

THE WORLD NEWS II

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Political polarization between liberal/progressives and conservative/rightwing populists has deepened since the controversial 2000 election and especially since President Bush's declaration of the "War on Terrorism at home and abroad" after September 11. This intensified struggle over war and economics has overlapped with and shaped the political parties and elections.

I cannot think of a time in U.S. history where the far rightwing, steeped in racism as usual, held such sway over a major political party and influenced such a large portion of the general electorate. Since 1980 the far right has sought to eliminate the critical gains of the 1930s such as union rights, Social Security and unemployment insurance as well as the civil rights/voting rights,

reproductive rights, Medicare and war on poverty gains of the 1960s.

Having taken down ACORN, the rightwing now has its gun sights on public worker unions, non-profits, Planned Parenthood and trial lawyers. Today it is closer than ever to achieving these disastrous goals.

After decades of uneven participation, a significant number of social justice community organizations and organizers began to join the electoral fray in the last decade or more. Increasingly, community organizers have recognized that we cannot leave our communities to the gentle mercies of mainstream politicians and that we must enter this arena of struggle in order to win victories, build organizing scale, politicize our bases and contend for power. Although tentative and uneven, social justice organizers increasingly recognize that the electoral arena is a central battleground against the rightwing and for social justice and a key site for organizing.

However, today's social justice forces need to overcome a long history of left/progressive strategic confusion and division about elections. This is not surprising. In my opinion, the undemocratic and elitist character of the U.S. electoral (and governmental) system is one of the main pillars of corporate rule (along with settler colonialism/imperialism, racism/white supremacy and patriarchy) and one of the main obstacles to progressive work.

Many on the left have also inappropriately applied the theory and practice of Lenin and/or European or Latin American socialists whose political terrains are qualitatively different than in the U.S. Most either confront extremely weak states that can be toppled by force from the outside, or work within proportional representation systems that provide space for ideologically based third parties.

A recent positive trend is that some organizers have begun to blaze a new and very promising trail forward for social justice electoral work. Seeking to combat the alarming gains of the right as well as seeing the opportunity to forge a new majority arising from changing racial demographics, groups like California Calls (formerly the California Alliance), Virginia New Majority, Oakland Rising, Florida New Majority, the Southwest Organizing Project and others are developing new electoral strategies and practices. Simultaneously labor, civil rights groups, feminists and advocacy/voter groups are also re-thinking their electoral approach and scouring for new allies. This paper is meant to contribute to that process.

First it will discuss the left's strategic confusion and division regarding electoral strategy. Second it outlines the main elements of the electoral strategy of the rightwing, and argues that the left should pursue a very similar one. Third, it argues that a sound strategy needs to be based on familiarity with the historical/structural dynamics of national U.S.

electoral system. It then makes an initial analysis of the system's main elements that both exposes the class and racial biases of the system and also provides the basis of a viable left electoral strategy. Finally it proposes some of the main points of a left/progressive electoral strategy. The paper will only touch upon some of the biggest structural and strategic questions and will not venture much into the realm of the politics of 2012 or the numerous tactical or practical/operational questions of electoral work. While it argues for an integrated inside/outside strategy, the paper focuses on the electoral component of such a strategy.

I. Strategic Confusion and Division on the Left

In my opinion there were two periods in which the U.S. left deployed a basically sound and sophisticated inside/outside orientation to the Democratic Party and electoral politics: the 1930s (Communist Party/CIO/New Deal) and the 1980s (Rainbow Coalition/Jesse Jackson campaigns). Both of these were ultimately defeated due to a complex set of external and internal factors and are rich with lessons. Yet the sophisticated strategies they pursued were the exception rather than the rule. [Footnote 1]

First, there is a long history of progressive and left forces participating in the Democratic Party but failing to gain a significant or lasting degree of political strength or independence. Once entering Democratic politics, many deprioritize their efforts to build a powerful progressive force outside of the electoral arena. Consequently even those progressives (like the Democratic Socialists of America) who won substantial support from electeds and labor leaders did not gain enough mass power to successfully resist the pro-corporate moderate leadership of the party. This tendency is particularly pronounced among those who fail to recognize or act upon the fact that the main social base of progressive politics in the U.S. is the Black community. There is a lot of experience here that deserves close study, especially since many of these groups and individuals will be important allies as our work proceeds.

