

On Electoral Reforms, Sewer Socialism, and Concern-Trolling Technocrats

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One of the many great things about having a card-carrying socialist elected to a major municipal office [in Seattle] is that we can start to have good arguments. Peter Lavenia started one with me a couple of weeks ago and I'm going to argue back.

But before I do, it's important to stress that, like any other good argument, this one is based on many points of agreement, including on the following four points:

Most fundamentally, we agree that a socialist transformation of the political and economic system is absolutely necessary for all of the obvious reasons: e.g. for the human species to avert environmental collapse, to stop wasting its remaining resources on senseless wars, to reverse the continuing degradation of the living standards of the vast majority of the population etc. Socialism or barbarism no longer is a deep truth: it is a trivial fact of life.

Second, we agree that this transformation, if it occurs, will be achieved through some combination of social movement pressure (street protest, boycotts, sit-ins, general strikes and other forms of direct action) and independent political action expressed within existing bourgeois democratic channels, which is to say by competing in and winning elections.

Third, we also agree that achieving the second of these requires the development of an independent political party running potentially winning candidates. Initially these will be at local levels, mainly in what Lavenia accurately characterizes as Democratic fiefdoms, localities where Democratic machines exercise unchallenged political control. Eventually, building on the Bernie Sanders model, they ascend to higher office; though unlike Sanders, we will need to insure that the party's future will not be sacrificed on the altar of one politician's pursuit of power.

Fourth, Peter argues that the success of these will depend on various sorts of statutory reforms, of which he lists four: proportional representation, removing ballot access barriers, public campaign funding and permanent voter registration. It is at this point where our argument begins. Given the subject matter, the following will require what will be for many an excessively detailed discussion of statutory minutiae. Those who have the taste for this kind of discussion are welcomed to read on, though I will observe here that this — i.e. a conversation which will be limited to those well-steeped in technocracy, its insular jargon and norms — is itself a problem, as I will discuss at the end.

For those who are not up to speed on what Peter is referring to, ballot access law applicable in most states mandates filing a number of signatures amounting to a percentage of the total vote for a given office. For state-wide or federal office, this can be large; Peter mentions 15,000 signatures for gubernatorial runs in New York. This does seem intimidating, but given that we both agree that our immediate concern should be local races, here what is significant is that the barriers in question are far less onerous: in small races a single digit number of signatures can be sufficient — accomplished by asking members of one's own family to sign. In larger local races a few hundred is all that's necessary. And as anyone who has ever worked on a petition drive knows, these can be achieved by setting up a table in front of a supermarket can during a weekend afternoon.

Once the party is in a position to compete in state and federal level races, a network of locally elected officeholders will have been established. This necessarily brings with it a system of volunteers and in some cases paid staff (loyal supporters rewarded through patronage positions in government). With these forces at our disposal, obtaining thousands of signatures is no longer a major obstacle: it is a matter of mobilizing a few teams for a few weekends of work. That it appears as such now is a reflection of political naiveté and an inability to see what kind of organization local victories quickly bootstrap into existence.

Furthermore, this is one of the many areas where a little knowledge is dangerous in that those taking for granted the consensus position that ballot access laws present an insurmountable barrier will be intimidated from moving forward with their campaigns. Their negative assessment will be reinforced by Democratic Party operatives, often masquerading as neutral technocrats, who have a vested interest in promoting the Democrats' presumed invincibility. Similarly disparaging will be ultra-left wing cynics parroting the childish slogan "revolution is the only solution" in blissful disregard of the last decade of Latin American history, assuming that radical transformations cannot be achieved through established electoral channels. A left wing party will need to repudiate demobilizing cynicism whether it emerges from concern-trolling Democrats or delusionary neo-Maoists.

To a lesser degree, the same logic applies to the other categories Peter identifies. Peter is, of course, correct that a system of proportional representation will greatly aid in achieving representation of minority parties. But given that an insurgent left party is the de facto second party in the great majority of large cities, a large number of victories are ripe for the taking — as the Sawant campaign showed; and now, not after statutory reforms have been achieved. The fear which is registering among Democrats is an indication of how deeply they are aware of their vulnerability, even without any alteration to the current system. We should be too.

