

REFOCUSING OUR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING VISION¹

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As if yet another shattering experience was needed, we have with Election 2016 a convincing demonstration of the progressive left's relative powerlessness in the national political arena. From the perspective of organizing, the importance of the recent events is less about the tens of millions who voted for Donald Trump (whether we abhor any or all of them, or imagine we can redeem them for future progressive campaigns), and much more about the overwhelming *inequality of power*. It is this power-inequality that energizes and sustains the forces of the reactionary right, which now controls the presidency, both chambers of Congress, 32 state legislatures and 33 governorships. It is this power-inequality which is at the root of virtually all economic, political, and social inequality.

In the aftermath of Election 2016, some of the best minds and most experienced professional organizers are analyzing how and why it happened. We imagine there will be agreement on many points of analysis. For example, we've heard extensively how Hillary Rodham Clinton lost the election because of inadequate Democratic turnout, the result of her campaign's failure to invest sufficiently in Wisconsin and Michigan; and about the Republican Attorney General's misguided missives to Congress. But is it really useful to rationalize the painful outcome by citing shortcomings of the candidate's campaign, or the upwelling of mass misogyny, or the reactionary right's gerrymandering and voter-suppression, or the failure of the media, or the gullibility of the electorate, or the incompetence and corruption of the Democratic party, or the anomalies of the Electoral College, or the blatant racism, or the far-reaching dark power of social media,² or the Russian interference, or the myriad other components of our relative powerlessness?

How might professional organizers weigh in? In any crisis, including the present threats and the options facing the progressive left, the first task of organizing is to multiply alternatives for *action*. But reactions to crisis are commonly less useful. There are those who simply lose their heads—among which we would hope not to find professional organizers. There are those who, fearful of further shocks, want to “wait and see what happens”—and this group too is not likely to in-

clude professional organizers. There are those who focus on fault, which they say is for the sake of analysis—here we are likely to find activists much more than professional organizers. And there are those who are convinced that if we only do more of what we've been doing and do it better, we'll yet succeed. Unfortunately, this last group is where we find most professional organizers, regardless of whether they are turf-based, faith-based, issue-based, identity-based, or what have you.

But how will doing more of the same help us to achieve the dream of an inclusive coalition that will fundamentally alter the powerlessness of the grassroots citizenry in the face of the forces of the reactionary right that are currently dominating our national life?

When the shock and despair of Election 2016 wear off, cool anger must drive the strategy and tactics of future coalition-building and campaigns. We must ask ourselves, in what arena are the fights to take place, and for what objectives? How are we to refocus our strategic vision to respond to this seemingly inescapable imbalance of power? And most critically, what are our weaknesses? The outcome of Election 2016 should drive organizing projects and federations of projects to rethink their overall strategies, which some have already begun to do.

One of the critical weaknesses of the progressive forces in the national political arena has been in their funding. The resource base for grassroots organizing by the progressive left has not kept pace with its strategic objectives to mount statewide and national campaigns. Funding sources have diminished rather than expanded in recent years. The Great Recession had a significant negative effect on foundation support for organizing.

Furthermore, few foundations have been interested in supporting organizing as a means to achieve major social change; although it's possible, given the intensity of liberal and progressive reactions to Election 2016, we could see a significant reversal and uptick in foundation funding for community organizing. Nonetheless, such increases may be relatively short-term and accompanied by the same demands for “wins” exclusive of “builds” which in the past have handicapped organizing projects and federations of projects from upscaling the

reach and effect of their campaigns.

The all-important Catholic Campaign for Human Development has in recent years been scaling back its commitment to organizing. And most recently we've had confirmation of what we've long suspected, which is that contributions to religious organizations have dropped precipitously, down 50 percent since 1990.³

The unique importance of religious institutions to the success of the progressive left requires us to consider carefully the decline in religious affiliation and contributions to religious organizations. The latter poses a long-term disability for faith-based organizing in its present incarnation, which relies *permanently* on dues from its religious organizational members, with no prospect of becoming self-sufficient.