Second, the Democratic Party's betrayals of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s ushered in a long period of uneven participation, even total boycott, of electoral work by people and organizations who consider themselves radical or revolutionary. The corporate elite's control of both parties has led many such people and organizations to consider electoral work to be counterproductive or at best an episodic, purely tactical venture. After a brief breakthrough under the leadership of the Rev. Jesse Jackson in the 1980s (and partly in reaction to Jackson's own political shortcomings), many leftists again opted out or again tried to build third parties. This position has been strengthened by the fact that so many social justice forces are now located in non-profit organizations that are legally barred from partisan political work.

Some leftists seem to believe that social justice transformation can be achieved strictly from outside the electoral system. In my opinion this is a terrible mistake. The advanced capitalist countries have long constructed extremely stable regimes based on electoral systems deemed legitimate by most of their peoples. This is now true in a large number of developing countries as well, which has led many revolutionary groups such as the FMLN in El Salvador to switch to electoral rather than armed strategies. In countries with highly legitimized and powerful electoral systems, the road to system change is through, not around, the electoral system.

Electoral abstinence ignores the fact that, despite its unfair rules, elections are the principal path to governmental power in the U.S. and are accepted by the great majority of people in the U.S. as legitimate. Vastly more people participate in elections than any other form of political activity. Thus, participation in elections is a crucial arena for social justice forces to contend for political power and to politically interact with the broad masses of people.

Third, there is also a long history of determined but mostly small and short-lived attempts to build progressive third parties. The biggest such attempt was the Progressive Party in the late 1940s whose presidential candidate was Henry Wallace, the Vice President of the United States under Franklin Roosevelt. Recently, the main progressive third party energy has gone into building the Green Party. The most sophisticated recent effort was the New Party (1992-1998) which was derailed when the Supreme Court upheld a ban on cross-endorsing candidacies (sometimes called "fusion"), the heart of the legal/strategic basis of the party. Some of these experiences are also rich but in my opinion the main lesson is that the structure of the U.S. electoral system dooms such efforts to marginal status.

Of course, the problem facing left and progressive forces has not been purely strategic. It is, perhaps above all, practical. The elitist and racist biases, complexity, scale and cost of electoral work are immense, far outstripping any other forms of organizing. This is precisely because this arena requires true mass scale and power is directly at stake. In many ways, the left/progressive strategic confusion stems from the incredible difficulty of reaching the scale and sophistication to implement any strategy at all, or fears of losing, dealing with forces that are much more powerful, having to make complex compromises that might even lead to charges of selling out. However that confusion and division has made it impossible to systematically build our capacity to significant scale.

In recent years the determined efforts mounted by left and progressive forces such as Move On, Daily Kos, Progressive Democrats of America, Wellstone Action, Rebuild the Dream as well as social justice community organizing groups like California Calls, Virginia New Majority and Florida New Majority indicate that there is renewed

determination to make a breakthrough. In addition labor, which is absolutely core to any progressive front, is becoming more political independent and looking for allies, and the NAACP and other civil rights groups are reviving under new leadership. These are all building blocks of a stronger and more politically independent progressive alliance. But whether that potential is realized will depend in part on what strategies social justice activists and groups pursue.

II. United Strategy on the Right

Meanwhile, the vast majority of far rightwing forces united on a longterm electoral strategy as early as 1968 and since then have skillfully applied that strategy to achieve tremendous power. After decades of being the lunatic fringe of Klansmen, Nazis, survivalists, John Birchers and academic fringe, the far right went mainstream with a united, systematic and ultimately widely successful strategy starting with the 1964 nomination of Barry Goldwater for president and consolidated following the George Wallace third party campaign of 1968. Ironically, it was exactly in those years that the left was turning away from electoral work. And the right landed on a strategy that in many respects I suggest for the left as well.

Although the mix of racists, militarists and white Christian fundamentalists with ultra free marketeers, anti-government libertarians, ultra tax cutters, and others is in constant motion, the main elements of the far rightwing strategy have been remarkably stable:

First, it is a comprehensive and coordinated inside/outside strategy. The right builds large-scale issue and values based organizations and campaigns outside of the electoral process, but systematically connects them to their strategy to fight for influence inside the Republican Party and the government.

Second, it is a strategy that is simultaneously politically and ideologically connected to its core social base and yet whose purpose is to fight for control (not just influence) of the Republican Party as against the corporate moderates who have traditionally been the dominant forces. This strategy is politically consistent but tactically flexible, making alliances with corporate moderates and centrists where they deem it appropriate and fighting them tooth and nail when they assessed that the better tactical choice to advance their aims. Surely they have made many mistakes, but they have not shied from making these difficult choices.

