

Can a Progressive Democrat Make a Difference?: Running Against Hillary

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Jonathan Tasini made enemies when he ran against Senator Hillary Clinton in New York State's September 2006 Democratic primary. Some liberal Democrats called his effort a quixotic and self-referential campaign, one that would accomplish nothing beyond potentially harming Clinton's own political standing. Others to Tasini's left wrote off his campaign as a diversion, a way of co-opting critics of neo-liberalism onto a narrow path while draining resources from potentially insurgent third party efforts. But he also made friends, with still others viewing his primary run as a godsend, a brave stand that thankfully someone was taking and that offered a chance to vote against Senator Clinton, her support for the Iraq War and her corporate handlers.

Underfunded, facing a virtual television news blackout, and with the senator studiously refusing to debate — something for which both the liberal, pro-Clinton *New York Times* and the pro-Bush *New York Post*, scored her campaign — Tasini still attracted 17 percent of the primary vote, receiving some 125,000 votes statewide.

Tasini, a highly regarded labor writer, economic researcher, former president of the National Writers Union (UAW), and now president of the Economic Future Group, a national consulting firm, spoke in late October with *New Politics* editorial board members Joanne Landy and Michael Hirsch. Below is the text of their interview.

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New Politics: *When launching a progressive primary run against the pro-war, non-progressive and largely shoo-in Hillary Clinton, what assumptions did you bring into the campaign? What did you seek to accomplish? To what degree did you succeed/fail? What would an infusion of dollars have let you do that didn't get done, if anything?*

JT: There's no question that this race was the perfect example of how money corrupts politics, and also how the media plays a role in deciding who gets heard and who doesn't. I was often asked, "Am I the Ned Lamont of New York," and I said, "No, I'm not; I'm not independently wealthy, I can't put \$12 million of my own money into a campaign." We raised about \$225,000. There's no question that if we'd had \$1 million, we would have done twice as well. I think we would have gotten 30 to 35 percent of the primary vote, and I simply base that on the reality that two thirds of the people said they agreed with me, certainly on the issue of the war, as well as other issues. And yet two thirds of the people up until the election didn't even know I was running. I ascribe these incredible contradictions directly to money and media.

So, having said all that, I feel like we did extraordinarily well in terms of our goals, which were: First, to make sure that a pro-war senator, who's bad on so many other

issues, but certainly on the war, did not get a free pass. To see that there would be an alternative, and an opportunity for voters to vote for somebody opposed to the war. And when you get 125,000 votes — that gave people a place to go. And since then a lot of people come up to me to say "Thank God I voted for you; it really felt good to be able to cast a vote." So that was a small thing that I think was important. Second, I think it was important to make sure that the war was a part of the debate, not just in this race, but throughout the country.

I wasn't the only anti-war candidate running. When people asked me if I was the Ned Lamont of NY, I would say no, I'm the Marcy Winograd. You may know Marcy, who's a friend of mine; she ran against Jane Harmon in southern California, who voted for the war. Marcy's someone I met through Progressive Democrats of America, a schoolteacher. Not like Ned Lamont, not independently wealthy — and she got 39 percent of her district's primary vote. And there are other people like that. Our goal, as part of this kind of loose network, was to make the war a central part of the campaign. I think that happened to the extent that when the media did cover it, they talked about the war as *the* defining issue. My campaign was about many more things besides the war; we had a very progressive economic plan, and so on, but clearly I could not have run this race without the war. Clinton is so bad on so many issues, but the war was supposed to be the motivating factor for people to vote against her.

I got into this assuming that we would have enormous support, motivation and energy from the anti-war movement and I was surprised at how weak the anti-war movement was, what a failure they were. They were much more interested in doing what I consider to be "nice" things like demonstrations, but not interested in, or having the skills, the inclination, or the ability to get down into the political world, and do what was really needed, which was to confront somebody at the ballot box.

