
Adam Hilton


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Adam Hilton
York University, Canada

ABSTRACT
By the late 1960s, the Democratic Party had fallen into crisis. Vietnam, urban riots, and declining electoral fortunes marked a crossroads in the history of the party, raising questions about the meaning and trajectory of postwar liberalism. Amid the political chaos and economic crisis of the 1970s, a distinct political tendency running through the civil rights, feminist, labor, and antiwar movements demanded a new politics. The New Politics movement attempted to reform and realign the Democratic Party to the left. Reformers perceived party rules and structure as constraining progressives’ influence on public policy. Their project to democratize the Democratic Party began in the wake of the 1968 party crisis, and it ended ten years later with the failure to compel a sitting Democratic president and Democratic Congress to implement the party’s program for full employment. While faced with organized intraparty resistance, the failure of the New Politics movement hinged on the contradictory consequences of its struggle to open the party. The successes and failures of the New Politics movement suggest the limits and possibilities confronting progressive forces in the United States today. The New Politics episode can help clarify the goals and tactics involved in realigning American politics in a more progressive direction.

Introduction
By the time Senator Bernie Sanders announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination, the struggle to shape the post-Obama era in Democratic Party politics was already well underway. In the face of what was likely to be a relatively straightforward coronation of Hillary Clinton as the Democratic standard-bearer, the post-Obama/pre-Hillary interregnum opened an opportunity for the American electoral left. Since at least the 2014 midterm elections, left-liberal circles inside and around the Democratic Party were projecting a revival of its progressive wing. This had several overlapping causes, including the lingering disappointment among those originally energized by President Obama’s 2008 campaign, the already stultifying performance of Hillary on the campaign trail, as well as, and perhaps most importantly, the continuing hardships and precariousness facing most working-class people in the United States. Sanders’s call for a “political revolution” in America, his attacks
on income inequality, and his socialist self-identification excited liberals and leftists who hoped that a Sanders insurgency in the primaries could pressure Hillary to inch to the left. Surprisingly, at the time of writing, Sanders has exceeded expectations by overtaking Clinton in the polls in New Hampshire and is tied in Iowa. But whether or not early victories can sustain his insurgency over the preferences of the party establishment remains to be seen.

Episodes such as these reopen the debate about the relationship of progressive forces with the Democratic Party. In the face of the typical left response that working people need an independent political organization outside the Democrats, advocates of Democratic “entry” point to the success of the Tea Party, a pressure group that has achieved some considerable success by running candidates against Republicans, most conspicuously depriving House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of his seat and driving Speaker John Boehner into retirement. However, while a left Tea Party may be able to replace a few representatives with more outspoken progressives, pressure group tactics cannot build the popular capacities necessary for the implementation of an ambitious progressive agenda—a project that requires not only good program and policies but widespread education, organization, and mobilization of citizens in their communities and workplaces.

The contradictions facing progressive social forces working within the Democratic Party are considerable—as are the institutional barriers to launching an independent, third party alternative. But this debate has suffered from a simplistic either/or dichotomy and distorts the more complex dialectic of social forces and political institutions. More importantly, both perspectives tend to assume the existence of a broad-based social force that could sustain a progressive realignment of American politics, as if a nascent popular left movement already exists beyond the walls of the political system but is merely frustrated by a corporate-dominated party or the restrictive logic of the two-party system. Whether advocating partisan independence or Democratic entry, both sides leave little room for actual politics as the creative development of new institutions, discourses, and practices, which would be a vital ingredient for building a new progressive political force.

In the decade following the turbulent year of 1968, such a project to reform and realign the Democratic Party to the left was conceived and attempted. As a distinct political tendency running through the civil rights, feminist, labor, and antiwar movements, the New Politics coalition perceived party rules and structure as constraining progressives’ influence on public policy. Their project to democratize the Democratic Party began in the wake of the 1968 party crisis and ended ten years later with the failure to compel a sitting Democratic president and Democratic Congress to implement the party’s program for full employment. While faced with powerful intraparty resistance, the fate of the New Politics project hinged on the contradictory consequences of its struggle to open the party. The successes and failures of the New Politics project suggest the limits and possibilities confronting left and progressive forces in the United States today.

**What was the New Politics Movement?**

The New Politics movement has received little sustained scholarly attention. This is due in part to the difficulty of specifying its scope and boundaries. The problem is as old as the phenomenon itself. As one compendium published at the time asked, “The New Politics:
Mood or Movement?" The passage of time has not alleviated the problem. Decades later, Martin Shefter noted that the sociological bases of the New Politics movement had still yet to be sketched out. Others, such as Claus Offe, have used the phrase in conjunction with the more commonplace "new social movements," implying the New Politics to be a generic mode of political action characteristic of post-1960s activism. More focused treatments of the New Politics movement are frequent in the literature on party reform, specifically that on the Democratic Party. However, such discussions are surprisingly thin, tending to be rather gestural or casual allusions, as if the origins, nature, and scope of late 1960s activism were self-evident. This includes un-interrogated conceptions about the purportedly "post-material" bases of late postwar politics; the generational change of the baby boomers; and the distinctiveness of college campus politics. This is not to suggest that these concepts or what they point to are without merit. The point is only that their causal relationship to the political and ideological dynamics of the late 1960s and 1970s does not speak for itself.