Third, the whole premise of the strategy is to control the U.S. government as a whole. It is not a strategy just of “influence” or “impacting public policy and debate” but instead is a strategy for power and governance. This was a crucial break from the defensive, fringe (whether of the openly white supremacist type or the elitist National Review type), regionalist and often violent strategies of previous far right groups. Progressives and especially leftists, meanwhile, tend to project a holier than thou, fringe mentality and are usually holed up in the bluest communities in the bluest cities.

Fourth, the rightwing strategy is simultaneously a national-to-local strategy and a local-to-national strategy. The rightwing developed a massive cadre of candidates and electeds that started at the system’s most open space— local elections—and then lifted the most successful of those into candidates for higher office—all the way to the presidency. They built from the rightwing political base—especially conservative rural, affluent middle class suburbs (the tax revolt) and Southern/Rocky Mountain Christian racist traditionalists—and built outwards.

However, all this was done as a part of a unified national strategy, not disconnected local strategies. In addition, they simultaneously put up candidates for national and statewide office, from the presidency to congressional leadership to internal Republican Party posts, and organized major national issue and media campaigns and institutions, building from the top down and connecting the two.

Fifth, the strategy has alertly taken advantage of “movement moments” to qualitatively expand the rightwing rather than just building institutionally and incrementally. The Tea Party is the latest example. So was Sept. 11.

Sixth, the rightwing has built wide and even rotating leadership and tactical flexibility. They have managed to strengthen and broaden their coalition despite the many different racial, religious, economic, foreign policy and social agendas within it. It is impressive how the leaders, tactics and program have changed so many times since 1968 yet the right still maintained continuity in building power.

Seventh, the whole inside/outside strategy has a massive communications apparatus ranging from public relations and earned media to Internet, newspapers, radio and television programming, to think tanks/journals/academic institutions and all the way to ownership of hundreds of radio stations and several television networks such as Fox News. They clearly understand that the main struggle is for the hearts and minds of the public, without which organizing is extremely limited and politics quite futile.

I believe the rightwing strategy is based on an accurate analysis of the U.S. electoral and governmental systems, and

should be largely emulated by the left.

Of course, they have a formidable asset that we lack: Since the mid-1970s the majority of the corporate elite have moved steadily to the right in order to combat increased international capitalist competition and leverage new technology to increase profits. In so doing they have largely switched from supporting the Democratic Party (1932-1964) to backing the Republican Party, and to change political opinion and build electoral strength they have proffered tremendous ideological/communications, monetary and organizational support to the far right. The right has masterfully utilized that support to build its political independence and power, to the point that they now overshadow the corporate moderates of the party. A left/progressive effort will never receive that level of support from big corporations. And even if some decide to fight the right we will surely be in for some epic battles with them.

Also, the class and racial biases of the electoral system mostly work in the rightwing's (and especially the corporate elite's) favor. They have skillfully accentuated those biases with their version of "electoral reform," further limiting voting rights and tailoring the playing field to their advantage.

The right also took advantage of a highly unusual historical opportunity: The civil rights revolution led to a mass exodus of conservative/racist white people from their historic home in the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. The far right was able to set up much of the inside and outside infrastructure that mobilized and harnessed that new motion.

Perhaps our historic opportunity lies in the tremendous increase in people of color voters and the so-called rising American electorate of people of color, single women and youth. This is the heart of our strategic task. If we can mobilize these progressive voters and stabilize their infrastructure, this can be the stable social base of our electoral power and governance strategy.

III. Initial Analysis of the Structure of U.S. Electoral System and its Strategic Implications

Now it is time to take a big step back to examine the structural underpinnings of a viable electoral strategy. Strategy must be based on an accurate historical, structural/systemic and current day analysis if it is to be a viable, useful guide to action over the long run. Just as we must understand the systemic dynamics and structure of capitalism, racism or patriarchy to develop a strategy to fight them, so we must base an electoral strategy on a historical and structural analysis of the electoral system.

This paper is a limited, first shot out of the box, attempt at such an analysis. It will focus only on the main elements of the national system/structure of U.S. elections.

To begin, let's remember that any system or structure is above all the result of political struggle. It is not passed down by God, historically inevitable or the result of disinterested theoretical discussion of "indelible principles" or "natural rights" by the "Founding Fathers." Rather, the U.S. electoral system has been shaped and reshaped by the struggle of conflicting political forces on the ground in real historical time.

In understanding the U.S. electoral system, it is crucial to recall that the most powerful political force that shaped its constitutional basis were large slaveholders such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. These slaveholders were allied with Northern merchants who were tethered to the South since their business consisted largely of trade in Southern tobacco, rice and cotton. Slaves were nearly a quarter of the population but had almost no political power and workers/artisans had little power (Thomas Paine, however, was there champion).

