hear Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who endorsed the slate and predicted the Alliance and its grassroots work would prove a model for other cities. The three council members

plus the mayor, a well-known area independent running on their slate, are now Richmond's elected leadership.

### **Few Working-Class Issues Prominent in Campaigns**

It would seem that, in principle, Trumka was right about working people reliably voting their class interests when those interests are starkly drawn. So why weren't working families' needs front and center on candidate appeals? Why wasn't wage stagnation pinned on the GOP? Or Wall Street banking theft? Where were the critical living wage demands? And where was organized labor in making these class issues part of the Democrats' campaign? Why didn't it disabuse the Democrats' notion that keeping their heads down and waiting for the GOP to implode is not a strategy; it's barely a tactic.

### **Weakness in Liberal Election Punditry**

Much of the center-left commentary on the election follows a pattern begun soon after the 2008 election, to wit that President Obama should grow a spine. Writing in *Daily Kos*, Laurence Lewis advances the incontestable, that "Democrats have to reclaim the mantle of being the people's party, and they must fight any Republican efforts that will widen the income gap, undermine civil and human rights, or loosen protections on workers, consumers, the environment, and the historically and institutionally disadvantaged."

Good sentiment, but as advice it's like demanding a castrato reproduce. It's that big-tent mantra that requires at least rhetorically satisfying such disparate agencies as Wall Street hedge funders, donors, labor unions, tenant farmers and tenants, landowners and landlords, feminists and fathers' rights advocates, and an agglomeration of interests that not only can't agree on a common agenda, but are in many ways antagonistic. Even the need to battle corporate rapacity in the long-term interest of business itself isn't shared by many in the party's higher circles, either for ideological, economic, or opportunistic reasons.

Add the post- Great Society politics holding that election success comes from courting the always-in-play statistical middle of the electorate—especially when traditional New Deal-like supporters and union leaders have nowhere else to go absent massive changes in constitutional and election law, and the idea of this party moving toward populism in anything but rhetoric is stillborn. Then there's the baleful electoral notion that you go after existing voters as safe bets instead of new ones who could be wild cards, and you have a lose-lose scenario.

### **Unions Stump for Democrats Who Might As Well Be Mainstream Republicans**

Case in point: New York governor Andrew Cuomo is the state's most business-friendly and worker-bashing top official since Nelson Rockefeller. AFT President Randi Weingarten had it right, if late, when she pointedly assured members in a memo posted on the union's website days before the election that "I am deeply disappointed and appalled by Gov. Cuomo's recent statement that public education is a 'monopoly' that needs to be busted up. She went on to say that his was language more appropriate for "hedge fund millionaires, right-wing privatizers, and tea partiers," and it was "heartbreaking to see Cuomo aping them." She distinguished Cuomo from better "gubernatorial candidates [in other states] who unequivocally support public education, respect teachers, and will fight for the investment our schools need."

That's not how the pro-labor Working Families Party saw it, as it hand-delivered Cuomo its endorsement, despite a revolt by grassroots members backing Fordham University law professor Zephyr Teachout. The neophyte candidate went on to strongly challenge Cuomo in the Democratic

primary, garnering some 35 percent of the state primary vote.

The party endorsed Cuomo because key unions in the party didn't just agree to differ for the nonce and work together after the election; they made plain that if Cuomo was denied the nomination, they would walk, find a new party, and take their money with them. So the WFP campaigned without mentioning its own candidate. Its ace in the hole was on the order of "never mind the candidate—it's the party's ballot status that matters."

One high-placed source in the multi-state SEIU 1199 put the best face on what, in any other context, would be blackmail, saying that with healthcare funding in crisis, "the union has to get a seat at the governor's table" in order to have influence. Assuming it could influence outcomes—never a gimme—the obvious question is why the union simply didn't take a four-month sabbatical from the party (especially when it was clear Cuomo was unbeatable) without threatening to junk a 16-year party relationship. "Well, you know 1199; we don't play nice," the source said, making it clear the comment was not for attribution.

If there was a protest vote against the neoliberal governor, it went to the Greens, whose statewide total of some 200,000 is impressive, especially for an underfunded campaign and a skeletal party whose major assets were credible top candidates, some facility with new media, and just enough cash to do robocalls.

### **Previewing a Congressional GOP Majority**

What can we expect from this new political bestiary? The most obvious things a GOP-dominated Senate will task itself with is a further erosion of, if not full-scale assault on, Obamacare and a trench war over federal appointments, from federal judges to cabinet members to regulatory agencies (including the NLRB). At this writing, the lame duck session in the House is expected to block Obama from permanently filling the remaining vacancy on the District of Columbia Circuit court, which, given its location, frequently rules on federal regulations and enforcement agencies, including those overseeing labor relations, health and safety, and environmental cases.