NP: *Do you think that was because their activists were not accustomed to engaging in political action, or because they just didn't want to confront Hillary Clinton?*

JT: I would say yes and yes. And I'll add another thing. Some of them said, "Well, our peace group is a 501(c)3 tax exempt organization and the rules of the IRS say that we can't endorse candidates." I understand that. But Peace Action provides a good example of what *can* be done. They prepared a voter guide, which simply compared our positions, not just on the Iraq war, but on broader issues of defense and peace, as well as other issues. And they didn't endorse me; they were simply informational. And that's fine. They handed that guide out in many, many places, and I think that was very helpful. If they had handed out 100,000 of them, that would have been great. But there are opportunities for the peace movement. I'm going to be frank: what I discovered is how much of a paper tiger the progressive movement is, specifically the peace movement — that it's got a lot of good rhetoric, but it's so thin, in terms of its depth within the community. Yes, they can turn out people to demonstrations, but how many of those people end up being part of the movement and staying to build an alternative? I think that's a very hard question.

I think yes, some of them did not want to confront somebody whom they fear. I found that throughout the progressive movement, and ultimately, and I'm making a generalization — there's a section of them — left, liberals, progressives, however you want to define them, that want a seat at the table, and want to have their phone calls returned, and want to be seen as players.

NP: *So if you weren't going to win, they didn't want to be involved with you.*

JT: Right. For some people it was that calculation. For a segment of the progressive movement, that's the case, though not for all of it.

But our third goal was to strengthen the progressive movement, and I think we did accomplish that, because it's continuing. Wherever I went, I talked about how this campaign does not end on primary day, September 12. It continues. And we're now working with a variety of people throughout the state; we have hundreds of people who volunteered for the campaign, we're trying to develop a lasting progressive political network throughout the state. Just as a small example, I have a whole bunch of volunteers whom I've been taking up [to Westchester County] the last few weekends to canvas for John Hall, in New York's 19th Congressional District [Note: Musician and activist John Hall won the district with 51 percent of the vote.]

NP: *You scored 17 percent of the primary vote. That was far more than your detractors imagined, though less than your closest supporters had hoped. Yet the anti-war sentiment among Democrats is far higher than 17 percent. At bottom, why did so many anti-war Democrats either sit on their hands or vote for war-enabling Hillary?*

JT: A lot of people who were against the war didn't vote in the primary — it was a very light turnout, 15 percent or something. [Note: The exact percentage of registered state Democrats casting a ballot for Senator was 13.9 percent.] I think we did as well as we could have, given the lack of money and media attention. So again, what I heard from many volunteers was stunning: at the polls, on election day, they'd hand out a palm card, someone would walk 10 steps, read it, and turn back, and say "I'm voting for your guy." Or, "I didn't even know he was running." It was a dual response that reinforced what we knew, which was that we just did not have the megaphone, and we didn't have the money. And the media always sort of dealt with this as a kind of horse race, and didn't want to deal with issues.

NP: *What about the Working Families Party?**

JT: Their role was negative. I mean, they put Hillary Clinton on their ballot, which I think is a travesty. At some point you have to draw the line. She's terrible on so many issues — I mean, she's for the death penalty, she believes that NAFTA was a good thing; Rupert Murdoch is one of her supporters, you just go down the list. But the *war* — which now we know killed 600,000 Iraqis, and thousands of Americans, and the economic costs—how could a party that's supposed to be progressive, or I don't know how they define it, put somebody up who did so much damage to everything that they stand for? I didn't take this personally — people know that if I had been in the hall of the Working Families Party convention and we were debating this, I would have been one of the first people to stand up and say, we cannot endorse her, it's outrageous.

NP: *You spoke at the Working Families convention, didn't you?*

JT: I spoke at a state committee meeting. They did not have anybody speak at the statewide convention. Partly because I think they did not want to give me a platform at the moment they were debating. There was a lot of manipulation that went on with this. Unfortunately, it was not just a straight-up thing. But just on the position of the Working Families Party. I think that it's a shame to endorse center-right candidates — I mean, where do you draw the line? Do you want to be about economic prosperity and that's all?