The victorious Founding slaveholders and merchants were, not surprisingly, concerned to institutionalize their power and create political stability under their leadership. The class and racial bias of the electoral system was quite overt: only white male property holders were allowed to vote (cementing an alliance of slaveholders, merchants and small white landowning farmers) and state legislators, not the limited voters, chose the president (through an Electoral College) and senators.

The initial U.S. electoral system was an integral part of the newly formed white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal state.

Over time, a combination of systemic dysfunction and popular struggles has dramatically altered the electoral system. Non-property owners, women and African Americans have successfully struggled for the right to vote and many (certainly not all) governmental leaders are elected by popular vote.

Yet despite these great victories, today's ruling elite and ruling alliance have made sure that our electoral system still retains tremendous bias towards the rich, especially the corporate elite, and towards conservative white affluent and rural voters. The challenge to progressives is to develop and implement an inside/outside strategy that enables us to gather enough power to democratize the system and ultimately govern the country in the interests of people of color,

poor folks, women and workers.

A. The Structure of White, Corporate Power, Part 1: Presidential and Electoral College System

What is the structure of corporate and white power in the U.S. electoral system today?

The national electoral system has three main features: (1) it is a presidential system that utilizes an Electoral College; (2) it is a winner-take-all, single member district system; (3) it is a federal system. This paper will now examine each in turn, drawing out their strategic implications.

Most democratic systems allow voters to directly elect the members of the national legislature (usually called a parliament or congress) and then the party that wins a majority or plurality of legislative members chooses the head of state (usually called the prime minister) through an inner party (or coalition if no single party wins the majority) process, not through a popular election. This “parliamentary system” gives rise to strong, politically defined parties that are often organized down to the grassroots and workplaces.

By contrast, the U.S. adopted a “presidential system” whereby the president is personally elected by the voters (via the Electoral College). State governors are also directly elected. Such a system means that U.S. parties are shaped by candidates and officeholders, rather than by longterm party leaders or ideology, let alone a definite social base. U.S. parties are wide coalitions led by revolving candidates/electeds with vague politics that appeal to multiple constituencies that are generally not strongly organized and often have conflicting interests. (This also presents significant opportunities for progressives (and others) to organize within the parties.)

The U.S. system is made even more unique (and biased) by the invention of an Electoral College to elect the president rather than election through direct popular vote. As I will explain, today the Electoral College system of this country ensures, even requires, that nearly half of voters of color be marginalized or totally ignored, violates the principle of one person, one vote by significantly overweighting the votes of conservative rural voters and gives conservative Republicans a major advantage in presidential contests. [Footnote 2]

The Founding slaveholders invented the Electoral College out of thin air to serve their interests.

They codified the notorious idea that slaves were non-humans, and thus deserving of no constitutional or human rights. The one exception to this rule was the stipulation that slaves were to be counted as three-fifths of a person—but solely for the purpose of determining how many congressional representatives each state would be allotted. The three-fifths rule thereby vastly increased the slaveholders’ representation and power in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Electoral College was invented as the institutional means to transfer that same pro-slavery congressional allocation to determining the presidency. It does so by providing to each state a number of Electors equal to the size of its congressional delegation. With a lock on the House of Representative and the presidency thanks to the three-fifths rule, slaveholders held the presidency for 50 of the 72 years. Nary an even soft critic of slavery was elected until Abraham Lincoln declared against the expansion of slavery. Gravely insulted, the slaveholders promptly seceded.

Since the end of slavery the Electoral College has remained a racist and conservative instrument that gave undue power to Southern white supremacists. Since reactionary Southerners switched en masse from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party in protest of the 1960s civil rights legislation, the College has given the Republicans a running head start to win the presidency.

The racial bias embedded in the Electoral College system is the structural basis of the notoriously racist and highly successful Southern Strategy pursued by the Republicans over the last forty years. The winner-take-all Electoral College system ensures, even requires, that about half of all voters of color be marginalized or totally ignored. Here’s how it works:

About 53 percent of all Blacks live in the Southern states, and they normally vote about 90 percent Democratic. However, in almost every election white Republicans out-vote them in every Southern state and every border state except Maryland.

Every single other southern Electoral College vote was awarded to Bush in 2000 and 2004. While whites voted 54-42 for Bush nationally in 2000, southern whites gave him over 70 percent of their votes in both 2000 and 2004. They thus completely erased the massive Southern Black vote for the Democrats in that region.

