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# Mainstream Politics

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From its inception, *democracy* has advocated a revitalized participatory democracy of citizen politics, locally based, rooted in tradition and place, scaled to the dimensions of political rather than economic man. Sharing the view of the traditional left, the new radical rejects the centralized, corporate managerial, and technocratic state, driven by economic, acquisitive man, as the antithesis of democracy. But departing from the left of old, the new radical is highly skeptical of democratic socialism as a viable alternative. He sees economic man at the center of democratic socialism and fears that the centralized, bureaucratic, economic means it prescribes for achieving a more just redistribution of wealth and power in society may also eclipse democratic citizenship and local empowerment.

What then is the alternative way to a democratic future? *democracy's* contributors have offered much diagnosis, little prescription. That is not to say that cures are easy to come by. The new democratic radical wisely rejects violent revolution as ultimately antidemocratic and counterrevolutionary. A new political party may be encompassed within the general call for new institutions, but it is hard to be sanguine about third-party prospects given their marginal role in recent times.

Mainstream politics fares no better in these pages. The Democratic party is viewed alternatively as "bankrupt" or captured by the same corporate interests that dominate the Republican party. The Reagan election provides added justification to turn away from "conventional national institutions of political parties, elections, Congress, and the presidency." Ground Zero and major environmental organizations are characterized as "pseudodemocratic" and led by those who only "conceive of political participation as the opportunity to be informed by experts." *democracy's* alternative is the "backyard revolution," the myriad of citizen organizations and community development groups that have organized over the last decade and a half to battle for fair utility rates, rent control, poor people's housing and economic development needs, tax reform, consumer rights, and a livable environment.

I share the belief that a democratic future in America depends in part on the viability of the new local citizen organizations. They have demonstrated through

their imaginative strategies, tenacity, and energy that democracy is alive, if not well, in America. ACORN in the West, Massachusetts Fair Share in the East, the Highlander Center in Appalachia, TWO in Chicago, SEASHA and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in the South are some of the many ongoing democratic experiments that deserve support and encouragement.

However, in our present political state, this cannot be accomplished if democratic radicals turn their backs on mainstream political institutions and processes. The backyard revolution cannot prosper, let alone survive, without national, state, and local government programs to support and expand community organizations and to provide the resources to achieve their goals of local empowerment and community regeneration. The lesson of recent history is that such programs need to be shaped and instituted by citizens themselves. This requires marshalling of power at the ballot box and within the only political party at all receptive to the needs of the disenfranchised, the Democratic party.

**A**s citizen organizations well know, the backyard revolution was the creation of liberal federal programs enacted as part of the Johnson administration's Great Society. The core of that program was not the series of monetary or in-kind transfer payments (in large measure instituted by the Nixon administration), but programs of political empowerment such as the Voting Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The EOA established Head Start, Legal Services, VISTA, and the Community Action Program (CAP), with its requirement of "maximum feasible participation of the poor." The unstated but explicit purpose of these programs was to create political organizations for the poor. In literally hundreds of communities, federal funds were made available to assist local groups. VISTA supported volunteers who were in fact organizers. Head Start gave citizens a new leverage over public education institutions. The legal services program provided the means for community organizations to challenge discriminatory barriers to a score of government programs. And the CAPs, at the hub, established power bases for the formerly disenfranchised from which they could take on city hall. As community organizations took hold, they tapped other federal grant and loan programs for community development resources: the Economic Development Administration provided economic development planning and development grants; Housing and Urban Development funded housing projects controlled by community groups; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare funded health maintenance organizations and clinics under the direction of client groups; the Department of Labor provided job training funds that underwrote salaries for employees in community-owned businesses. Even the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration provided grants to community organizations to make their neighborhoods safer.

Without recounting the whole sad history, the Great Society experiment in

community empowerment has all but terminated. Imposed from the top down—where was the public mandate for a program in 1964?—and a threat to established power centers, OEO was immediately and constantly attacked by vested interests. The Vietnam War led to a diminution in funding (insufficient to begin with) and diverted the attention and commitment of the Johnson administration. When many on the Democratic party's left abandoned Humphrey because of the war, the Nixon administration came to power committed to OEO's dismantlement and a shift from what Daniel Patrick Moynihan called "maximum feasible misunderstanding" to benign neglect: instead of institutions in which they had some measure of control, the poor and disenfranchised were to receive welfare through a negative income tax.