I was working with the Working Families Party, I was on the state committee, and I left to enroll in the Democrats — to run in the primary. I think that Mike Hirsch raised some ruckus about that (endorsement policy) really well. I thought — okay, so — all this has happened, and then they went and said "As an anti-war vote, vote for Hillary Clinton."

NP: *It's right out of Orwell, isn't it?*

JT: I read that and I thought: "this is unbelievable!" And then Mike [Hirsch] and I and other people made an issue of it. Not to try to reverse what they had done, that was a done deal, but my God, don't try to—that's disgusting. You know, it is almost straight out of Orwell, to say that you should vote for a pro-war person in order to say you're anti-war! War is peace — it's unbelievable!

NP: *It's our impression that Working Families tried to walk away from that.*

JT: Well, they did walk away, and I think thanks to you (Mike) and a number of people, all the WFP emails now don't mention her name at all. They say, vote for Elliot Spitzer (who has his own problems), but Clinton's name does not appear. Somebody else told me they prepared two different leaflets, that there was a leaflet prepared for union people that had her name on it but for the community people, it's not on there. So, I think that we were effective, though we could have achieved more. But it was an important achievement to prevent Working Families from giving routine support to Hillary Clinton.

NP: *So what dirty tricks, if any, did you encounter? What institutional blocks? The two best known were that refusal to let all candidates address the NY State Democratic Party convention, along with the reported pressure on delegates not to defend you. Then there was the local Time Warner (cable, all news) station the demurrer by NY1, from hosting a Tasini/Clinton debate because (political director) Robert Hardt and Time Warner deemed you under-funded since you hadn't raised \$500,000 and were hence nonviable.*

JT: Well let's start with those two. I arrived at the state convention wanting a simple thing — just to have a debate about the war. It seemed incomprehensible that the NY Democratic Party, in one of the most Democratic states in the country — would not debate the war. And yet, they didn't want to. In fact I learned — maybe I'm naïve — that the state Democratic convention is not actually about having a debate, it's about having parties and schmoozing. Don't get me wrong, I'm always the first in line for a party. But, there's got to be some content to it, and we're at war. So I arrived at the convention with 2,500 signatures on a petition asking that the party pass a resolution that essentially mirrored the legislation that Rep. Jim McGovern is promoting — to cut off all funding for the war — HR4232.

So, anyway, I have to be fair: the rules of the convention state that you have to have 25 percent of the delegates supporting your candidacy in order to be nominated and address the convention. So it wasn't just me that didn't get a role — Mark Green and Charlie King [both attorney general aspirants] didn't get to speak; the only three people who spoke were Spitzer, Clinton, and Andrew Cuomo. But there was another issue: was I going to put my name in nomination? Had I been nominated, they would have had to have a roll-call vote, which would have taken three hours. And I wasn't interested — I knew I wasn't going to get 25 percent, but what I wanted to do was to have a debate about the war. So there was some negotiation that went back and forth, whereby I would not place my name in nomination and in return there would be a debate about the war. They ended up reneging on that, too, and there was no debate. They don't believe in

actual debate you know, pro and con, and back and forth. What they did was introduce the resolution, and then Congressman Jerry Nadler spoke about it. There was no vote until way at the end, when everyone was rushing out the door.

So we made some progress. The resolution they brought forward was much weaker than the one I brought, but at least it did in some respects contradict Clinton's position, which could be seen as a victory, and the fact that they were forced to talk, to mention the war, I thought was an accomplishment.

NP: *It's sad that the fact that if they just talk about the war it's an accomplishment.*

JT: It is. It's very, very sad.

Even if it had come to a vote, I'm sure they could have controlled the delegates. There's no doubt that they control all those state committee people — I saw that. There's so much a desire to be part of the crowd and to not step out. You see that in organizations in other places — some people don't want to step over the line because then, you know, they won't get the favors, they'll get opposed the next time they run for state committee person...so there's a general tendency, let's follow the machine. So, I'm sure they could have defeated any anti-war resolution — but why not have a debate? What were they afraid of? I know the answer: because the debate would have made clear there were many Democrats who opposed the war in Iraq, and would have made clear how bad Hillary Clinton was on the war.