Without the relevant context, the New Politics movement seems to appear out of nowhere. This impression has been in part an omission in the scholarship. However, analyses that give short shrift to the New Politics project imply the impropriety of the reformers’ demands. This scholarly dismissal of an important political development seems to be linked, at least in part, to the fact that the reform movement’s entry into the party was a focal event in the formation of neoconservatism before its migration to the Republican Party in the 1980s. Anti-reform Democrats of several stripes fought pitched organizational and policy battles...
against New Politics forces in the years following 1972. Some, like political scientist Austin Ranney, were originally reformers themselves but came to distrust the direction and intent of the reform project, seeing it as institutionalizing division and instability in the party. Others, such as Nelson Polsby, Samuel Huntington, and Jeane Kirkpatrick, responded negatively to a connection they (correctly) discerned between the organizational/procedural reforms of the party and its programmatic orientation. The New Politics coalition’s ascendancy in the party jeopardized the Cold War framework guiding its foreign policy. The critics did not need to look for confirmation of their suspicions beyond the slogan of Senator George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign: “Come Home, America.” The decontextualized narrative of the New Politics insurgency offered by these accounts functions to delegitimize the project’s demands while also placing responsibility for the end of the New Deal regime on the reforms, rather than the party’s inability to manage its contradictions.

Lastly, there has recently been a very refreshing revival of interest in the history of postwar American liberalism. While these accounts span time and place, ranging from community to national studies, the upshot has been to fundamentally rethink the purported decline of American liberalism in the post-1960s era. This literature has challenged the standard “rise and fall of the New Deal order” framework to account for the transformation—not disappearance—of liberal ideology and praxis in an era of Democratic electoral disasters (the landslides of 1972, 1984, 1988), new right Republican ascendancy, mass suburbanization, and the decline of the labor movement. The new scholarship on the “pivotal decade” of the “long 1970s” has treated the McGovern presidential campaign as a requisite destination on the path from 1968 to the Reagan revolution. The New Politics movement, however, was more than McGovernism. The senator from South Dakota had been an early critic of American involvement in Vietnam and had served as the primary spokesperson for party reform when he chaired the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection—struck in the aftermath of the 1968 Democratic convention debacle in Chicago—before launching his own bid for the presidency. That he managed to win the Democratic nomination did indeed constitute the high watermark of the New Politics coalition in the party. But it was not its end. Rather than the “flash in the pan” treatment that the New Politics movement is normally accorded when conflated with McGovernism, its analytic distinction from the 1972 presidential campaign opens up a wider field of operation and influence and reveals a much more ambitious political project at work.

My periodization of the New Politics movement ranges from the party crisis in 1968 to the struggle for full employment in the mid- to late-1970s. That is, I widen the scope of

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8Internal opposition to party reform was scattered and disorganized until McGovern’s loss to Nixon in November 1972, after which they were consolidated as the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM) under the leadership of Penn Kemble and Ben Wattenberg. Jeane Kirkpatrick, Austin Ranney, and Nelson Polsby, whose scholarly texts are among the most critical of the reforms, were founding members of the CDM. Shafer’s exhaustive study of the reform process between 1968 and 1972 is the first major investigation made by a non-participant, although he reproduces the same thesis as Kirkpatrick and was a student of Polsby’s. For discussion of the formation of the CDM and its domestic and foreign policy agendas, see Justin Vaïsse, Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011). See also Plotke, “Party Reform as Failed Democratic Renewal”; and Robert T. Nakamura and Denis Sullivan, “Neoconservatism and Presidential Nomination Reforms,” Congress & the Presidency 9:2 (1982).

the battle over the Democratic Party beyond the standard accounts to include both the procedural reforms implemented between 1968 and 1972 as well as the post-1972 struggle over party structure and program. The two episodes have rarely been linked together into a single narrative: the former is usually depicted as merely a conflict over technical rules; the latter about public policy concerns. Such a distinction and separation is artificial and obscures, on the one hand, the extent to which party reform was deeply intertwined with a larger political vision concerning the meaning of democratic participation and, on the other hand, the extent to which later policy disputes were mobilized through institutions and discourses developed in the post-1968 reforms. The reform agenda was predicated on a fundamental reorganization of power relations within the party as well as between the party and the state. Party reformers aimed at building an open, ideologically coherent, and disciplined party organization that could democratically formulate and implement a popular, social democratic policy agenda. Party reform aimed at realignment, and realignment required reform.

The Crisis of the New Deal Order and the Making of the New Politics

The New Politics project to reform and realign the Democratic Party took shape amid the crisis that overwhelmed the party in 1968. As David Plotke has shown in one of the most incisive treatments of party reform, the crisis confronting the Democrats in 1968 was not only a crisis of the party but a crisis of the entire New Deal regime. The decline in Democratic electoral fortunes had begun well before the reforms’ implementation. In fact, the gains of the Johnson landslide of 1964 were mostly wiped out in the 1966 midterm elections. By 1967, approval ratings for the president were plummeting as the human costs of the Vietnam War increased and race riots across a number of American cities proved politically unmanageable. The cumulative effect of Eugene McCarthy’s antiwar insurgency, Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, Robert Kennedy’s belated entry and assassination, George Wallace's racial populism, and the uncompromising and mismanaged Chicago convention displayed the party leadership and its program to have exhausted its ability to cope with the contradictions of the late postwar era.