Peter is also correct that an insurgent party would benefit from campaign finance reform and it may well be that certain candidacies will lose to corporate-funded Democrats without it. But it should be clear that at present strong candidates, like Sawant (and previously Matt Gonzalez), were able to raise six figure sums having solicited contributions nationally from those interested in helping third parties to obtain a local foothold. Once the number of viable candidacies reaches a critical mass, it may be the case that these financial resources will be tapped out. But we are a long way from reaching this point. And, counterbalancing this, as more third party candidates are successful, the pool of those excited about the possibility of a viable party materializing will likely expand thus making possible the financing of more major local races. In any case, given that most campaigns will be small and will require only token financing (as did mine) candidates should not be deterred from running based on the assumption that they will not be able to purchase what is necessary to run competitive local campaigns.

Finally, with respect to Peter's comment on voter registration, while it is likely that a developing left third party will benefit from increased participation, it is important to understand why. Democratic machines, their official opposition to Republican voter suppression tactics notwithstanding, benefit from and actively seek limited voter turn-out as it confers disproportionate influence on the voting blocs which they have control of: patronage appointments, their friends, families and business associates, unions, churches etc. At the same time, it is important to recognize that even under existing statutes, voter registration is easily obtained, and a political party that undertakes a registration drive can count on greatly increased participation. Furthermore, those voters it has registered are generally grateful and often become supporters on this basis, as was my experience in running for office. Voter registration within the present dysfunctional system should be seen as a

central component of campaigns, one which works to our advantage.

I'll conclude my response to Peter with an anecdote from my time as an alderman. When I was elected, there was an opportunity for me to pursue a statutory change of the sort Peter is advocating: the New Haven charter review commission which meets every ten years was scheduled to convene and, through having been granted an ex officio seat, it would have been possible for me to advocate for various sorts of electoral reforms in New Haven. I remember at the time being contacted by Rob Richie who had just written a book on electoral reform and was pushing for Instant Run-off Voting as a solution to the spoiler problem which he argued had posed an insurmountable barrier to the growth of alternative parties. While I agreed with him that IRV was important, I chose not to prioritize it, which is to say that I chose not to make the commitment to spend the numerous hours and political capital which would have been necessary to achieve it.

My reasons for not doing so were, first, that New Haven was and is a quintessential machine town, so it was not clear what electoral positions would be gained, at least in the immediate future, by IRV. Yes, pushing for it so would bring extra visibility to the IRV issue, but this would ultimately be a symbolic measure, one which would have little immediate impact on the day to day lives of our constituents.

This brings up a second consideration, which is that elected officials need to make a calculation about what sorts of issues will be most likely to resonate and which will have potential for helping to attract a broader base of support to the party among those communities most victimized by the current system. To make this point, I'll mention the issue which I decided to make my first priority on taking office: illegal dumping. It turns out that suburbanites, in a transparent display of racialized contempt, were, quite literally treating New Haven as a trash dump, loading their SUVs and pick-ups with household and construction waste and depositing it on New Haven streets and in our parks. The NHPD, mostly staffed by out of town cops, turned a blind eye to the trashing of public spaces and had recently removed the one officer who had been assigned to monitor illegal dumping.

In fact, a dumper had been recently apprehended by a park ranger and he turned out to be a sergeant in the Connecticut State Police. Surprising no one, he was let off with a small fine, after pleading to a misdemeanor.

And so rather than IRV, my first policy objective, one that took many hours (in a part time, unpaid capacity) to advance, was to require that the NHPD restore the position of the cop who had been assigned to this beat and, subsequently, to toughen the punishment for those caught.

I won't continue the story here since the point should be clear. We need to be moving on a 21st century variant of sewer socialism (opposing illegal dumping being a near textbook quality example) one which speaks directly to the needs of the overwhelming majority who are the primary victims of politics as usual. Mobilizing and galvanizing this constituency, as Sawant is already doing, should be our first priority. Statutory manipulations, of the sort which required the 1000 words above to describe, let alone argue for convincingly, should be left to the academic seminar rooms, at least for now. When we have developed as a party, we can expect our own cadre of academics who will be arguing our case from the inside. At present, academic political science is rife with Democratic Party apologists posing as "objective" technocratic liberals. We need to steer clear of them, and of the issues which they promote as central to a third party agenda (often on bad faith grounds).

Hopefully, two years from now Peter will be in a position where, as a member of the Albany City Council, he will be weighing these sorts of priorities which I faced as an alderman. I have little doubt that he will come down on the right side of them.

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