The Electoral College result was the same as if African Americans in the South had not voted at all.

Similarly negated were the votes of millions of Native American and Latino voters who live in overwhelmingly white Republican states like Arizona, Oklahoma, Utah, the Dakotas, Montana and Texas. Further, the peoples of Puerto

Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa and Guam—“territories” (read colonies) ruled by the U.S.—get no Electoral College votes at all. What Lani Guinier calls the “tyranny of the white, conservative majority” prevails.

Compounding the reactionary and pro-Republican bias of the Electoral College, the system gives as much as three times as much weight to the mainly conservative and white Republicans in the rural states compared to states with large, racially diverse and majority Democratic populations.

For example, Wyoming has a little more than 240,000 voters but despite its small population is awarded three Electoral College votes. Although the average population per congressional seat is about 700,000 (with varying numbers of voters but always much greater than Wyoming’s 240,000), every state no matter how small is guaranteed a minimum of two Senators and one congressperson. Consequently Wyoming has about one Electoral vote for every 80,000 or so voters. By comparison large population states like California receive about one Electoral College vote for every 220,000 voters. The small population states are almost all rural and Republican while the large ones have major urban centers and vote mostly Democratic. The Electoral College system thus gives a major edge to the Republicans.

The maps below show that almost 150 years after the abolition of slavery, the political patterns wrought by the “peculiar institution” still shape U.S. politics.

The first is the map of slave versus Free states and territories just prior to the Civil War. The other is the electoral map of the 2004 election. Depressingly, they are almost identical: the former slave areas are almost universally Republican and the former free areas, with a couple of exceptions, are Democratic.



Map of 2004 Presidential Election Results

Moreover, in almost all cases, the election in each district is on a winner-take-all basis: only one person is elected from each district (or in the case of the Electoral College, all but two states give all of their electoral votes to whichever candidate gets the most votes).

This system is highly undemocratic, racially and class biased.

First, the biggest beneficiary of the single member district, winner-take-all system is big money, especially real estate developers at the local level and big corporations at the national and state levels but also the affluent in general. The reason is that the winner-take-all system imposes tremendous costs on meaningful participation and minimizes the impact of grassroots organization. And, instead of having one national election for all seats, the single member district (and federal) system geometrically increases the number of elections and therefore the costs of attempting to win. Folk with few resources, especially people of color, are highly disadvantaged. [Footnote 4]

Second, people of color also lose in another way, since there are so few districts in which they constitute either a political majority or can assemble a coalition that can win. We've already noted how that shuts out Black voters in the South in the Electoral College system. But the same de facto disenfranchisement happens to many people of color voters in the vast majority of gubernatorial, congressional, legislative and local races. People of color are usually either consigned to the role of ignored junior partners or ignored altogether. This is a major reason driving low voter participation in communities of color.

Third, the system shuts out all political minorities. But in this case "political minorities" means the vast majority of all voters. The reason why this fate strikes most voters is that there are so few battleground districts, that is, districts that are truly competitive between the two parties instead of clearly being a Red or Blue district.

We have all learned by now that there are usually no more than four or five battleground states in a presidential election. But less publicized is the fact that there are also precious few congressional and legislative races. Almost all electoral districts are clearly Blue or Red. If you are a Red voter in a Blue district, your vote counts for nothing, and vice versa. Together, this includes the vast majority of voters.

This is a major reason for the dismal turnouts in U.S. elections (barely 50 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in presidential elections, as few as five percent in local elections). This starkly highlights the undemocratic nature of the system. Not surprisingly, the color and income of those who actually vote is skewed to higher income, older, and more conservative white people. (However, if we can motivate progressive voters, this can also present opportunities.)

Fourth, it is the winner-take-all, single member district system that causes two party dominance. Most democracies in the developing world and in the advanced capitalist countries utilize systems of proportional representation. In such systems, all parties that win a certain minimum of the popular vote (often five percent) win representation in the Congress (or Parliament or city council) equal to their percentage of the total vote, even if they don't win a plurality or majority in a single parliamentary race.

Proportional representation systems give representation and power to minority political parties (and the voters that vote for them) in a fair manner, while preserving majority rule.

By contrast our winner-take-all system shuts out political minorities. In a system of proportional representation small parties can participate in lawmaking and have a national political voice, and can also thereby systematically attempt to build their strength while fighting for their constituencies. In a winner-take-all system a party (and its voters) that cannot outright win an election has no power and consequently is consigned to marginality or disappearance.