But the nature of the Democratic crisis was much more serious and went far deeper than its post-1964 electoral troubles. Those setbacks at the polls reflected the breakup of the New Deal Democratic coalition due to its own internal political dynamics. By mid-decade, the fundamentally irreconcilable interests that had always been at the heart of the New Deal coalition became explosive. That coalition, forged in the cauldron of depression and world war, had stood on three legs of support: the one-party Democratic South, northern urban machines, and the labor–liberal alliance. While these coalitional partners had found grounds on which to cooperate, such as welfare state measures aimed to alleviate the effects of the

10For a very recent exception, see Sam Hoffman Rosenfeld, “A Choice, Not an Echo: Polarization and the Transformation of the American Party System” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2014), esp. chs 4 and 6.
11Interview with Arvonne Fraser and Donald Fraser, Minneapolis, 24 November 2014.
depression, modernization and infrastructure spending, intervention in WWII, and Cold War anti-communism, they had just as often worked at cross-purposes. Labor–liberals had their social democratic agenda checked by the conservative southern Democrat–Republican alliance in Congress. Postwar urban redevelopment programs engineered under the New Deal and Fair Deal housing programs underwrote white suburbanization, depriving political machines of their traditional ethnic constituencies while also ghettoizing African Americans in city centres. Military intervention in Korea and nuclear brinkmanship over Cuba helped spur on a fledgling peace movement that would later split the “vital center” of postwar liberalism into camps of hawks and doves. The programmatic and administrative compromises necessary to sustain such an antagonistic coalition produced the two-tiered, segmented, and semi-private welfare state, with all its racialized and gendered policies, that has figured so prominently in recent profiles of American exceptionalism. The crisis of the regime and its governing coalition opened up the space and provided the immediate rationale for the project to democratize the party.

Most conspicuous in this respect was the inherent tension between the New Deal regime’s commitment to racial liberalism and southern Democrats’ commitment to Jim Crow. The fight for democracy abroad during and after the Second World War had powerful discursive and practical effects on race relations at home. Not only did soldiering have profound implications for black (male) citizenship, but also the maintenance of solidarity within the armed forces required two executive orders, one establishing a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee and another desegregating the army. African Americans had already bid farewell to the party of Lincoln in large numbers during the depression, even if the New Deal’s deference to “local conditions”—the price the South had placed on its support for federal relief programs—had disadvantaged many black recipients. Nonetheless, the intervention of the federal government had stirred the hopes of rights activists—black and white, liberals and labor—who continued to press their demands through the federal court system and in the streets, contributing to the pressure to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The historic milestones of the mid-1960s notwithstanding, the discordance between the Democratic leadership’s embrace of racial liberalism and the Democratic South’s continuing intransigence was immediately put to the test in ways that would (and were meant to) purge the conservative South from the party. The credentials challenge presented by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the 1964 Democratic convention in Atlantic City underscored the oddity of an ostensibly democratic organization containing within it pro-civil rights activists as well as white segregationist delegates. This tension had been brought to the surface before when Hubert Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis, had swung the 1948 convention to adopt the minority civil rights plank in the party’s platform, triggering a bolt of the Deep South and an abortive Dixiecrat, third party movement. Nearly twenty years later, President Johnson, fearing a repeat of a southern bolt, dispatched Humphrey and United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther to placate the MFDP, offering them two at-large seats in the convention hall and the promise to strike an investigative committee on civil rights in the party. The MFDP rejected the president’s compromise, but as

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The Nation observed several years later, “the Southern black (MFDP) strategy of challenging racist and restrictive Democratic Party processes (became) a national strategy for reform.”

The Special Equal Rights Commission set up to address these concerns before 1968 moved with the authority of the convention to help state Democratic parties meet newly established requirements “to assure that voters in the State, regardless of race, color, creed or national origin, will have the opportunity to participate fully in Party affairs.” In effect, the commission had codified the basis of the MFDP challenge in Atlantic City, asserting the legitimacy of anti-discrimination policies within the highest body of the party organization. The party’s handling of the MFDP controversy and the fairly capacious language of participation rights adopted in response provided the basis for further intraparty struggles as the political disputes polarizing the New Deal coalition continued to deepen. The implications the project held for the politics of party conventions were registered by the Special Equal Rights Commission early on when its chair acknowledged its recommendations problematized “the relationship of the various State parties to the National [party]” because “failure on the part of a State delegation to meet this [anti-discrimination] requirement could lead to the sitting of another [that is, legitimate] delegation.”

Such an act would constitute an unprecedented assertion of national party superiority over its state-level affiliates.

The insurgent 1968 primary campaigns of McCarthy and Kennedy provided a galvanizing space for the new activist movements as they experienced the frustration of being denied convention delegates despite winning impressive electoral victories. Only seventeen states held primaries in 1968, apportioning 38 percent of the total convention delegates. The other 62 percent, chosen in states without primary contests, were most often selected behind closed doors by state party leaders, their central committees, or Democratic mayors and governors. In those states where convention delegates were composed of handpicked loyalists of the state parties, the antiwar campaigns were simply shut out. State party officials and most Democratic officeholders were loyal to the Johnson-Humphrey leadership and were committed for either ideological or material reasons to the party’s domestic and foreign policy priorities. In other primary states, antiwar forces were not awarded delegates in proportion to their victories. In the New York primary, McCarthy won a majority of representatives, but his total was diluted when the central committee subsequently appointed fifty additional delegates. In Nebraska, McCarthy’s 31 percent total translated to only 20 percent of delegates. In Pennsylvania, a 71 percent result in the polls earned him only 21 of 130 convention delegates.