Community organizations were able to survive and even expand during the seventies for two principal reasons: Watergate and liberal foundations. Watergate postponed the gutting of many of the great programs that provided resources and development opportunities for community groups. Although the CAP program was severely curtailed, foundations such as Ford and Field stepped in to make core support grants to community development organizations across the country. National organizations such as the Urban League, Urban Coalition, Center for Community Change, and National Council of La Raza served as brokers for community groups with federal grant-making agencies. Grants were weaved together to support community organization development and service strategies, including water and sewer construction, cooperative farming ventures, supermarkets, low-cost housing and rental unit construction, clinics, day care centers, and job training programs. Staff were supported by core foundation grants. Foundation loans secured bank financing for various community ventures. The Watergate scandal not only brought down the Nixon administration, it also halted the plans for a "New Federalism" that would have replaced categorical grants by block grants. If it had been enacted, the New Federalism would have deprived community groups of the leverage supplied to them by categorical grants and would have returned power to the state houses and city halls.

Watergate and the public distrust of government it generated helped to elect Jimmy Carter to the presidency and gave community empowerment a new lease on life. Carter appointed community organization supporters to key positions in HUD, HEW, USDA, Commerce, and Labor who in turn made sizable grants both to national community organization broker organizations (for example, the National Urban League) and community groups to support community development. In fact, an untold story of the Carter administration is how its commitment of funds dwarfed previous administrations' efforts on behalf of community self-development. To cite one example, of 700,000 public service jobs provided under Carter's CETA program, almost one-third were sponsored by community-based organizations. Fearful throughout the Nixon years that drastic curtailment of funding was always in the offing, the community groups had

new hope that the center would hold during the Carter administration. Of course, it did not.

**T**he Reagan election and the social program budget cuts have been an unmitigated disaster for community organizations. The dismantlement, begun by Howard Phillips in 1969, is being completed by David Stockman in 1983. Most of the programs that community groups have counted on for community empowerment have been severely curtailed or, as Stockman puts it, "zeroed out": EDA, Urban Development Grants, CETA and other job training programs, rural development loans, legal services, health maintenance programs, and a score of others. By one estimate more than one and one-half billion dollars in annual federal program cuts directly supported community organization infrastructure. While Congress resists some of these cuts, key programs are now being administered by right-wing ideologues dedicated to "defunding the left." Internal hit lists have surfaced marking for termination every VISTA project supportive of community groups. Support grants to national organizations have not been renewed. For example the National Urban League has lost all of its \$15 million in annual grants used to provide community assistance through its 130 affiliates across the country. On the local level, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives that controlled \$2.5 million in federal funds before the Reagan years now controls just \$200,000.

By necessity, leaders and participants in community organizing efforts are returning to or redoubling their efforts to gain power and influence within existing political institutions, particularly the Democratic party. Because they can ill afford a repeat of the 1980 debacle in 1984 or count on the good will of democratic office-holders to support community empowerment, community activists are pursuing a number of strategies designed to secure the party's commitment to their needs. In the 1960s, groups demanded power from the outside through the civil rights, consumer, and environmental movements, and significant programs were won only to be curtailed when other priorities (the Vietnam War) or hostile administrators intervened. This time, community leaders seek to be insiders who both design programs and channel funds. In 1982 a number of community leaders won elected office in the Democratic party. In California, Esteban Torres, a former leader of TELECU (The East Los Angeles Community Union), was elected to Congress. Tom Hayden, founder of the Campaign for Economic Democracy, was elected to the California State Assembly. In Texas, Jim Hightower, former public interest advocate of small family farming and a foe of giant agribusiness, was elected State Agriculture Commissioner. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives elected three local officials in Sumpter County, Alabama. In the District of Columbia, Marian Barry, former head of Pride, Inc., was reelected mayor. Civil rights leader Andrew Young became the mayor of

Atlanta. They join a growing number of mayors, city council members, and state representatives who gained experience in OEO programs and who share a commitment to programs and institutions of community empowerment.

In addition to seeking office, community activists are helping to organize voters to elect candidates to office who can be counted on to support community self-development projects. In Arkansas, ACORN's network played a crucial role in returning Bill Clinton to the governorship in 1982. Community activists led the voter registration drive in California that almost elected Tom Bradley governor of that state. In Chicago, Jesse Jackson's "Operation Push" and other community groups registered enough voters to give Harold Washington an upset win in the Democratic mayoralty primary, and to carry that victory through to his election.