Thus, for example, the German Green Party, which maxed out at about seven percent of the vote, had significant power in Germany and was long a part of the ruling coalition in that country. If we had such a system, a racial and economic justice party could be quite powerful. Instead, someone like Jesse Jackson, who won 30 percent of the Democratic popular vote in 1988, is not a viable candidate and ended up with precious little power.

Worse, the system not only marginalizes third parties, it absolutely punishes them by helping their starkest opponents. For example a leftwing third party draws votes away from the Democrats, thereby helping the Republicans to defeat them. Similarly a rightwing third party takes votes from the Republicans and aids their defeat by the Democrats. [Footnote 5]

The rightwing learned these lessons well after a series of disastrous third party efforts in the 1960s, and have since singularly pursued a strategy to fight for the Republican Party. Meanwhile, a significant part of the left, sometimes referencing the experience of socialists in Europe or Latin America that have proportional representation systems, still fantasizes about a purely progressive third party. This is political suicide until our electoral system is transformed, and our system can only be changed if we gain significant power within (and outside) it. [Footnote 6]

Third parties are even ineffective when it comes to the limited task of “raising issues” or “impacting the debate.” This is because parties that have no real chance to win are presumed illegitimate, can raise few funds and get virtually no hearing. By contrast progressive candidacies in Democratic primaries often gain a wide public platform. One of the systemic problems of our electoral system—winner-take-all, presidential and federal—also provide an opening: parties that contain a very wide and fairly loose political coalition in which progressives have considerable room to maneuver at different levels (national, fifty states, tens of thousands of localities) and with hundreds of primaries to contest.

Additionally, progressives constitute a large portion of the Democratic vote nationally and in many congressional, legislative and local districts. We therefore very often have a real chance to win, or at least to be competitive. We thus gain access to public debates and news coverage, and often attract enough financial support to buy significant media and mount major organizing drives. Thousands of progressive local candidates have taken advantage of these conditions, spearheaded by the numerous progressive blacks who won office in formerly white-dominated districts following the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, including many of the largest cities in the country.

One need only compare Rev. Jesse Jackson’s tremendously influential campaigns to the pitiful ones of Ralph Nader. The lesson is that progressives can have much greater political and ideological impact by running candidates in Democratic primaries than running as third party candidates at all levels of government.

Democratic primaries also tend to have more democratic rules than general elections. For example almost all states have adopted proportional representation in primary elections that govern the allocation of delegates to the national convention that chooses the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate. The fact that the system also dictates weak and shifting parties is also an opening for progressive work within the Democratic Party, making it relatively easy to organize within the Democratic Party and to run candidates.

Bad as it is, the winner-take-all, single member district system provides other openings and opportunities. It points to the central importance of fighting for favorable redistricting every ten years. This is especially true because the Voting Rights Act of 1965, despite numerous attacks, still governs redistricting and is one of the strongest anti-racist electoral laws in the country. Careful analysis of districts should also enable us to develop clear strategies for where progressives can run impressive primary fights, where we really have a chance to win, where we can help Democrats defeat Republicans, and where we might even decide to help a moderate Republican defeat a rightwinger as part of an anti-right strategy. Analysis of districts is the basis for successful national, state and local electoral strategies. All of these provide excellent mass organizing opportunities.

With skill we can identify key battleground districts at every level, both those that are battleground today but those that, with our work, we can make into battleground districts in the future. For example Texas is not a battleground presidential state at present, but its demographic trends make it clear that it will soon become one. The same is true for Mississippi. We can also identify districts where a progressive might challenge a moderate Democrat.

In short, a unified inside/outside strategy of fighting for political independence and a struggle for the Democratic Party (including primaries) and the electorate is dictated by the winner-take-all structure of our electoral system. [Footnote 7]. The winner-take-all system is unfair and undemocratic, but that does not mean we can ignore it or not participate, any more than we can ignore capitalism, racism or patriarchy. Instead we must develop effective strategies within it as well as bend major efforts to reform and transform it.

C. Structure of U.S. Elections, Part 3: Federalism

Another key element of our electoral system is federalism. Instead of a single unified national system of elections, the Founding Fathers created a “federal” system in which power is divided between the national government, state governments and local governments. Historically this system has allowed Southern slaveholders and segregationists to set up white supremacist state and local regimes, and given them undue power at the national level. It has also made it extremely difficult to hold the “government” responsible for inequities and injustices, as power is spread between so many governments in the U.S.