But if some mutated bipartisanship emerges, corporate-tax reform (the kind that mean fewer taxes for corporations), deficit reduction, and federal highway funding (but not mass transit) are the future at best. If not, get ready for a brawl over approving the Keystone XL pipeline, an environmental nightmare, or countering the nativist swing against immigrants that fires opposition to the Dream Act.

Ironically, labor may benefit from a Republican Congress in at least one area: trade policy. Many in the GOP don't like fast-tracking the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement either—and labor could find its new best friend in Tea Party loyalists. Proof maybe of Marx's maxim that history does repeat, "the second time as farce."

### **The Toll**

So it isn't hard to explain the GOP's surge. Added to the demonizing of Obama, it was a low-turnout election where just 35 percent of registered voters cast ballots, meaning (for starters) that poor people and students didn't vote in proportion to their size in the population. Voting was also down among key progressive constituencies: African-Americans, Hispanics, and unmarried women. By contrast, the proportion of voters 65 and over rose from 16 percent in 2012 to 22 percent this time. Then there's the traditional midterm voter profile—a white male, married, older, no-flies-on-us cohort that trends conservative and votes regularly.

Sure, voter suppression in some states effectively scaled back Democratic turnout. Two High Court

rulings untying campaign contributions meant that ideologically driven corporate heads, such as the Waltons and the Koch Brothers, had a *carte blanche* to target close races.

The media played its part too, treating the contests as a grand guignol and the news hook as a series of dog races and campaign blunders. But the big reason Democrats lost was because they campaigned on little more than the lesser evil fallback that “we may be bad, but they are worse.” With wages frozen, working-class homes devalued, a wealth gap that rivals the widest since the Depression, and war news that only makes Obama look weak, it was unlikely Democrats could win on a campaign that implied to voters “you’ve never had it so good.”

## **The Quality of the Elected**

Here’s a selected look at what that strategy delivered:

In Illinois, an epic battle pitted a GOP plutocrat against a Democratic kleptocrat, with equity investor and Chicago business fixture Bruce Rauner ousting incumbent Democrat Gov. Pat Quinn in a race that featured a mountain of mudslinging and some \$100 million spent between the two candidates. The Democrats missed targeting one of Rauner’s campaign promises, to “create right-to-work zones: and allow local communities to decide whether workers must join a union in order to get a job.”

For their part, the unions were slow to mobilize an army of volunteers for Quinn, who was no day at a Lake Michigan beach for working people. AFSCME and the AFT in particular never forgot his 2012 move to cut public pension costs, force government workers to pay more, raise the retirement age, and scale back cost-of-living adjustments. “Bottom line, Quinn was just not well-liked,” one senior union staff member told me, *sotto voce*.

And what really is the difference when the 57-year-old Rauner, a longtime grandee of the blue-blood Commercial Club of Chicago, went on to name Democrat Bill Daly to head his transition team. The former JPMorgan Chase investment banker, and Obama and Rahm Emanuel consigliere, was named by must-read *Chicago Reader* columnist Ben Joravsky, “as much, or more, responsible for our state’s financial woes as anyone else in or around Illinois. Or at least the Chicago part of it.” Joravsky called Daly “a consummate insider whose firm once made millions managing state pensions funds during Governor Blago’s reign.”

The same can be said about Massachusetts, where voters preferred GOP candidate Charlie Baker over Democrat and incumbent attorney general Martha Coakley. Baker, a former state budget director and health plan executive, was named by the *Boston Globe* in a 2010 investigation as singularly responsible for immense cost overruns in Boston’s “Big Dig,” a waterfront tunnel and bridge complex that replaced the decaying elevated Central Artery roadway along Boston Harbor. Originally expected to cost \$3 billion, the final cost maxed out at nearly \$15 billion, with interest alone coming to \$7 billion, which will not be paid off until 2038. That exposé was enough to keep Baker out of the governor’s mansion in 2010, but not this time, Nor was it enough to keep him from winning the *Boston Globe*’s endorsement.

## **So What’s the Problem?**

Among the difficulties in divining a future for the main parties is that the United States doesn’t have parties. It has agglomerations of interests and individual operators who make a career out of fashioning connections to national and state candidates. Sociologically, the party is 435 discrete election machines with paid staff and volunteers. You can’t join the Democratic or Republican Parties, but you can enroll in a club or wear a button or throw a party for a candidate. There’s no

role for anyone else between elections. These are not mass parties but voting blocks, whose supporters have little capacity outside of money for influencing party directions, though the poorer of us can maybe influence officeholders and promote insurgents on the most local and least powerful of levels. Where does democracy fit?