This funding weakness cripples the ability of faith-based-organizing to challenge power-inequality beyond metropolitan and regional arenas. The ever-tightening of belts by those religious organizations will inevitably have them looking askance at the prospect of permanently supporting organizing activity that excels more at promises than actual performance in the national arena. The best example of that is the extraordinary energy invested over the past several years to achieve immigration reform, which has little to show for the effort, and now the prospect of even less achievement. With good reason, given their *resource limitations*, organizing projects are beginning to look locally and regionally for arenas in which they can leverage campaign targets much more effectively.

But even local and regional organizing initiatives face chronic limitations because of insufficient resources. With a model that relies so heavily on *permanent* foundation and religious organizational funding, their prospects for scaling up their resources are not promising, given what we have noted above about funding pull-backs of foundations and religious institutions.

Furthermore, the circumstance of power-inequality virtually guarantees that the forces of the reactionary right will remain infinitely better resourced than those of the progressive left for the foreseeable future. This is true because the reactionary right has taken overwhelming control of the institutional public powers of the state and national governments—that is, the powers to legislate, to tax, to spend public monies, to police, to take by eminent domain, and to market tax-free bonds. In contrast, the progressive left has remained doggedly an ad hoc movement, devoid of and disinterested in acquiring those institutional powers.

What's to be done? We could hope that the problem of power-inequality will go away on its own. Say, for example, the Trump Administration and Republican Congress make good on their promises to kill the Affordable Care Act, dismantle Social Security and Medicare, and implement further tax cuts for the upper-income brackets—they may simply poison their own well. But Trump and his minions are already demonstrating sufficient political savvy to scale back and implement incrementally the more extreme proposals he

made as a candidate. However, even if Trump loses the Presidency after one term and the Republicans lose their majority in the Senate, the inequality of *institutional* power will remain mostly undisturbed, as evidenced by the Republican take-over of the Congress after the Democratic sweep in 2008.

Another hope may be that Election 2016 represents the death rattle of the reactionary right, which is doomed by the inevitability of demographics. That would seem to explain the inclination to resurrect (endlessly) the vision of a national progressive coalition, with the anticipation of achieving significant power in the near future. Many professional community and congregational organizers believe that demographics are on our side and we need only double down on our organizing and wait for the inevitable growth in minority populations.

However, a critical question about the coming demographic changes in the electorate is how they will affect the “toss-up” states, those that ended up in the Republican column by only by a percentage point or two. Should we expect Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania to move to the left in the next few years because of inevitable demographic changes, in particular the growth of minority populations?⁴ The problem with that expectation is that the likelihood of a positive demographic effect—one that increases the power of the progressive left—is directly proportional to the current percentage of minority population in a given state. In other words, if the minority population of the state is now small, the likelihood of a positive electoral demographic effect in the future is small, and vice-versa. In short, the greater the percentage of white versus minority population, the less likely the demographic changes will be substantial enough to effect electoral outcomes. In fact, those states may become more conservative. If that's true, then Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—with *white* populations of 76 percent, 78 percent, and 82 percent respectively—are less likely to see growth in their minority electorates than California, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii—with *minority* populations of 61 percent, 65 percent, and 77 percent. In the final analysis, it seems mistaken to count on changing demographics to move the toss-up states from the red to the blue column, or to hope that those changes will cause a dramatic upswing in the national prospects of the progressive left.

Or, we could hope that the progressive left can overcome the cultural distance of the Heartland and the South. The virulence of the reaction against Clinton was not primarily in response to economic issues but *cultural* ones, which have been explored by many other commentators. Further, it seems doubtful Bernie Sanders would have done any better than Clinton. The Heartland and the South likely as not would have been just as offended by a socialist Jew who supports pluralism, multiculturalism, church-state separation, government intervention, same-sex marriage, abortion, affirmative action, and all the other social issue-positions they find abhorrent.⁵ The idea that the progressive left can

somehow politically mitigate this cultural distance, while a worthy ambition, does not offer a convincing strategic vision. The resources and know-how required to achieve it are not likely to materialize in the foreseeable future.