17Special Equal Rights Committee Chair Richard J. Hughes to William L. Taylor, Staff Director of the US Commission for Civil Rights, Box 44, Folder: 1968 Democratic Convention Credentials Committee, James O’Hara Collection, Bentley Historical Library.
18Ibid. The precedent set by the MFDP compromise in 1964 served as the basis of an unprecedented number of credentials challenges (seventeen) at the 1968 convention in Chicago, adding to the tumultuousness of the event. See the coverage provided in The Presidential Nominating Conventions—1968 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Services, 1968).
19The energizing effect of the insurgent candidacies and Johnson’s withdrawal, and then the frustration at the Chicago disaster in the wake of Kennedy’s murder, all provided momentum to what would become the New Politics reform movement. While McCarthy forces played a prominent role in subsequent party reform, it was Kennedy’s nascent presidential coalition that built durable ties within a broad network of liberal circles. As he told journalist David Frost, “I think there has to be a new kind of coalition to keep the Democratic Party going … We have to write off the unions and the South now. And to replace them with Negroes, blue-collar whites, and the kids” (quoted in Cowie, Stayin’ Alive, p. 75). Kennedy’s potential to upset and complicate matters for the Democratic leadership and their sponsors can be indirectly gauged by the fact that after his death, the significant financial contributions that had been flowing to Vice-President Humphrey because LBJ’s withdrawal “promptly dried up.” Carl Solberg, Hubert Humphrey: A Biography (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 340.
In the face of these exclusions, a small ad hoc commission composed of members of the civil rights movement, the antiwar campaigns, and reform-minded officeholders issued an 80-page report entitled *The Democratic Choice* in the run-up to the 1968 Chicago convention. Noting the disintegration of the New Deal coalition and the incapacity of the party “to accommodate the aspirations of emergent social forces,” the report warned of the impending danger Democratic Party procedures posed to the stability of the American political system. By failing to adequately represent popular preferences, such as those supporting antiwar candidates, the party risked further erosion of its majority status. They concluded that “state systems for selecting delegates to the National Convention and the procedures of the Convention itself display considerably less fidelity to basic democratic principles than a nation which claims to govern itself can safely tolerate.”20 “The cure for the ills of democracy,” they asserted, “is more democracy.”21 Their recommendations included the following: “imposing an affirmative obligation” on state organizations to integrate minority Democrats; abolition of the unit-rule restricting proportional representation of delegate preferences; and shifting the burden of proof to defendants in convention credentials challenges “wherever gross disparities” exist between delegations and the state’s demographic composition.22 Taken together, these recommendations called into question the legitimacy of about 60 percent of Chicago convention delegates.23

The catastrophe that unfolded at the Chicago convention that summer created the opportunity Democratic activists had been waiting for. While riot police attacked antiwar demonstrators in the streets outside, the Democratic left was routed inside the convention hall. Even though Kennedy and McCarthy had collectively swept up more than two-thirds of the primary votes, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey received the party’s nomination with an overwhelming count of 1760 to McCarthy’s 601 on the first ballot, despite the vice-president not having contested a single primary. In terms of policy, Humphrey, whose liberal credentials on labor and civil rights issues were impressive, was unwilling to break with Johnson on Vietnam. However, to reduce the splits within Democratic ranks and improve his chances in November, Humphrey did not actively resist the motion demanding an official party reform commission. Amid the confusion of debate and dissension on the convention floor, the motion passed narrowly, 1350 to 1206.

The effect of the disaster in Chicago and the narrow defeat to Richard Nixon in November created an atmosphere wherein the fact of the party crisis could no longer be denied or ignored. The party reform resolution of the Chicago convention produced two official reform commissions: the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (otherwise known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission) and the Commission on Rules (or the O’Hara Commission). The McGovern Commission’s final report, *Mandate for Reform*, found in its investigation of the 1968 convention the “image of an organization impervious to the will of its rank and file.”24 The upshot of the commission’s work was a set of binding guidelines

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20 *The Democratic Choice*, Report by the Commission on the Democratic Selection of Presidential Nominees; see also the Commission’s Summary of Findings and Advisory Report, Box 149.C.12.3B, Folder: Democratic Party Reform—1969, Donald Fraser Papers, Minnesota History Center.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.


that ranged from noncontroversial codification and standardization of delegate selection procedures to the elimination of automatic delegate status for Democratic officials and officeholders (they would have to enter the same selection processes as everyone else). It was also required that state parties “overcome the effects of past discrimination” through affirmative recruitment of women, African Americans, and young people “in reasonable relationship” to the state’s demographic composition. It concluded:

We believe that popular control of the Democratic Party is necessary for its survival. … Our Party is the only major vehicle for peaceful, progressive change in the United States. If we are not an open party; if we do not represent the demands of change, then the danger is not that people will go to the Republican Party; it is that there will no longer be a way for people committed to orderly change to fulfill their needs and desires within our traditional political system. It is that they will turn to third or fourth party politics or the anti-politics of the street.