NP: *She obviously didn't want to debate.*

JT: They wanted no debate at all. Sort of leads to the NY1 issue and that's a kind of sad thing, the price of admission to debate is half a million dollars now. And since I had not raised half a million dollars, NY1 (Time-Warner cable news channel) said I was not eligible to debate.

NP: *That's such a naked statement by the media that "money talks." That's another accomplishment of yours, that they were forced to be open about using such criteria.*

JT: It's shocking. It's interesting that the things I confronted in the political process are all the things Americans are disgusted with: the media controlling the message, the obscene way that money dictates who gets heard and who doesn't. The way the machine just roars ahead and there's no interest in debating issues. I mean, I think Hillary Clinton's a coward, not being willing to debate me. I think it is going to come back and haunt her — she's going to have to confront the Democratic base out there. She can't hide if she runs for president. She's going to have a primary. She can't do the same thing she did with me. She's going to have to stand side by side with all these other people and have it out. And I think at that point people will be clear about how unprincipled she is — and the fact that she stands for nothing.

NP: *You have said you respect Howie Hawkins, the Green Party candidate for Senate from New York, but that as a Democrat you cannot back him. Why not? And how do you respond to the charge made in Counterpunch by Joshua Frank, and bruited about in some left circles — that your campaign in effect "distracted the antiwar movement"?*

JT: I don't know much about Frank. The position I took was, from the very beginning that if Hillary Clinton did not change her position on the war, I would not endorse her.

And I stuck to that. I did not endorse her. And I think the Clinton campaign was quick to harshly say, "Who cares?" Because they didn't want that to get out. There are some people who are urging me to do a write-in campaign — get people to write my name in as a protest. I'm not sure whether that's worth the time and effort, although certainly people can do that. So, I'm a Democrat working within Democrats. I'm not inclined to endorse Hawkins.

NP: *Why not urge a protest vote?*

JT: Well they could do it — I actually — what I said is that people should vote their conscience.

NP: *Why don't you cast a protest vote for Howie Hawkins, and ask others to do the same. Hawkins has pretty much the same positions you do on the issues.*

JT: I don't actually know what he's calling for on the war, whether it's exactly what I do, but it's close.

NP: *Why not give a protest vote to the Greens? It's the only kind of protest vote one can make. When Crain's NY Business comes out for Hillary Clinton, when the Daily News comes out for Hillary Clinton, when Murdoch comes out for Hillary Clinton, we need a big protest.*

JT: That's why people were talking about this write-in campaign — I'm trying to get people to write my name in as a protest vote too. I think the cumulative vote of that, plus what Hawkins might get, would be also effective. But — I just don't know, at the end of the day, whatever number we're going to roll up, how much of the vote, once you're out of the Democratic primary, what does that really mean? What is the number? If I thought that we could roll up even 35 percent, I'd do it. But frankly my guess is that he'll be getting 5 percent. [The Nov. 8 preliminary count, as announced by the NYS Greens, showed Hawkins garnering 51,538 votes, or 1.22 percent of all votes cast for Senator.]

NP: *If somebody were to run as a progressive in the Democratic Primary and only get 5 percent of the vote, would you discount that? I'm trying to see the logic here—if you're saying, well, it makes you look weaker than you are. So don't do it.*

JT: I think 5 percent in this kind of race in a Primary, would look pretty weak. I would not have run if I thought we could only do 5 percent, because I do think that makes it look weaker.

NP: *But would you have voted for somebody in the Democratic Primary if you thought they could only get 5 percent?*

JT: Sure, I would vote for them, in the primary, sure.

NP: *When you say, "I'm a Democrat," does that mean that you won't ever support somebody running against a Democrat, or that you wouldn't do it right now?*

JT: I haven't given much thought to down the road. Because I was in the Working Families Party I believe in third-party efforts and I think that's a good thing, but if you're trying to change and take over the Democratic Party, I think that it's better to try to do that internally.

