Progressive Election Strategy and the Norman Solomon Campaign

written by Jeff Cohen | April 29, 2012

We can't devise a successful electoral strategy for "The Left"—meaning the forces of peace, social/economic justice and sustainability—unless we face a simple fact: We're getting our asses kicked.

For three decades, our country's politics have moved steadily rightward and become more corporate-dominated. With few exceptions (gay rights, for example), the right wing has been winning on almost every issue. That's why we have record levels of war-spending, with near record levels of poverty and wealth disparities. Labor is weakened and under attack, while corporate power over government and both major parties keeps increasing. Our earth faces environmental disasters while the mindless "Drill, Baby, Drill" slogan gains popularity. Issues we thought we'd won decades ago—like reproductive rights and separation of church and state—are under constant threat.

There's an essential reason for this sad state of affairs: Rightwing activists have seized one of the two major parties, the GOP, and used that party to amass power and dominate the terms of debate on most issues since Reagan was elected in 1981.

Rightwing activists—not always with corporate backing—have been resolute in taking over local and state Republican organizations and electing movement allies to office at all levels. Unlike many liberal/progressive activists, these conservative activists don't instinctively make apologies for politicians who sell them out or fail to deliver. Instead of apologizing for the GOP elite, rightwing activists keep electing a new crop—ever further right and more closely aligned with their extremist demands and litmus tests.

This determined, strategic electoral activism is the reason that what passes for "mainstream" GOP positions today—denying Darwin and global warming while bestowing personhood on fetuses and ExxonMobil—are more rightwing than 30 years ago. And one can argue that the Tea Party-influenced 2012 Republican presidential frontrunners (including Mr. Etch-A-Sketch) were further right than George W. Bush . . . who was further right than the 1994 Gingrich "revolutionaries" . . . who were further right than Reagan . . . who was further right than the Republican mainstream of previous decades.

A Roadmap for Progressive Power?

Have rightwing activists given progressives a roadmap for political power? If so, why has there not been a concerted effort by progressive movements and activists to enter and transform the Democratic Party into a vehicle that can move our country in a dramatically progressive direction?

Unfortunately, instead of implementing a "remake-the-Democratic-party" strategy, constituency groups like labor and the liberal netroots often function as loyal party operatives, pouring money behind whatever mediocre candidates the Democratic establishment serves up. Some big-spending unions are loath to intervene in primaries—which is where their money and activism could prove decisive in replacing business-as-usual Democrats with genuine progressives.

It should be clear by now that electing Democrats—even Democratic majorities—is not enough. In 2009, Democrats held both Congress and the White House, as they did in 1993-94. How'd that work

out for us? We got NAFTA, but no Employee Free Choice Act. It's more than a trivial matter *what kinds of Democrats* are nominated.

Among hardened leftists, there's a different objection to the "transform-the-Democrats" strategy: a purist rejection of dealing with the Democratic Party—one of the "twin parties of capitalism." So, even in this current period of mass disgust with the powers that be, electoral activism consists of running marginalized protest or third party campaigns that pick up a tiny percentage of votes.

While it's true that today's Democratic Party is a corporate-dominated party bolstering elite rule, it's also the party that most young people, women, people of color and progressive-inclined Americans look to for their choices. The Left needs to offer these groups vastly different choices, and transform the party in the process.

I sure wish rightwingers had spent the last few decades as electoral purists—and instead of working to take over the GOP, they'd confined themselves to "protest politics" and self-marginalizing minor parties. Our country would be much better off.

But the right wing went about seizing a major party, beginning with the failed Goldwater insurgency of 1964. We need to remember that the Republican Party of President Eisenhower was a moderate, status quo party that had acquiesced to the New Deal—with 90% tax rates on the 1 percenters, federal jobs programs and virtually no union-busting.

Perhaps the main excuse for electoral timidity or abstention from progressives of various stripes is: "*Rightwing movements have big corporate money behind them, and we don't.*" Actually, we do now have the ability to raise big money from small donors online. And corporate money doesn't always explain rightwing success: the religious right, which drove much of our country's conservative shift in recent decades, was largely a grassroots movement of middle-class whites, often triumphing over the moneyed Republican Old Guard.

In my view, money is not the main advantage rightwing movements have over progressive ones. It's leadership. And zeal for transformative change. Look at a rightwing leader like the late Paul Weyrich, who coined the term "Moral Majority," founded grassroots religious right organizations and pioneered direct mail fundraising among small donors. (Yes, he also cofounded corporate fronts like Heritage and ALEC.) Thirty years ago, Weyrich remarked: "We are different from previous generations of conservatives. . . . We are no longer working to preserve the status quo. We are radicals, working to overturn the present power structure of this country."

Those who've led rightwing activists to power in recent decades have burned with a passion to radically transform our country. Meanwhile, those who lead large liberal/progressive groups today seem to burn with a passion to have lunch with Democrats in Congress, to hobnob with "our friends on the Hill," to explain to the base why we can't push too fast or demand too much of the Democrats.

In the past century, the two periods of dramatic progressive reform—the 1930s New Deal era and the 1960s Civil Rights/War on Poverty era—were times when independent Left movements made increasingly bold demands on the Democrats. Martin Luther King, Jr. was repeatedly asked by the Kennedys and LBJ to slow down, but he never did—and he went to his grave as a vocal opponent of the Democrats' war in Vietnam.

In those eras of social progress, there were progressive movement leaders who acted with independence—more attuned to the base than to Democratic elites. They weren't prone to constant apologizing for party leaders.