The combined effects of the new party rules and the heightened popular activism of the antiwar, feminist, and black freedom struggles transformed the face of the party, evidently displayed at the 1972 convention in Miami Beach. African Americans who in 1968 held 7 percent of delegate seats now held 15 percent. In Chicago, women had held only 13 percent; in Miami Beach, 40 percent. Young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty had held only 4 percent of delegate seats before the reforms; after, they comprised 22 percent. The convention signaled the entrance of new organizations like the New Democratic Coalition (NDC) and the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) to the national political stage. The reformed convention crafted a platform calling for immediate American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, a domestic commitment to race-conscious policies, an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, and a federally guaranteed right to a job. It read: “We must restructure the social, political and economic relationships throughout the entire society in order to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth and power.” Perhaps the most important symbol of the new direction of the party was the unseating of Chicago mayor Richard Daley and his handpicked Illinois delegation and its replacement with one meeting the racial, gender, and age requirements codified in the new reforms.

The New Politics and the Labor Movement: Toward a Renewed Labor Liberalism?

The organized labor movement viewed the New Politics project of party reform with mixed emotions. On the one hand, the majority of the labor leadership perceived it as a potential
threat to their power in the Democratic Party. From their perspective, the New Politics movement and its polarizing effect on Democratic liberalism could not have been more ill-timed. Because the labor movement had always been a junior partner in the New Deal coalition, the defection of the South and the breakdown of machine politics was seen as the window of opportunity for which the movement had long been waiting. Indeed, the increasing weight of labor’s voice in the party appeared to be confirmed not only by the degree to which labor-sponsored legislation had been taken up in the Great Society programs of mid-decade, but also by the dependence of the party on labor’s enormous political apparatus to mobilize voters for the 1968 campaign. 32 As long-time American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) treasurer (and later president) Lane Kirkland later put it, “There was an arrangement—a tacit, invisible but real arrangement” between party and union leaders: “the party leaders knew that, in the general election, they needed labor to draw some of the water and hew some of the wood. … They wouldn’t nominate anyone who was too offensive to the trade union movement.” 33 But when “the rules changed and the role of the leadership was substantially stripped” of its power, “serious problems” resulted “for all of us accustomed to operating under the old system.” 34 With the union leadership’s long sought-after role as central power broker in the party’s inner councils seemingly at hand, the New Politics movement represented a threat many labor officials felt compelled to oppose.

Others in the labor movement viewed the New Politics coalition differently. Rather than a threat to labor’s newfound elevation in the party, the New Politics movement offered the unions an opportunity for revitalization as well as the larger prospect of renewing a dynamic labor–liberal alliance at the core of the party. United Auto Workers west coast regional director Paul Schrade testified to the mutual benefits of such an alliance: “Union action is a source of strength for the Democratic Party. Cooperation with the liberal, Democratic unions ought to be a major effort. … That is why we need a new politics, a new coalition, and a new Democratic Party. Only then can we become a majority party again. Only then will we deserve to be the majority party in America.” 35

This fault line cutting through the labor leadership in the late 1960s was superimposed over an already existing rift that had been developing within the movement for years. In the era following the 1955 merger, organizational and political differences remained between craft-based AFL unions and the industrial unions of the CIO. The personalized feud between federation president George Meany and former CIO president Walter Reuther represented

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33 Remarks of AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, 29 September 1982, Box 1, Folder: 1, AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education Records, George Meany Memorial Archives, University of Maryland.
34 Ibid.
deeper factional rivalries within the united federation and distinct programmatic approaches to the question of reversing the decline in private sector unionism and its role in the wider society. By the late 1960s, the issue of the Vietnam War had exacerbated these tensions. Under Meany's presidency, the AFL-CIO had become deeply integrated with the Democratic leadership's Cold War foreign policy. While not as ideologically committed to this program, Reuther muted his concerns about American intervention in Southeast Asia out of fear of jeopardizing his relationship with the Democratic administration. The factional disputes within the labor federation eventually led Reuther to take the UAW out, making a short-lived attempt to construct a breakaway rival labor organization with the Teamsters. Additionally, once the Vietnam War became a policy of the Nixon administration in 1969, Reuther and other dissenting unionists could unleash their doubts and criticisms they had kept silent while a Democrat was in the White House.

Meany's hostility to McGovern's antiwar, New Politics campaign was undisguised despite the senator's impeccable record supporting labor legislation by the AFL-CIO's own standards and several public overtures from the candidate. In 1972, just days after McGovern won the party's nomination, Meany maneuvered the AFL-CIO Executive Council into its first and only position of neutrality in a presidential race. The content of the decision, however, and the autocratic means by which it was made, triggered a wave of defiance throughout the labor movement. Dissident unions such as the United Auto Workers (who had already pulled out of the AFL-CIO), State, County, and Municipal Workers (AFSCME), the Machinists (IAM), the Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU), the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), the United Electrical Workers (UE), the Communication Workers (CWA), the National Education Workers (NEA), and the United Farm Workers (UFW) openly endorsed McGovern and committed themselves to mobilize their constituencies for the November election.37

The war and the ideological schisms it produced was not the only issue determining labor's differing perspectives on the New Politics. By seeking to inject popular control over party officials and Democratic officeholders in presidential nominations, the reform project threatened—indeed, intended—to eliminate the elite brokerage structures through which the dominant wing of the AFL-CIO had exerted special influence in the party. In fact, there were more union-member delegates at Miami Beach than at any previous Democratic convention, but the fewest under the control of the labor leadership.38 Furthermore, by

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36 AFL-CIO Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 28–29 August 1972, AFL-CIO Records, George Meany Memorial Archives. Meany made his personal preference for Nixon well known through high-profile golf games with the president, though the AFL-CIO never adopted an official candidate preference.