NP: *But when you're defeated inside the Party, do you think you still shouldn't go outside?*

JT: Yeah — to try to keep fighting the battle internally, I think that that's still worth doing. And I can actually hold two contradictory ideas in my mind at the same time.

NP: *You have to if you're a Democrat.*

JT: Yeah, well, that's right.

NP: *What do you see as the possibility of transforming the Democratic Party into one that is both progressive and (small "d") democratic. What possibilities do you hold out for third party efforts, on any electoral level?*

JT: I think in local races, like for mayor, city council, all those kinds of things, it's more likely that third party efforts can work — because it's a resource issue, it's money, it's capacity. When Tony Mazzocchi started the Labor Party, I was at the founding convention in Cleveland, because I believed that we needed it. It was great. But the fact is, the Democratic Party, and the Republican Party, (1) have a brand name in people's minds; (2) have an enormous number of resources; and that is important in terms of how do you functionally get out to people. Now having said all that, I actually think we're at this crisis point — I guess that we thought this every 10 years, we kept saying this — oh, we're at a crossroads. Every 10 years, going back to the 1970s — where people are just gonna kick the door down now, it has to happen! I do think that the corruption is so endemic in terms of the lies, and people are so pissed off, and we have basically ten years to solve the global warming question or it's over. It may be over anyway. But from what I've read, we have about ten years to actually stabilize it. The question of what's happening with rich and poor, and jobs and globalization, I think all this is starting to come to a head. Now whether that translates itself into a third party, or whether that translates itself into a Democratic Party faction — where we can really shake it up, I don't know.

NP: *Part of the resources the Democrats have are corporate resources, which undermine what progressives are trying to accomplish.*

JT: Right. One thing I was always in favor of is public election financing. I think public financing of elections is crucial; taking that money out of the system is the best chance we have for getting a different kind of party. And not just a different kind of party. Then it becomes possible, you know, for third party people to run. One of the good things about New York City, even if it's not perfect, is its election financing system. When you run for local office here there's the matching program, it encourages relatively small donations, up to \$250, they match 4 to 1. So actually you can get people who are just like us, who can actually, if you get 1,000 people to give \$250 each, that's a hurdle, but it's not *insurmountable*.

NP: *What do you say to the charge that trying to be "effective" in the framework of the Democratic Party has historically had a conservatizing effect on people?*

JT: It's a good question. We'll have to see. If you're just speaking about me personally, I had a parallel fight in the labor movement where I don't think it conservatized me — maybe a little bit — saying the things I believe about the labor movement and got a lot of shit for it. But when John Sweeney was first elected president of the AFL-CIO, I ran

against *that* old regime, and this is one example. I've been doing this for years.

NP: *The labor movement, even with its layers of bureaucracy, is not exactly the same thing as the corporate-dominated Democratic Party.*

JT: No, but in both labor and the Democrats you have to face the machinery. Going to the state AFL-CIO is very similar to the state Democratic Party meeting. There's not a lot of conflict or debate about issues because there's a tendency for leaders to want to have more control. But you're right, it's not a one-to-one comparison, you bring up a point that is legitimate.

NP: *The question is whether it is intrinsic that rebels will be conservatized by a party dominated by corporate and professional political interests. Or are these obstacles that can be transcended? Who advances most, the progressives or the corporations and their friends?*

JT: To me, there's not a simple answer to that. I don't know which is going to come first — the fact that there is this brand, the Democratic Party, that still means a lot to a lot of people out there, who could be *our* people, I think that a lot of people are desperate for change and feel horrified on all levels that we probably all agree about, I think there's a way of reaching them. At the same time, I think we should — they're not mutually exclusive — we should encourage people to try these other independent avenues. I've always said third party efforts are important.

