After the Elections: Which Way for the Left?

written by Thomas Harrison | January 13, 2013

IN CONTRAST TO THE INTENSE EUPHORIA so widespread in 2008, the dominant emotion in the run-up to the 2012 election was fear, a well-founded fear of Republican savagery. Once the results were in, rather than entertaining hopes for a brighter future, most Democratic voters were probably just relieved. Obama was swept back into office chiefly by a coalition of blacks, Latinos, unionized workers, youth, and low income Americans—that is, by the very people who have suffered most from the policies of his administration. For them, as for almost everybody else apart from the one percent, a future determined by the policies of austerity, neoliberalism and war is a grim one indeed.

There were some important signs of a leftward shift in the electorate. Three states legalized same-sex marriage (a fourth, Minnesota defeated an anti-gay marriage constitutional amendment), and two voted to permit recreational use of marijuana. Tea Party Republicans took a beating, and every candidate but one that was endorsed and funded by the loathsome rightwing casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson went down to defeat—as did the outrageous misogynists Todd Aikin and Richard Mourdock. The ultra-wealthy donors to Republican Super PACs are apparently devastated by the electoral results. Tammy Baldwin, an out lesbian and progressive, and Elizabeth Warren, who has a reputation for militant consumer advocacy and sharp criticism of Wall Street, won election to the Senate. And it was encouraging that African-Americans and Latinos responded to Republican voter suppression efforts by turning out in impressive numbers.

The overall turnout was relatively high by U.S. standards—60 percent. Despite that the "party of nonvoters" remains the largest; some did not go to polls because they live in solidly blue states: most are young and lower income, with a large proportion of Hispanics. Polls show that nonvoters lean left politically by around two to one.

But this shift to the left will not automatically affect government policy. In fact, without militant struggle by labor and social movements, Obama's second term will doubtless look pretty much like his first. The far right will probably recover from its setback this fall and continue to grow in the absence of a leftwing alternative. Moreover, the Democratic Party will remain firmly committed to the interests of the one percent; the presence of Baldwin, Warren, and a few more progressives will have little or no effect on the Administration's course. The White House and the Democrats' congressional leadership—not to mention Democratic funders—regard the party's left wing as a somewhat deranged nuisance that is, however, usually easy to contain. It will take the pressure of a mass upheaval from outside the party to wring any even moderately significant concessions to popular needs from this Administration.

Obama lost no time after the election was over to start negotiating a "grand bargain" with the GOP to cut the deficit at the expense of entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, in return for very modest tax increases on the rich. Any trade-off of this kind will be a grand swindle, not a grand bargain, because the idea of reciprocity in a society riven by grotesque inequality is ludicrous. Its only purpose is to apply a patina of "fairness" to a brutally one-sided austerity regime, and austerity is Obama's number one domestic priority.

There are probably few progressives who are naive enough to believe that Obama will now feel obliged to govern in the interests of those who returned him to office with their campaigning and votes. But is Glenn Greenwald right to predict that "inebriated with love and gratitude for Obama for having vanquished the evil Republican villains, they will follow their beloved superhero wherever he

goes with even more loyalty than before" (*The Guardian*, "Obama and Progressives: What Will Liberals Do with Their Election Victory?" Nov. 7, 2012)? Or will progressives heed calls by *The Nation*, Paul Krugman, and others to "hold Obama's feet to the fire," to compel him to focus on jobs rather than the deficit, to resist any cuts to entitlement programs, to tax the rich?

Whether it was right to vote for Obama, if only to prevent a Romney presidency, or wrong, the question is, what are we going to do now? One problem with those on the left who urged us to vote for Obama "without illusions" is that they usually resorted to minimizing his crimes—that is, to sowing illusions. An extreme example is Tom Hayden, who wrote: "History will show that the first term was better than most progressives now think" ("Saving Obama, Saving Ourselves," *Common Dreams*, Nov. 17, 2012). Hayden goes so far as to criticize Paul Krugman for claiming that the stimulus was inadequate, and he accuses Obama's leftist critics of "white blindness." Hayden even defends Obama's two-year timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan: "He knows that Afghanistan is a lost cause, though this cannot be acknowledged and dealt with during the election season."