That's a question the late Peter Mair raises in *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (Verso, 2013). Without reducing his argument to a tweet, his analysis holds that even the mass socialist parties in Europe are no longer democratic in the sense that a Demos decides policy or that the parties are vehicles for voice so that elected officials even hear them, which largely explains the collapsing rates of voter participation across the continent, too, only not yet as extreme as in the U.S. The effect, then, is not just silencing voters but turning elected officials into, at best, quality control monitors of "experts," read policy analysts and engineers, who administer the state. The parties are left with barely discernable differences over how to manage capitalism in general and an austerity regime in particular.

Is Mair right? Do politicians have a circumscribed range of choices? Agree or disagree, a better initial question is what is labor doing to make them choose? Look at how much time and money is spent on politicking and how little on organizing, both on the job and in the wider communities over community vs. neighborhood issues, too. The two don't have to be counterpoised, but for all intents and purposes they are. Another conundrum. David Rolf, the president of a highly successful Seattle-based healthcare affiliate of the SEIU thinks unions on every level are a dead parrot whose handlers can only hope to pass on what resources remain to newer, informal associations not mired in contract unionism. As he told *The Washington Post's* Harold Meyerson, "If right-to-work passing in Michigan isn't Lenin's statue coming down in Red Square, I don't know what is."

Add that to the changing nature of work, where an entire generation faces the possibility of never holding a full-time job, let alone a career with benefits, and it's clear that if unions are to survive, they or their successors will have to locate or help build solidarity in a once-more fragmented working class that has no common workplace or even common, steady employer. Unfortunately, like his mentor Andy Stern, Huff (?) doesn't drop the service model for organizing; he just switches the service model from union functions to organizing. The model is still one of condescending saviors and not working-class self-activity.

### **What's Next?**

We know what labor wants to do in the short run. Trumka announced a Raising Wages Summit set for January, which will formulate plans "to hold all 2016 candidates accountable for improving the lives of working families and will lay the groundwork for state and local legislative campaigns in 2015." It's engaged in a campaign against Walmart and the Walton family, gunning up support for a \$15 per hour minimum wage and full-time work as the norm. It is also working with the Clinton Global Initiative to "find innovative ways to create good jobs that support workers and their families." A post-election release reads, "The AFL-CIO is ready to work with anyone—business, government, investors—who wants to create good jobs and help restore America's middle class and challenge policies that stand in the way of giving America the chance to go back to work."

You don't have to be a Karl Marx aficionado to know that last formulation is problematic. Despite the excellent work of the union-environmental Blue-Green coalition to control for methane gas (a far greater atmospheric danger than is carbon dioxide)—and the unions' interest in it as a job generator for replacing corroded cast iron pipe is clear and right—that confluence of mind and interest between labor and other social movements is so far the exception. More typical of the union movement's regimen is backing business, pushing its agenda full throttle if it contains any hint of jobs. Given that the Federation also cooperates with environmental groups, including the Sierra

Club, on mutual projects, where does fracking fit in? Or construction jobs, where Class A office towers, coming with bottomless budgets, run against plans for more modest and less profitable affordable housing and schools. How can labor balance the two and still claim unity? What will be prioritized?

So what to do? Much of the answer lies in recognizing how disparate, and even conflicting, are the needs of the more than 60 national unions. There isn't much of a common agenda that the Democrats were even obliged to promote, especially in a midterm election where candidates campaign on discrete local issues and personalities. In the best of times, labor's ability, thus far, in getting the Democrats themselves to run on consistent working-class themes is like herding pre-schoolers, or cats.

That's at least unless three things happen—none the shock of the new to *New Labor Forum* readers. The union movement has to:

- ratchet up its demands, bring union power out of isolation at the bargaining table or whispered into the ears of legislators and back to the workplace, where it has teeth;
- make common cause with the entire working class and not simply the organized sector, no matter how generalizable it thinks that what's good for members is good for all;
- mobilize new voters not just in seasonal GOTV efforts but regularly. And not just as voters, but as activists.

Fear of a reactionary specter only gets you so far, especially when the sitting president, and not the party out of power, is widely seen—fairly or not—as a deer in the headlights, and neoliberal Democratic governors are more at home promoting the needs of the privileged .01 percent of the population than with those shared by 99.9 percent of their own voters.

Then there's the very real possibility that Hillary Clinton will be the next Democratic candidate for president. That way can't be the way to build a New Jerusalem.

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