NP: *What and where was your labor support? What would it have taken to move labor from backing the politically connected incumbent to supporting a progressive insurgent who was not connected to the party apparatus? What lessons are there for other insurgent, issue-oriented primary candidates?*

JT: I didn't have any labor support. There were a lot of people who hit me with their elbow and said, "You know, thank God you're doing this," but no labor endorsements. Not a single union. I mean, look at Hillary Clinton's position on our issues. And a lot of people both inside and outside the unions didn't, don't know where she stands. There were great efforts to obfuscate her actual positions. So when I went into progressive groups — homes, you know, for fundraisers — and when I said she has been on the board of Wal-Mart, people would gasp. People would turn to each other — I mean, you could see people's minds start to move — I had people come up to me, Hillary Clinton supporters, and because of what they heard from me, they'll never vote for her again. It's unbelievable. If I could have done that with 500,000 people I would have won the election.

But to go back to your point, I think nobody wanted, no institution wanted to risk their access and their relationship to support me. In a certain way, I don't blame them. I mean, it's easy for us, a lot of people who are free-floating, to criticize, yeah, to be purists about it. And I'm as purist sometimes as they come. But when you actually have to, say, get something for your members — save a plant from closing, I can see where that calculation goes in. Some of that calculation I don't think is legitimate — some of it. I think it comes back ultimately and it hurts working people. The whole thing comes back to this, time and again, to the public financing of elections. If you took the money out of the system, I think it would be a different calculus, because that would make a difference in terms of turf. I say it would make a difference.

NP: *What would public financing do to the two parties—would it make them a better operation, or worse operation?*

JT: Well, I think it would make them better because the elections then would not be about fundraising, they would be about issues.

NP: *Wouldn't the kind of public financing that most people talk about mean that labor and progressive organizations also couldn't contribute to political parties?*

JT: Yes, but we can never compete with corporate money, ever. Because you're always outspent. The number's always 10 to 1 or 20 to 1.

NP: *It's true, you can't raise as much money as the corporations do, but on the other hand, to build a really progressive party you would need financial support from labor and progressive groups.*

JT: But the funding wouldn't go to the party, it would go to building vibrant political operations. What I'm advocating wouldn't mean unions were barred from get-out-the-vote operations. That's different.

NP: *But making candidates accountable to a labor and progressive base — that wouldn't happen if those groups couldn't provide party funding.*

JT: If I'm running out there and I know that I have to get X number of votes and I know that you're at all these places and the labor movement can turn out x-percentage, you want to be accountable to the labor movement. I've never had any problem with the labor movement doing what it *should* be doing, which is getting its members out to vote for the right people.

NP: *In Europe, where you have historically labor-based parties, it's our impression that their money is as important as their turn-out-the-vote efforts.*

JT: Well, I've always thought that where our side is effective is in mobilizing people. Corporations don't have the people — they have the money. We, in theory — this is all theoretical, if the labor movement was healthy as it should be — the body is the people, the voters. So you know, if you take the money out, but don't take the ability of turning out voters, which corporations can't do — it's not, they don't have a base — then we are in pretty good shape.

NP: *Because their strong suit is dollars, while ours is numbers.*

JT: Right.

NP: *The question is, if you take out the ability of progressives to finance their own politics, would that disable them from building up a rebel party?*

JT: I don't think so. My gut, my hunch would be no.

Footnotes

* The Working Families Party operates nominally as a third party in several states, but chiefly in

New York, largely as a leftish pressure on elected Democrats. It functions electorally courtesy of state laws allowing "fusion" or cross-endorsing and slating other parties' candidates. Modeled after the old American Labor Party and the now defunct Liberal Party and comprising affiliated community-based organizations, unions and members of local chapters and clubs, it has on occasion endorsed Republicans — especially those with strong pro-labor voting records — using such support as leverage to enact progressive legislation. In scattered cases it runs or supports independents whose candidacies it considers "viable." In the 2006 general election, as in previous elections, the WFP's statewide candidates were the same as those put up by the Democrats, and it won some 125,000 votes for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Eliot Spitzer on its line, guaranteeing it continued statewide ballot access for the next four years. A Nov. 7 ballot initiative in Massachusetts, backed by the local WFP and some unions and that sought to amend the state constitution to allow fusion endorsements — the party's hope being to duplicate the New York operation — was defeated.