Hayden was not the only one to suggest that refusing to vote for Obama was a frivolous exercise in self-indulgence by middle-class white radicals. Bill Fletcher and Carl Davidson ("How the Left Can Become a True Political Force to be Reckoned With," *Alternet Viewpoint*, Nov. 13, 2012) insisted that Obama's policies were "not the issue" and characterized the election as a "referendum on demographics" (meaning not entirely clear), accusing those who might demur about voting for Obama of being "out of touch." For them minorities and the poor are "realistic" to believe that they must stick with the Democrats. But how realistic is it for the most oppressed to vote for a party that almost abolished welfare, supports mass incarceration and capital punishment and pushes job-destroying globalization? Minorities and the poor have been more victimized than anyone else by Obama's collusion in a grossly unjust system.

Obama's Record

IN FACT, IT'S HARD TO OVERESTIMATE the damage caused by Obama's policies, both at home and abroad. For one thing, the domination of financial elites over American society is now more absolute than ever. To the relentless grinding down of working people under years of Republican and neoliberal Democratic rule has been added the misery of millions, victims of the Great Recession, who have lost their jobs and homes and been left by the government essentially to fend for themselves—that, and a vicious assault on public employees, enabled and sometimes spearheaded by Democratic officeholders at every level.

Writing in *Salon* ("The Progressive Case Against Obama," Oct. 27, 2012), Matt Stoller charted the widening gulf since 2008 between corporate profits and home equity, the "main store of savings for Americans who have savings." Under Obama, profits have recovered since 2008, but home equity levels have not—an unprecedented divergence. In effect, Stoller says, Obama has made property rights for the rich "immune from challenge or market forces," while the property rights of debtors "increasingly exist solely at the pleasure of the powerful." He shows that whereas under Bush 65 cents of every dollar of income growth went to the top one percent, under Obama it was 93 cents. David Bromwich observed (*Nation of Change*, Nov. 17, 2012 [correction: Aug. 19, 2012]), "redistribution of wealth and power more than three decades in the making has now been carved into the system and given the stamp of permanence. Only a Democratic president, and one associated in the public mind (however wrongly) with the fortunes of the poor, could have accomplished such a reversal with such sickening completeness."

Arguably, U.S. foreign policy under Obama is even more militarized, more arrogantly imperial than it was under Bush. Bromwich, in the same piece, argues that Obama, together with Bush, has presided over a new historical stage in U.S. governance characterized by vastly increased "force projection" abroad and a powerfully enhanced national security state of secrecy, surveillance, "kill lists," and indefinite detention.

Environmentalists know that the Obama administration has been aggressively indifferent to global warming. Obama endorses hydro-fracking, natural gas in place of coal, the tar sands pipeline, nuclear power, and oil drilling in both the Arctic and the Gulf of Mexico. As Naomi Klein has pointed out, ("Capitalism vs. the Climate," *The Nation,* Nov. 28, 2011) real solutions to the climate crisis—not merely recycling and buying green products—are antithetical to "free market" dogmas, to which the Democrats cling as much as the Republicans, albeit usually in a more temperate fashion. Klein explains that only collectivist measures might make a difference: heavy investment in rail transportation, large-scale development of renewable energy, and, above all, planning based on the common good, not profitability. That would mean a major assault on corporate "rights" and priorities, an assault that obviously would be fiercely resisted and probably could be overcome only by nationalization. The Obama Administration’s treatment of the banksters and hedge fund managers should make it pretty clear that a serious challenge to corporate prerogatives—let alone nationalization—is simply not on the table for the Democrats.

The policies of Obama and the Democratic Party cannot be understood in terms of "spinelessness" and "capitulation" to corporations and the military, nor as opportunistic bidding for the votes of conservatives and centrists. Democrats have been abandoning the politics of statist liberalism, of regulated capitalism, since the 1970s. Except for a small and thoroughly marginalized left wing, they have long embraced the elite neoliberal consensus of free markets, privatization, reduced government spending, and low taxes on the rich. Democrats may eschew the explicit racism, sexism, and homophobia so rampant among Republicans, they may "feel our pain," in the unctuous words of Bill Clinton, but they are as committed as their GOP rivals to the health and profitability of a heartless and massively destructive economic system—and they are equally certain that "There Is No Alternative."