37 Dissenting labor unions soon formed their own Labor for McGovern committee to challenge the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education under the leadership of Leonard Woodcock (UAW), Jerry Wurf (AFSCME), and Floyd Smith (IAM). The AFL-CIO Executive's neutrality decision was not binding on any of the 117 members of the federation. However, this did not stop Meany from taking action against the Colorado Labor Council (CLC), the state-level AFL-CIO, when it openly endorsed McGovern. Meany suspended the CLC's charter, dismissed its president and other top officers, and froze its accounts, asserting that its support for McGovern was “detrimental to the best interests” of the labor federation. A federal judge issued an injunction against Meany's unilateral action, ordering the reinstatement of the CLC's personnel. Other AFL-CIO bodies avoided such a direct conflict with the pugnacious federation president by phrasing their endorsement of McGovern obliquely, publically protesting the policies of the Nixon administration and warning their constituents against his re-election. Having been reprimanded in Denver, Meany sent letters to state labor leaders across the country, saying “a call for the defeat of one candidate is equivalent to an endorsement of the other.” See Appeal of the CLC, AFL-CIO Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 19–26 February 1973, AFL-CIO Records, George Meany Memorial Archives; as well as “Meany Punishes Mavericks,” Daily News, 21 September 1972; “AFL-CIO Take-Over of Colorado Council Prohibited by Court,” Wall Street Journal, 3 October 1972; Peter Milius, “Meany Slaps More State Labor Units,” Washington Post, 5 October 1972.

opening up delegate selection procedures, the New Politics movement threatened to shift the balance of power within the labor movement from the dominant AFL-type unions to industrial and service-oriented ones, which could more easily adapt to the newly created participatory party organs. The social composition of these unions also tended to mirror the constituencies of the New Politics movement itself: knowledge workers; younger, lower skilled industrial and service workers; and public employees who worked in sectors that were more often composed of women and people of color than the white, male-dominated craft unions. These were workers who were often attracted to liberal values and who supported an expansive domestic program, a renegotiated geopolitical framework, and a conversion of military spending to domestic infrastructure.

Lastly, aside from issues of policy and access, the New Politics movement threatened to exacerbate the growing rank-and-file rebellion in the house of labor. As journalist James Wechsler wrote at the time, this was the “more profound” threat at work in the reform project:

> If the Democratic Party can successfully execute this process of democratization, the idea could become infectious. It might even invite emulation by those trade unions whose conventions still resemble Soviet party congresses. Imagine what would happen to the life-style of some ancient labor bodies if they were required to consider adequate representation for the young, and the black, and to admit women to their higher councils.

Such were precisely the fears of the AFL-CIO leadership at the turn of the 1970s. As the diffusion of rights consciousness permeated the shop floor, and as the demography of the working population became sharply more female and black (including returning Vietnam veterans), worker militancy at the end of the New Deal order was directed at employers as well as at the sclerotic union structures that seemed to only police shop floor activism on behalf of management. Formations like the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and, a little later, the Coalition of Trade Union Women (CLUW) presented a challenge unprecedented in the postwar era. While much of the rhetoric from the rebellious rank and file echoed the black nationalism of the time, the labor upsurge of African Americans, women, and young people was much more concerned with breaking down the internal structures of New Deal industrial relations that had come to privilege the white male stratum of the working class to the exclusion of others. The conversations around the formation of CLUW had even toyed with the idea of launching a rival union federation to the AFL-CIO.

Even if much of the militancy during the late 1960s and early 1970s was reactive to employer speedup or union bureaucratic intransigence, the ongoing wildfires throughout the organized labor movement were a crisis the union leadership was eager to contain. This was true not only of culturally conservative leaders like George Meany, who regularly denounced the counterculture of hippies and “longhairs,” but also of those like the UAW’s Walter Reuther, who at once pined for a reawakening of union consciousness on the scale of the 1930s but also proved unable to come to terms with the new radicalism. Even though the

39Battista, Revival of Labor Liberalism, p. 67.
40Geismer, Don’t Blame Us.
new industrial militancy often “targeted shop issues virtually identical to those that animated UAW radicals” in earlier generations, in Reuther’s eyes, “there is a new breed of workers in the plant who is less willing to accept corporate decisions that pre-empt his own decisions. . . . a different kind of worker than we had twenty-five or thirty years ago.” Without leadership or organization that could bridge the union structures of the old left with the movements representing women, peace, and black freedom, the rebellions in labor and the party ran parallel but divided tracks.

