



How Progressives Can Regain the Initiative

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The efforts of progressives in America to achieve bold reforms – ranging from inclusive economic growth, to immigration reform, to a new environmentalism – have repeatedly fallen short since the 1970s. Why? How is it that conservatives lead popular upsurges, while liberals (who are often afraid even to use the label) seem on the defensive? Why do people on the right have the courage of their convictions – and a willingness to turn the narrowest of electoral victories into “mandates” for sharp policy changes – while people on the center-left turn their victories into no more than tenuous half-measures? It takes morally inspired movements linking local and national activists to overcome barriers to change in U.S. politics, and progressives in recent times have failed to build such movements.

Built-In Obstacles to Change

At the founding, constraints were built into U.S. political institutions to protect the prerogatives of local elites – especially owners of slaves. Despite changes since then, institutional rules still make it hard for officials to initiate bold reforms or express the will of national majorities.

- Because presidential candidates campaign only in states where the result is in doubt and voters are motivated to turn out by the prospect of a close election, the Electoral College leaves many citizens on the sidelines and depresses turnout in uncontested areas, including these days most of the largest states with more progressive-minded voters.
- Single-member, winner-take-all legislative districts enhance the influence of even slight local majorities, who may not be in line with regional or national majorities. Fifty-one percent, even in a low-turnout contest, can claim a House seat, for example, leaving the other 49% without representation. A Senate in which the shots can be called by very small states is hardly conducive to building majorities.
- Inside government, minorities use procedural checks and balances to stop things from happening, even when most Americans want action. This reduces faith in politics.

How Reform Movements Can Carry the Day

Transformational reform, when it has come from the left or from the right in America, has been the result of social movements mobilized from outside official institutions. Modeled again and again on the Great Awakenings of the 1830s, major U.S. social movements have always expressed themselves as campaigns for “moral reform,” linking personal transformation to societal transformation and simultaneously promoting cultural and political change.

- Moral inspiration is vital for movement organizers and participants. Narrow policy interests are no substitute for values-based motivation. The Montgomery bus boycott was not only about transportation policy. The demands had a broader significance, far more inspiring, as steps in the fight for freedom and against U.S. racial segregation.
- Social movements at their best organize across local, state, and national levels, unconstrained by the short-term economics of electoral campaigning. They aspire to influence hearts, minds, and balances of power across all communities and states, even where immediate election victories are not possible. Paradoxically, the result can be greater political power, as a successful movement builds widely distributed capacities for mobilization that make it possible to prod and move the fragmented political system.
- Most short-term election or policy campaigns use big budgets to promote a “brand” through mass advertising. In contrast, a social movement recruits, trains and develops local, state, and national leadership skilled in the arts of collective action.

Many social movements have eventually leveraged and transformed U.S. political parties. Examples range from the temperance and abolition movements, through populism, women’s suffrage, and the movement for unions and labor reforms, to more recent instances such as the civil rights struggle, contemporary feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, and the conservative efforts for the right to life, the right bear arms, and the reduction of taxes.

Shifting Momentum – and the Need to Rediscover Movement-Building

Over the last thirty years, movement building has proceeded more effectively on the right. Many people felt threatened by the racial, gender, and generational changes of the 1960s and 1970s, especially once the federal government got actively involved in cementing reforms. As the post-1970s economy brought insecurity and growing inequality, conservative leaders and movement organizers were able to mobilize millions to demonize government itself.

Progressives emerged from the 1972 McGovern campaign divided and demoralized. Liberals created lobbying and legal operations in Washington DC, and turned away from movement building to try advance their many special causes through polling, messaging and marketing. Meanwhile, conservatives built a movement that changed the Republican Party and then – with the election of Ronald Reagan, the Newt Gingrich-led Congress, and now the Tea Party –transformed the U.S. polity. When in office, Democratic presidents have not linked up with nationwide movements, so their policy achievements are piecemeal and hard to sustain.

Stirrings there have been: in the 2007-08 Obama campaign, immigration reform activism, opposition to the XL pipeline, the vigorous reaction to the assault on Planned Parenthood, and, of course, the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations. Mobilization, however, is not the same thing as organization – the ability to share information and concert action on a vast scale. Social media can facilitate this, but cannot replace leadership, strategy, and structure. To counter the power of the right, progressives must invest energy and resources in locally rooted and nationally coordinated movement organizations. Then it will be possible to translate the outrage of many Americans into the capacity to do something about it – through lasting democratic reforms.

Read more in Marshall Ganz, **“Left Behind’: Social Movements, Parties, and the Politics of Reform,”** The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations Working Paper No. 34, Harvard University, August 2006; and Marshall Ganz, **“Leading Change: Leadership, Organization and Social Movements,”** in *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, edited by Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana (Harvard Business School Press, 2010), 509-550.