The bulk of the U.S. left continues to believe that there is in fact no alternative to its perpetual subordination to the Democrats, to the politics of lesser evilism. But if that is so, it may as well give up any hope of substantially cutting bloated military budgets, ending the continuum of imperial interventions, reviving a strong labor movement, really addressing climate change, ending poverty, offering quality education to all children, establishing a national system of free medical care—or even saving the remnants of the New Deal and the Great Society. Things are bad enough already,

but they will get worse unless and until the left takes the first steps down the road of political independence.

A Latent Third Party

THERE HAS BEEN NO SHORTAGE of evidence over the past couple of years that vast numbers of people are fed up and willing to fight back—the Wisconsin uprising, the Occupy movement, and the Chicago teachers' strike being the most dramatic examples. For a while, Occupy looked like an unofficial third party; it managed to electrify the nation and the world, winning the sympathy of many millions. It eclipsed the Tea Party and almost overnight forced the national debate to center on inequality, jobs, and housing rather than taxes and "Big Government." Occupy gave us a glimpse of the potential for bringing a radical critique of the status quo into the living rooms of millions of Americans and inspiring hope.

But Occupiers showed virtually no interest in helping to create that third party. Driven out of public spaces by massive police actions, apparently in coordination with the Justice Department, and undoubtedly undermined by the perceived imperative to reelect Obama, Occupy faded from the scene; by late 2012 very little remained of this once powerful movement. Had it survived as a major independent and critical presence in the months leading up to the election, Occupy might at least have prevented it from degenerating into an almost issueless contest. Occupy's dramatic intervention in the Hurricane Sandy crisis may have breathed new life into the movement; but grassroots outrage at the vicious inequalities exposed by the storm cries out for radical *political* expression.

Jill Stein and the Green Party ran a highly principled campaign. Stein was arrested repeatedly for trying to get into the presidential debates, and she rightly refused to pursue a "safe states" strategy; real independence means that you must challenge Democrats (as well as Republicans, of course) wherever you can. The results—0.3 percent—were disappointing but predictable. The Greens have performed the indispensable service of keeping the idea of independent political action by the left alive, but by themselves they cannot begin to mobilize the forces that are needed for a creditable third party movement.

Starting under the Clinton Administration, progressives' disgust with the politics of the New Democrats spurred a wave of third party sentiment, but that wave has ebbed considerably since Obama came into office. Difficult though it seems at this moment to once again raise the idea of an independent party of the left, however, we cannot simply wait for a new groundswell. The initiative needs to be taken now, not to immediately proclaim a new political party but to begin laying the foundation for it.

In the first place, as already noted, that means challenging the myth that supporting Obama and the Democrats is a practical way to defend the Ninety-Nine Percent and promote a progressive agenda. Even if they voted for Obama—and the overwhelming majority did, of course—a great many progressive Americans sense that the Democrats offer no way out and that lesser-evilism is a trap. Such people are probably not yet numerous enough to form a left electoral alternative to the Democrats that could win the support of masses of people. But their numbers are far from negligible.

One debilitating idea that independent-minded leftists should definitely resist is that elections, and especially presidential elections, do not matter. Related to this is the notion that electoral action is a pointless distraction from the really important activity of building our movements.

The left should view elections not just in terms of immediately winning office, but also in terms of

getting people to think about alternatives of which they may not have been aware, about raising consciousness and changing public opinion. Indeed, while radicals are still in a minority, it is the educational value of elections that counts most. Elections are, in fact, just about the only time when most Americans are paying attention to political issues at all. For the left to be simply absent at such a moment, as it surely was in this past election, is a disaster.

Electoral activity can be an invaluable opportunity precisely for the kind of political education that also builds social movements and fosters militant struggle. Unlike the right, the left needs to promote among its supporters a sophisticated critical understanding of history, social problems, and the structures of power. It cannot, like the right, simply declare its loyalty to existing conventions and traditions or appeal to prejudices and religious dogma; it must, to a great extent, swim against the stream, push against the enormous weight of deference to authority, passivity and fatalism with which we are indoctrinated from birth. Electoral campaigns would enable the left to get its message out, to make its case, to far more people than are affected by other kinds of movements.

On the other hand, relegating electoral activity to simply going to the polls in order to stop the Republicans, after which the same conservative trends continue whether or not the Democrats are in office, is profoundly demoralizing—making it harder to build strong social movements, to organize the unorganized into unions, etc. This, in turn, makes it less likely that the feet of Obama or any other Democrat will be "held to the fire."