We should expect that single-issue and identity-based organizing will continue to hold the Trump Administration's feet to the fire for its policies and practices, appointments, and key nominations to high office—and we should support their doing so. But where, then, should faith-based and turf-based forces of the progressive-left be focused in the coming decade or two? It's obvious that their strength is in the major metropolitan areas, especially on the East and West Coasts. The dream of a unified national progressive coalition to achieve major influence at the state and federal levels should be set aside for at least a generation. The strongest argument for that conclusion is its repeated, worsening failures.

But that alone will not be enough. If we hope to transform the country's structural inequality of power, we will need to acquire institutional power to counter that which is exercised by the forces of the reactionary right. We must democratize metropolitan government and give the citizenry at the grassroots a powerful institutional voice and control of public powers, enabling them to leverage higher levels of government. Rather than engaging in an endless series of campaigns that fail to alter fundamentally the inequality of power, turf-based and faith-based federations joined together in unified campaigns (like the AFL and CIO merger) could build real, permanent, self-sustaining *directly democratic institutional power*, such as that exercised

by the directly democratic town governments of New England.⁶

As we have previously written: “We will need to distinguish between (1) building power—that is, organizing and mobilizing people in sufficient numbers to mount campaigns that leverage targets on issues (which is what grassroots organizing does); and (2) contending for state power—that is, using the power built through organization and mobilization to acquire control of those powers reserved to governments, which, as we have already noted, include the powers to legislate, to tax, to spend public monies, to police, to take by eminent domain, and to market tax-free bonds. These are the powers exercised by the people ‘in power’.”

By creating *directly democratic institutions of metropolitan government* that incorporate limited grants of the public powers listed above, the grassroots citizenry can permanently acquire the resources to sustain citizen action. Although we have explored this possibility in detail in two previous *Social Policy* articles (already cited above), we are convinced that Election 2016 substantially increases the necessity of this strategic vision.

If there is anything hopeful to be gained from Election 2016, it may be that many more Americans who suffer deep pain and deprivation as conditions deteriorate, will join the long uphill battle to revitalize democracy and achieve equality of power. Election 2016 may signal a sea change that moves us in that direction. Then the question is whether the progressive left in general and faith- and turf-based organizing in particular will refocus their strategic vision to offer the possibility of permanently *overcoming* the inequality of power that is poisoning American life.

¹ This article has been updated since originally published as “Refocusing our Strategic Organizing Vision” in *Social Policy*.

² See: Jason Abbott, Democracy@internet.org Revisited: analysing the socio-political impact of the internet and new social media in East Asia, *Third World Quarterly*, 33(2):333-357 (2012); Juliet E. Carlisle and Robert C. Patton, “Is Social Media Changing How We Understand Political Engagement? An Analysis of Facebook and the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 66(4):883-895 (2013); Farhad Manjoo, “Social Media’s Globe-Shaking Power,” *New York Times* (November 16, 2016); and J. Gregory Payne, “Impact of Social Media in 2012 Presidential Election,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(11):1535-1538 (2013).

³ See Alina Tugend, “Donations to Religious Institutions Fall as Values Change,” *New York Times* (November 3, 2016).

⁴ For more on this and related questions, see Mike Maciag, “A State-by-State Look at Growing Minority Populations,” *Governing the States and Localities* (June 25, 2015) [online at www.governing.com/topics/urban/gov-majority-minority-populations-in-states.html]; and Ruy Teixeira, William H. Frey, and Robert Griffin, *States of Change, The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1974-2060* (Center for American Progress, February 2015) [online at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2015/02/24/10726/states-of-change/>].

⁵ For a definitive accounting of the cultural alienation and its dynamics, see: Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones, “Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump,” PRRI/The Atlantic Report (May 9, 2017) [online at <https://www.prii.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-election-donald-trump>]. See also David Norman Smith and Eric Hanley, “The Anger Games: Who Voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Election, and Why?” *Critical Sociology*, 44(2):195-212 (February 9, 2018).

⁶ See our papers, “Public Powers for the Commonwealth: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing,” *Social Policy* (Winter 2015); and “Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform,” *Social Policy* (Spring 2016).

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