Despite the public defiance of the Labor for McGovern unions and their rapid mobilization on behalf of the nominee’s campaign, the combination of the AFL-CIO boycott and the distaste for the New Politics movement among most regular Democratic officeholders, who also withheld their active endorsement, proved a devastating loss for the senator from South Dakota and the New Politics project as a whole. As The Nation later reflected: “On that scorched earth was built the fractured architecture of the next period” in Democratic Party politics. 44

After the Landslide: The Democratic Agenda and the Struggle for Full Employment

The period following Nixon’s 1972 re-election saw a gradual scaling down of American engagement in Vietnam and with it a diminution of the activity of the antiwar movement. While there were grounds for some remaining optimism within liberal circles, such as the Democratic gains in Congress, the extent of McGovern’s loss had a demoralizing and disorganizing effect on the New Politics movement. Anti-reform critics inside and outside the party utilized the opportunity to make their case for unmaking the reforms. As an internal AFL-CIO memo explained, the first priority was “to regain control of the machinery after the election.” 46

The terrain of struggle between reform and regular Democrats (including the dominant wing of the AFL-CIO) shifted from nominating procedures to party structure. The convention in Miami Beach had mandated the creation of a new party institution, the biennial midterm policy conference, as a venue for injecting popular participation and accountability into the national party organization. The purpose of the midterm conference would be to bring grass roots representatives together with party officials and leaders to discuss, debate, and formulate a coherent policy agenda without the pressure to paper over differences in the face of nominating a presidential candidate, as was the experience of quadrennial conventions. The agenda, it was proposed, would act as a baseline from which Democratic officeholders, including the president, could be measured and evaluated. In essence, midterm conferences would establish a party organization that was autonomous from the politicians who adopted its name. The unfolding crises of Watergate and stagflation provided reformers with powerful arguments in favor of political accountability and clear policy positions.

Party regulars and their labor allies, however, successfully, though narrowly, defeated the effort to institutionalize mandatory policy conferences—though a second would meet in Memphis in 1978—handing the DNC the discretionary power to call future policy conferences and leaving the power to appoint the DNC chair with the presidential candidate. While the party’s capacity to hold Democratic officeholders accountable was weakened, New Politics forces and their allies in the labor-left mobilized around a program for full employment that could become the new platform at the forthcoming Democratic convention. Calling themselves the Democratic Agenda, the coalition drafted, negotiated, and lobbied on behalf of the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment bill, legislation proposed to restore the original intent of what three decades earlier had become the toothless 1946 Employment Act.

The principal sponsor in the House, Augustus Hawkins, was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, and, as representative of Watts, California, was acutely aware of the postwar persistence of chronic racialized unemployment, underemployment, and poverty that the Kerner Commission identified as the primary source of urban unrest.\(^{47}\) In the Senate, Hubert Humphrey introduced legislation drafted in partnership with the UAW-sponsored Initiative Committee for Economic Planning (ICEP), proposing the creation of an Economic Planning Board in the Executive Office of the President that could formulate comprehensive national economic goals for submission to Congress’s Joint Economic Committee for review and approval. The stagflation crisis, the bill’s supporters correctly perceived, was more than a crisis of rising price indices or the sudden surge in the rate of unemployment. Rather, it represented a crisis of the entire policy framework and institutionalized arrangements underpinning growth liberalism.\(^{48}\) With the foundations of the postwar political economy in doubt, advocates of full employment saw a window of opportunity in which a new, more egalitarian framework could be built. As first proposed, the Equal Opportunity and Full Employment bill sought to realize Franklin Roosevelt’s proposed “right to a job” by stipulating the responsibility of the federal government to actively plan for growth and, if the private sector cannot meet the task, to act as “employer of last resort” by increasing public sector employment and infrastructure spending. The proposed legislation went so far as to enshrine the right to employment in federal law, where individuals unable to find work could file suit with the courts. Thus, Humphrey-Hawkins was more than a return to Roosevelt’s “Economic Bill of Rights”; it held out the promise of “melding … 1960s rights consciousness with the unfinished agenda of the late New Deal.”\(^{49}\) It offered to provide the basis for a reorganized labor liberalism and to introduce a new dynamic into public policy. As one Democratic Agenda pamphlet read: “To keep Corporate America from marching the nation back to Herbert Hoover, we must go beyond the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt.”\(^{50}\)

To install full employment as the centrepiece of party policy, the Democratic Agenda launched their Democracy 76 campaign, hosting a series of national conferences that brought together former McGovernites, left-leaning labor leaders, and the newly minted Full Employment Action Council, headed up by Coretta Scott King and the Textile Workers’

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\(^{50}\)The Democratic Agenda, “Challenge for the 1980s,” Box 12A, Folder 1, Democratic Socialists of America Records, Tamiment Library, New York University.
Murray Finley. Democracy 76 developed a comprehensive lobbying strategy aimed at writing endorsement of Humphrey-Hawkins into the 1976 Democratic Party platform, promoting the idea publically through grass roots “mass lobbying” demonstrations, and then guiding the bill through Congress. As one ICEP memo put it: “we must make respectable the idea of planning in a democracy. And we must establish the machinery by which effective democratic planning is made real.” During the primary season, popular support for government action on the economic crisis had become, in the begrudging words of economist Milton Friedman, the new “litmus test” for Democrats of any stripe. Indeed, endorsements for Humphrey-Hawkins flooded the platform hearings at the 1976 party convention, from the congressional leadership as well as from candidate Jimmy Carter, who identified the “staggering” unemployment rate as “the greatest problem facing the American people today.” Even the AFL-CIO endorsed the proposed legislation, albeit after wage and price controls were removed.