Another argument against independent left participation in national elections under the banner of a new political party is that we should focus exclusively on the local and the grassroots. This may seem plausible, but while local elections and ballot initiatives are important, they cannot be a substitute for electoral initiatives that reach far more people and inspire them to feel part of a growing national alternative.

A democratic, movement-based electoral party would actually give deeper meaning and greater support to non-electoral activism. It could provide a continuous, nationwide political voice that would speak for movements, sustain them through inevitable ups and downs, and connect them to each other. It would enable movements to be more than pressure groups.

The First Step:
A Declaration of Independence

WHAT IS NEEDED is a declaration of independence from the Democrats by significant segments of the progressive community, one that points the way forward toward a new, broadly-based political party of the left. With as much support as it is possible to garner from trade unionists and social movement activists, such a declaration would announce to the public that at least a portion of the left has decisively rejected the idea that progressive change can come from the Democrats and intends instead to challenge them, as well as the Republicans, for political power.

It should forthrightly state the need for political opposition to the Democrats, not just technical organizational independence in the manner of New York’s Working Families Party and other "fusionist" initiatives, which almost always end up urging their followers to vote for Democratic candidates either directly or on an independent ballot line.

We should be clear. Political opposition means, once a reasonable amount of popular support has been mobilized, running candidates against Democrats (and Republicans, of course). The natural constituency for a new party of the left would be workers and unions, minorities, feminists, the poor, LGBT people, antiwar activists and progressives in general—those who have traditionally given their votes to the Democrats—as well as the millions of non-voters. In other words, a progressive third

party can be built only at the expense of the Democrats, even if this allows Republicans to win in the short run.

The growth of the British Labour Party in the early 1900s had as a direct result the reduction of the British Liberals, who had traditionally won the bulk of the working-class vote, to a small third party, and a political realignment of class forces—with the bulk of the capitalist class lining up behind the Conservatives. Should a popular anti-corporate party emerge here, something similar would doubtless occur. Our de facto one-party system would become a two-party system in reality, with Big Business on one side and the majority of working people and their allies on the other. Then, at long last, we can have an open political contest between the right and the left in this country.

All the resources—money, phone banks, doorbell ringers—that labor, environmentalists, gay rights organizations and civil rights groups lavish on electing Democrats, in return for essentially nothing in terms of legislation or political support, could be devoted to a party controlled by these movements and their allies, a party from which corporate and financial elites were excluded.

It is often argued that the U.S. electoral system, with its ancient two-party system and its one-round, winner-take-all voting makes third parties impossible. But Britain, Canada and Mexico all have a similar system, and none of them have proportional representation or second-round runoff voting; yet all have had successful third parties. Proportional representation and instant runoff voting (IRV) are vital democratic reforms in their own right, because they would permit a much wider spectrum of political opinions to be represented in government, and because they would immensely increase the odds in favor of third parties. But their absence is no reason to postpone creating a third party in the near future and no reason to believe it cannot be done. In fact, the pressure of an effective third party, able to mount protests and exercise political clout, is probably the only thing that can force the two-party duopoly to loosen its grip on the U.S. electoral system.

Of course, even many of those who have no illusions in the Obama Administration will still say that the right is so dangerous that this is "not the time" to consider political independence. The same thing was said in 2008, 2004, 2000 and for a very long time before that. But isn’t it almost certain that the Republicans will put up somebody as bad as, or more likely worse than, Romney in 2016, 2020, and so on? Because the Republicans will probably get worse, with the Democrats following in their wake, the prospect before us seems to be perpetual political enslavement to a rightward-moving Democratic Party.

This downward spiral must be stopped. There is, right now, a mass base, an implicit constituency, for progressive independent political action. Polls show that on such issues as universal health insurance, significantly increasing taxes on upper incomes, Afghanistan, and other matters of war and foreign policy, millions of Americans, not just a radical fringe, are to the left of Obama. Vast numbers of people are disgusted with corporate crime, with greed and excess, with mind-boggling inequality, and they sense that something is terribly wrong, terribly unjust about the system itself. In this restless climate, the message of a principled party of the left, with support from segments of labor, peace, and social justice movements can have significant appeal.

Footnotes