The most ambitious strategy to affect the agenda of the Democratic party is Jesse Jackson's suggestion to have a black leader enter the presidential primaries both to encourage blacks to register to vote and to gain delegates to the Democratic Convention and thus force the Democratic party to take minority community needs seriously as a price of their support at the polls.

Community-based organizations are not alone in seeking new leverage through mainstream politics. Environmental organizations, far from merely collecting dues and practicing elitist politics, turned out hundreds of volunteers and provided key financial support to elect a score of environmentalists to public office in 1982, including Jeff Bingaman to the Senate in New Mexico. Citizen groups also provided the foot soldiers for support of the nuclear freeze initiatives across the country and are taking that fight to the Congress this year where they may have the votes to pass a resolution in the House. A freeze on nuclear weapons is now a policy of the Democratic party leadership and sure to be a part of its 1984 party platform.

The question for the new radical is whether to join community activists in conventional mainstream politics to capture power within existing political institutions. Is the effort to seek power within the Democratic party a dead end, or a democratic agenda encouraging a revival of participation? Are there reasons for participation even though the prospects of moving the Democratic party to embrace a true democratic agenda may be remote in the near term?

In advocating that we follow the example of community leaders, environmentalists, and others in making an effort both to shape the agenda of the Democratic party and to make the party responsive to programs that foster community self-determination, I am not advocating that other radical agendas should be abandoned. Community organizing work must continue. Efforts to democratize unions, reshape the universities, and foster worker control of companies must go on at the same time. But given the Reagan counterrevolution and the need for programmatic support for the backyard revolution and other critical goals, serious attention must be given to conventional politics.

**T**he conviction that the Democratic party is bankrupt or dominated by the big oil and other vested interests may be in part true but does not condone or justify outright rejection by the democratic left. Obviously, the party, built on big defense and big social programs paid for out of the fiscal dividends of an expanding economy, has lost its way in the economic wilderness of the new austerity brought on by a declining economy. That its leadership offers more tax cuts to big business than Reagan and that elements within the party support Caspar Weinberger's defense budget is cause for revulsion.

But the Democratic party unlike the Republican party is not one dimensional or committed to a minimalist state ideology hostile to democratic interests and constituencies. Since at least the period of the New Deal, it has provided a big tent under which a host of otherwise irreconcilable groups have attempted to find common ground for gaining power and governing and who share the common belief that government is a positive, active means for solving social problems and ameliorating the effects of economic discontinuities. It is the party of the South with its history of segregation as well as the party of the blacks and other minorities. It is the party of ethnic working-class citizens who want to preserve their neighborhoods and the party of liberals committed to integration and full civil rights for all citizens. It is the party of the smokestack industries and the environmentalists. It is the party of the consumer who wants lower prices and the farmer who wants price supports. It is the party that fostered the Vietnam War and the party that called for its termination.

When these interests coalesce, the Democratic party can win national power and govern. When they do not (as in 1968, 1980), the Republican party can pick up the pieces and in combination with its ideological base in the West and Sunbelt, take power. Knowing this, the Democratic party drives toward a consensus and is by necessity responsive to pressure from minorities, environmentalists, and the democratic left. As a case in point, after the 1982 election and a twenty-six-seat gain in the House, the Democratic party majority is now prepared to support a repeal of some of the tax cuts, restore funding for social programs previously cut, provide new job programs, and cut the rate of increase in defense spending.

Of course, such minimal gains are not enough to restructure the economy, decentralize economic power, or encourage wider citizen participation. The Democratic party will not move in those directions unless that agenda is pressed, and one way to do this is to build a constituency within the Democratic party committed to its reorientation. Another would be to establish a third party movement around such an agenda, knowing that if it was successful, the Democratic party would move to encompass it in the same way it incorporated the socialist and progressive agendas into the New Deal.

Without a third party on the horizon, the Democratic party's bankruptcy of ideas and hunger to govern can be and should be viewed as a moment of oppor-

tunity, a time for new leadership and new priorities. The first task of the new radicals and democratic left is to put forward alternative programs that foster community self-determination and local empowerment. If reindustrialization is to occur, and there is no doubt that the Democratic party will offer such a program, the democratic left must insure broad public participation on any reindustrialization board and advocate that government investment require worker participation in plant management, plant location in areas of high unemployment or poverty, affirmative action, and environmental safeguards. If government programs are put forward to repair America's infrastructure, the democratic left must advocate inclusion of substantial funds for minority-owned firms and projects that can be directed and controlled by rural and urban community development corporations. Public planning involving citizens from targeted locations must be required to avoid those infrastructure repair programs that wreck havoc on low-income neighborhoods such as the urban renewal programs of previous decades. The Democratic party version of a New Federalism must include conditions that insure local leverage over programs for the poor and working class as well, both as a matter of empowerment and to avoid the working-class animosity that developed over the Great Society program assumption that only the poor and minorities were disenfranchised.