This means that a significant amount of power over the election system is conferred on each level of government, and therefore the system may vary by state and locality. For example, Maine and Nebraska choose their Electors by congressional district rather than winner-take-all for the whole state. It means that, strategically, progressives must develop distinct strategies that fit the rules (and other conditions) of each electoral district, and can identify particular offices and districts that we have a good chance of winning at each level, but especially the local level.

The rightwing successfully used the federal system to simultaneously build from the national level to the local level, but also from the local level to the national level in terms of inner party rules, candidates, party leadership, platform, etc. We must do the same.

IV. Initial Thoughts on Left/Progressive Electoral Strategy

Conservatives and rightwingers have been kicking our ass for more than thirty years. They have dramatically disfigured the political and economic landscape of the country in favor of the corporate one percent and the racist populists and against people of color, poor people, the labor movement and women.

The main line of thought of this essay is that social justice forces need to develop and unite on a sound, longterm electoral strategy if we are to become a major political force in this country. We cannot continue build strong foundations if we continue to pursue short term “strategies” that are constantly changing. I believe that many progressives, from social justice community organizers to labor to progressive voter, feminist and civil rights groups are actively searching for new strategies and new alliances.

This paper argues for a methodology as well as a strategy. The methodology is that strategy is best based on a historically based structural analysis (or in old terminology “class analysis”) of the system that one wishes to change; strategy cannot be developed simply based on vision or values or transferred from the experience of people working in different systems. In this case, the historically specific structure of the electoral system is the terrain upon which we must develop a strategy.

Just as the main battles against capitalist exploitation take place within its main structures—workplaces and communities—(rather than within idealistic alternatives such as cooperatives or utopian communities that may make some positive contributions but involve precious few people and have no chance of curbing let alone transforming the corporate system), we must fight the political power of the elite by entering the main structures of the electoral system as opposed to setting up idealistic third parties outside of it. Similarly progressive have long fought to win union office and transform unions as opposed to setting up small, purely left alternative unions. Staying outside the political and economic structures of U.S. capitalism might make us feel pure, but such a strategy would isolate us from the broad masses who have no choice but to participate in them and would leave the power structures to the elites without a fight.

Of course, within these structures we must develop a strategy to struggle and transform, not just to participate. Thus, while bending our efforts to reform and transform the U.S. electoral system on democratic lines, we must simultaneously develop a strategy that will enable us to gain real power for change.

In my opinion, the main outlines of such a strategy are:

First, we need a unified inside/outside strategy. We need to unite campaigning, street mobilization, community organizing, labor organizing, advocacy and electoral work. We need to organize inside and outside elections, the Democratic Party and the halls of power. An integrated strategy would modulate the precise weight, strategy and tactics of inside and outside work according to the changing concrete conditions, but will always require a major inside as well as outside effort. If we move into “inside” work without a powerful outside, we will be weak and isolated, or be forced to simply capitulate. If we do “outside” work without a complementary inside, we will be marginalized from power and dissipate.

Second, we need to expose and fight the elitist and racist biases of the electoral system and fight for electoral reform and transformation to democratize the system. This is critical to fully unleash and organize the power of the new majority that is an unstoppable progressive trend. We need genuinely mass political organizations that can identify and carry out political strategies that are not restricted by non-profit rules and funding guidelines or labor jurisdictions, even as we continue to build the effectiveness and strength of non-profits and unions.

Third, our strategy needs to be politically clear and connected to our core progressive social base of people of color, poor folk, labor, women, youth and students. We need to build a clearly identifiable and politically powerful left/progressive pole within and outside the Democratic Party that can mobilize our expanding base. At the same time, this left/progressive alliance/formation must have the tactical flexibility to make the broad alliances necessary to fight for influence and eventual control of the Democratic Party as against the corporate centrists who currently dominate it. We cannot confine ourselves to the Bluest cities and towns; most importantly we need a strong emphasis on the South and Southwest where the majority of people of color live yet still suffer under rightwing regimes. It is also crucial that we understand that an enormous number of white allies, especially workers, women and youth, are not optional or tactical, but absolutely key to a winning left/progressive strategy.

Fourth, we must have a governance strategy, not a strategy just of “influence” or “impacting public policy and debate” and certainly not a strategy of staying on the fringe. This means having the confidence and approach to enter and contend for control the largest public arenas and institutions. It also means that we must systematically contend for the centerpiece of elections—elected office—at all levels and not confine ourselves to voter registration or GOTV or strictly local office. The people and the country need us, but only if we take ourselves seriously enough to prepare to govern.