In other words, they acted like left versions of the rightwing leaders of recent decades.

It’s not glamorous work for activist movements to try to transform a major party. It’s slow and arduous—with more defeats than victories. But rightwing movements have shown it can be done.

To do something similar in the Democratic Party will require coordinated efforts—across issues and movements—to elect progressive activists at every level: from local and state Democratic committees (reforming party platforms along the way) to local public offices to state houses. And ultimately to Congress.

If such a process caught fire, we’d hear a drumbeat from mainstream punditry—not just at Fox News—about the “extremism” of progressive Democrats (despite their own polls showing that ending war, taxing the rich, protecting entitlements, etc., are majority views).

Currently, we do have a Congressional Progressive Caucus of 75 members, the largest and most multiracial caucus in Congress. But it lacks cohesion and teeth. About 60 members pledged to reject any healthcare bill that lacked a public option—and then caved. More powerful than the current caucus might be a cohesive 25-member group ready to vote as a bloc against war and corporate policies, even when it’s a Democratic White House promoting such policies.

Getting to a bloc of 25 genuine, principled progressives in Congress is attainable. What’s needed is a strategy and resources to develop candidates in dozens of solidly progressive congressional districts nationwide: black, Latino, college town, liberal urban, etc. When an incumbent Democrat sells-out or leaves office, activists in such a district should be able to call upon national organizational and netroots support to get a 100% progressive into Congress. Once elected by the grassroots in such districts, it’s hard for corporate or conservative forces to ever get them out. Think Bernie Sanders. Think Barbara Lee.

The Norman Solomon Insurgency

Which brings me to the Congressional campaign of lifelong progressive activist/author Norman Solomon (full disclosure: he’s a close friend, with whom I’ve written three books and hundreds of columns). An acclaimed antiwar leader who led three dramatic trips to Iraq in an effort to avert the U.S. invasion, Norman is running in a new, extremely progressive district on California’s North Coast that stretches from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Oregon border. The seat is open due to the retirement of Rep. Lynn Woolsey, a steadfast peace advocate who once co-chaired the Progressive Caucus.

To prepare for this race, Norman paid his dues in local Democratic work. He’s been elected three times to be a delegate from the North Bay to the state Democratic central committee (where he coauthored the party’s “troops-out-of-Afghanistan” position). In 2008, he was elected as an Obama delegate to the Democratic National Convention—but he has never refrained from criticizing Obama policies that bolster Wall Street or the warfare state.

Norman may or may not win, but he’s built one of the strongest, grassroots campaigns for Congress ever—with over 1,000 volunteers and more than 5,000 donors. He’s been endorsed by local elected officials in the district (both Democrats and Greens) as he’s campaigned on an uncompromising agenda popular with voters: tax Wall Street to fund federal green jobs programs; major military cuts; no attack on Iran; enhanced “Medicare for All”; end nuclear power. The primary is June 5, with voting-by-mail to begin early May.

The good news is that the Solomon campaign raised—in mostly small, grassroots donations—an impressive half-million dollars by the March 31 federal filing deadline. The bad (but expected) news is that two corporate-connected Democrats raised $865,000 and $740,000; both will significantly

outspend Norman on TV/radio ads. It's a classic battle of grassroots vs. big bucks. Will his volunteer-based *ground game* beat the *air attack* of the moneyed candidates, as Paul Wellstone did when he got into the U.S. Senate after being outspent 7 to 1? (Like Norman, Wellstone had never previously held elected office.)

In a 12-candidate race, experts in the district see Norman as now running second. The frontrunner is the Democratic establishment candidate, a well-funded state assemblyman who has received most of the labor and environmental endorsements—despite having accepted donations in recent years from companies like Walmart and PG&E that are despised by union and green activists. (The Solomon campaign refuses corporate and lobbyist money.)

These membership groups face a choice in primaries: Do they embrace party regulars and the status quo, or back outsider candidates who want to transform the party . . . and the country. Several unions have endorsed the Solomon campaign, including the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). One of the strongest unions in the state, SEIU California, hedged its bets by endorsing Norman, along with the state assemblyman and another elected official in the race. Some progressive unions (like the California Nurses Association) have so far stayed out.

National groups like Progressive Democrats of America and Blue America have backed the campaign from the start. Norman won the endorsement of Democracy for America (founded by Howard Dean) by finishing second out of 200 liberal/progressive candidates in DFA's nationwide online straw poll.

The Solomon campaign earns free media coverage each time a notable like Phil Donahue, Daniel Ellsberg or Sean Penn comes into the district to campaign. Other progressive leaders have endorsed, including Barbara Ehrenreich, Dolores Huerta, Rep. John Conyers and Progressive Caucus Co-Chair Raul Grijalva. Musician Tom Morello tweeted his support of the "antiwar, pro-Occupy candidate" to his 200,000 twitter fans. Blogger Glenn Greenwald, known for criticizing both Republican and Democratic politicians, was effusive: "When it comes to Congressional candidates, it just doesn't get any better than Norman Solomon."

The Solomon movement is up against tough odds and big money. But, win or lose, it offers a model—a campaign that inspires activists and challenges power and the Democratic establishment, a campaign promoting the full progressive agenda without settling for a puny number of protest votes.

It's the kind of campaign we need to see in communities across the country in the coming years.

Jeff Cohen is the author of Cable News Confidential. *He and Norman Solomon cofounded the online activism group RootsAction.org, and he founded the media watch group FAIR (with Solomon and others). He has served on the advisory board of Progressive Democrats of America. The views expressed here are his alone—not those of any organization or campaign.*

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