The new radical can work to shape the Democratic party without embracing every constituency within it. The new radical can work with existing congressional caucuses such as the Black Caucus, the Hispanic Caucus, and the Progressive Caucus who are at work developing and advocating alternative agendas for the Democratic party. He or she can work to elect delegates to the Democratic Convention who support a democratic agenda or support candidates for the Senate, House, or presidency who commit themselves to such an agenda, at the same time educating and marshaling a grass-roots constituency. The once-apolitical right wing of the Republican party has in the last several years elected scores of senators and representatives committed to a New Right agenda, while the political left cannot count one senator and only a handful of representatives solidly committed to a radical democratic vision. The political left must make a similar effort.

There is no guarantee that such efforts will succeed in reshaping the Democratic party or lead to fundamental change. Corporate elites, big labor, and other vested interests may be too powerful to overcome or too intransigent to move significantly toward fundamental change. However, the refusal to make such an effort guarantees failure and worse. While the pain and suffering engendered by laissez-faire Reaganomics may erase the public's recent antistate bias and permit the Democratic party to govern again, it would be folly to cede the Democratic party to the established elites on the eve of its reempowerment. If we rightly fear the reindustrialization vision of Felix Rohatyn, turning our backs on mainstream politics at this time would make that nightmare a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Even more dangerous, there is every possibility that Reagan may be reelected or another conservative take his place if the economy seems to be on the upswing and the disenfranchised and disaffected do not vote. Regardless of our long-term democratic agenda, we need to defend or restore worthy governmental accomplishments of the past, both by defeating Reagan or his successor and electing progressives to the Senate and House. Here I have in mind what is left of environmental and consumer protection laws and standards, controls on law enforcement and intelligence agencies, civil rights laws and enforcement efforts, and most of all, the welfare state. As Philip Green has argued in these pages, the welfare state is not the state we would bargain for, but compared to the minimalist state of Republican orthodoxy and New Right enthusiasm, it is a significant difference in political arrangements. As democrats, we have an obligation to halt the unraveling of the safety net. The election of any Democratic party candidate to the presidency will result in radical change in policy compared to rule under the William French Smiths, Watts, Burfords, and Schweikers of the present administration.

Another reason to engage in mainstream politics beyond possible gains for democratic institutions is the issue of war and peace and nuclear armaments. The defense budget needs to be cut and the funds substituted for social needs and community development. Nuclear arms need to be reduced and arms limitations agreements negotiated in good faith. The freeze movement will create pressure for ameliorative change but will not implement it. It is too easy to capture the symbols of arms control. Even Reagan almost manages to carry it off with the public. Real reductions require a president committed to such an agenda and enough senators different than Helms and Stennis to cut defense spending and ratify arms treaties. Consigning political institutions such as the Senate to the powers that be is to give the New Right and the old guard a strategic advantage when life and death decisions are made.

Over the last two years, a vicious battle has been waged in the trenches of traditional institutions. Against a conservative majority backed by right-wing groups, labor unions, consumer groups, environmental organizations, civil rights, and civil liberties organizations have been waging a defensive battle to protect minority rights (for example, an extension of the Voting Rights Act, filibusters of bills stripping federal courts of jurisdiction over cases involving abortion, school prayer, and school desegregation), and public rights (for example, preventing the gutting of the Clean Air Act, opposing the policies of the Environmental Protection Agency) against corporate power. Despite heavy odds, the defense—with social welfare programs the major exception—has been more successful than expected. However, an election setback in 1984 will doom much of what there is to cherish in a system we feel less and less charitable about.



The danger, of course, is the possibility of political cooptation, and the making of compromises which lead in the wrong direction, securing the corporate state while buying off discontent which may support ameliorative change in the future. Elements of the left have been saying this for ever so long without articulating or putting forward an alternative politics which is capable of transforming America. Rationalizing ways to turn away from mainstream politics, they bear some responsibility for the debacle while denying themselves the exercise of political citizenship—educating, persuading, joining together with other committed, concerned, and caring citizens on behalf of the achievable common good.