Fifth, we must be prepared to build both broad and ecumenical progressive coalitions in order to build real power within the Democratic Party, but to simultaneously play a major role in an “anti-right” front against the Republicans and rightwingers who are our main enemies. We must learn to unite with centrists and all who can be united against the main instrument of corporate and rightwing rule, the Republican Party. At the current moment, a broad anti-right front is the key to defending our communities and expanding left/progressive influence.

Progressives will always have basic differences with moderate Democrats and there will be many times when they may be strong opponents, especially in inner-party fights like primaries or when they are in power. However, nationally speaking, progressives that aim their main fire at moderate Democrats at a time when Republicans are clearly the most dangerous threat do our peoples a disservice and are likely doomed to the fringe. There is much to learn in the way the rightwing navigates this difficult unity/struggle relationship with moderate Republicans. This is a highly complex project but one that we must learn to master.

Sixth, we need to simultaneously work national, state and local strategies. We must pick our tactical emphases with an eye toward our potential South by Southwest by urban strength, building from the bottom up based on a national strategy while simultaneously entering the largest national arenas of struggle and power. We need to build timely powerful outside national and local campaigns that can geometrically increase our strength as well as engage the day to day door knocking and workplace organizing.

Seventh, we need to dramatically broaden and deepen our concept and practice of communications work if we are to reach millions and fight for public opinion. Unless we can win public opinion, organizing will be slow and expensive, and we will be on the defensive. We must help create the conditions in which people are self-organizing and looking for progressive organizations and candidates by the tens of thousands and millions, not just the dozens or hundreds.

There are many more strategic, tactical and operational/practical elements to a sound strategy. Some of these like the crucial role of non-electoral organizing and campaigning, and the importance of building a relationship with labor, are implied but not elaborated in this essay. Moreover, a structural and landscape analysis of each state and local electoral system is also necessary to a more fully developed strategy. Hopefully, however, I have provided some substantial ideas that will be useful to consider in the critical process of advancing social justice electoral work in the coming years.

Once we really start becoming a powerhouse, a whole new set of strategic and practical issues will come upon us. How to make fundamental social change in advanced capitalist countries is a historic strategic dilemma of radicals and revolutionaries throughout the world. Given the U.S. left’s current weaknesses, this is mainly a matter of speculation in this country. However it is hoped that deploying a unified inside/outside strategy described in this paper may enable us to make a breakthrough in becoming a serious force in national politics and in turn put that question on the table in a practical way.

FOOTNOTES

1: *Bill Fletcher, Jr., has been one of the most consistent advocates of fashioning an updated version of the Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition strategy. See Danny Glover and Bill Fletcher, Jr., “Visualizing a Neo-Rainbow,” <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0127-24.htm> and the documents of the now dormant Aurora Project at <http://aurorawa.wikispaces.com/Background+Documents>.*

2: *Lani Guinier was a pioneer critic Electoral College and other forms of electoral racism and inequity, as well as ideas for electoral reform. See, for example, Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy*

3: *One of the strongest analyses of the winner-take-all system is Steven Hill, Fixing Elections: The Future of America’s Winner-take-all Politics. I particularly recommend the first three chapters.*

4: *It also leads to the possibility of one party holding the presidency and another holding the congress, thus producing gridlock. This weak U.S. party system is further emphasized by the fact that congressional members are chosen in staggered elections, every two years. A structural analysis of the U.S. governmental system is also badly needed but beyond the scope of this essay.*

5: *Centrist third parties do the same: the Reform Party of Ross Perot was the most successful third party in recent history owing in significant part to the many millions of dollars Perot spent on it. It drew most of its votes from people who otherwise would have voted Republican, thereby propelling Bill Clinton to victory with only 43 percent of the vote. As soon as Perot withdrew his vast millions, the party quickly evaporated from the political landscape.*

6: *It is true that progressive third parties have won elections in some extremely progressive local districts. But such a*

strategy cuts its proponents off from progressives (most notably the main progressive base of African American and Latino voters) in the rest of the country.

7. A sophisticated but in my opinion limited third party strategy is the "fusion" strategy of the Working Families Party of New York. Fusion refers to strategy of developing a progressive party separate from the Democrats, but which can ally with the Democrats and vice versa. For example such a third party might back Democrats in some districts (or in the presidential) but run its own candidates backed by Democrats in others. The good thing about such a strategy is that it avoids the disaster of third parties helping Republicans to win by allying with Democrats rather than competing for votes with them. The problem is that fusion is legal only in a few states. Even where it is legal, fusion parties cannot compete for progressive politics within the Democratic Party where the vast majority of progressive voters are and which wields far greater power than a fusion party.

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