Once in office, however, the Carter administration appeared to drop its commitment to push for the bill’s passage, insisting on diluting the more ambitious unemployment targets and eliminating the legally enforceable “right” to a job. This at once widened the bill’s base of support to include figures like George Meany while simultaneously reducing its potential impact. More concerned with the inflationary consequences of promoting full employment and unwilling to consider more comprehensive planning mechanisms or price controls that would restrain price instability, President Carter drew strong criticism from his former supporters in labor–liberal circles. Numerous entreaties from the Congressional Black Caucus, who saw full employment planning as the key to addressing the chronic underemployment of African Americans, and other congressional liberals were rebuffed or simply placated. However, the president’s ability to avoid action on the full employment issue was limited by the upcoming midterm party conference in Memphis, mandated by the successful push of Democracy 76 at the previous convention. The conference threatened to become a showdown. After extracting further dilution of the bill from its principals, President Carter signed the Act into law on the eve of the party conference. Its final form was “a shell of the original bill, neither enhancing planning capabilities nor guaranteeing full employment.” With the provision of a legally enforceable right to a job stripped from the Act, “the only thing you can do,” Hawkins later reflected, “is to hold the president accountable.” The Democratic Agenda aimed to do just that.

The prospect of meeting his critics and being held to account publicly at the policy conference was an enormous source of concern for President Carter and his administration. As numerous White House memos reveal, any opportunity that the party rank and file might

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53 Carter’s statement was part of his prepared remarks at a New York press conference held on Humphrey-Hawkins with all the candidates in the presidential race. The remarks were prepared by Carter aide Stuart Eizenstat, who prefaces the remarks with a note of reassurance to the governor: “I do not see that [taking] such a position in any way would jeopardize your standing with others in your constituency, while opposition to the bill per se would be critically costly.” Memo from Eizenstat to Governor Carter, n.d., Box 20, Folder: Humphrey-Hawkins Bill, 9/76, Jimmy Carter Pre-Presidential Papers, Jimmy Carter Library.
54 Neir, Politics and Jobs, p. 131.
be able to meaningfully participate in debate and discussion with the president or cabinet members was constrained or eliminated. President Carter’s control of the DNC, charged with planning the party conference, enabled his team to “control all proceedings … screen all proposals … and screen any resolutions proposed for a vote.”

Further, the White House created a “pro-Administration whip system” to control votes on the floor should a delegate revolt arise. However, the administration’s “public posture,” one planning memo recommended, should still insist that “this is going to be an open Conference.”

Many members of the press framed the intraparty dispute as a personal political rivalry for the 1980 Democratic nomination between Senator Edward Kennedy, then receiving prods from liberals to run, and President Carter. But as White House press secretary Jody Powell told the Boston Globe, “The dispute which appears to be on the horizon in Memphis is not between the President and Senator Kennedy … but between the Administration and the Democratic Agenda.” However, as the showdown in Memphis approached, cracks in the edifice of the New Politics coalition began to show. While most unionists were strongly dissatisfied with the administration and its turn to fiscal austerity rather than full employment, the coalition began to splinter under the strain of confronting the president—an act of defiance that could jeopardize their access to the highest and most powerful political office. Carter’s operatives knew they could ultimately rely on the sectionalism inherent in the labor movement, where the pressure to defend dues-paying members undermines the ability for labor to act as a class, even when it is “strong.” This was well illustrated in one DNC memo, which reported that the CWA—who had been actively involved in McGovern’s campaign and had generally supported the creation of a stronger, accountable Democratic Party—“are not interested in taking on the W[hite] H[ouse] especially since the Telecommunications Act, the one piece of legislation they care deeply about, is coming up in the next Congress.”

Loath to risk the well-being of their dues-paying membership by burning their bridges with the Democratic leadership, despite their extreme dissatisfaction with the nature of that leadership, the CWA, like most progressive unions allied with the Democrats, found themselves in a strategic conundrum and withdrew from a UAW-organized strategy meeting prior to the Memphis conference.

With the New Politics coalition fractured, the party’s autonomy from the president curtailed, and the conference controlled by the White House, the programmatic commitment to revive a full employment labor liberalism was diluted to the point of rhetoric. While the Democratic Agenda made valiant last-ditch efforts to transform the Memphis meeting into an organ of popular party participation, the president and the party stalwarts were able to outmaneuver the New Politics movement.

Conclusion: The Lessons of the New Politics Movement

Ultimately, the New Politics movement was unable to utilize the new party institutions to compel the Democratic president and the Democrats in Congress to enact the party program

56 White House memo from Tim Kraft to undisclosed recipients, 7 September 1978, Box 238, Folder: DNC [6], Rick Hutcheson Subject Files, Jimmy Carter Library.
57 White House memo from Rick Hutcheson to Hamilton Jordan and Tim Kraft, 11 September 1978, Box 241, Folder: Midterm Conference, 1978 [4], Hutcheson Subject Files.
59 DNC Memo from Elaine Kamarck, 6 October 1978, Box 241, Folder: Midterm Conference 1978 [5], Hutcheson Subject Files.
endorsing bold action on full employment in the face of the economic crisis. Implementing full employment and the requisite planning mechanisms would have required a political force able to effectively threaten to withdraw support from public officeholders should they renge on the party platform. It had indeed been proposed that the reformed party operate in just such a way. The Democratic Agenda activists at the 1978 policy conference had proposed that the DNC “deny all support, financial or otherwise, to those candidates who have, in effect, abdicated their leadership role in our party by abandoning our basic principles as embodied in our Democratic national party platform.”

60 But, unsurprisingly, party officials and elected officeholders balked at the suggestion. Their resistance to any further party reform put an end to the movement for a New Politics. After a small, uneventful midterm policy conference in 1982, the DNC has not opted to call another.

However, the failure of the New Politics movement cannot be explained by referring only to the power of its intraparty opponents. Party reformers wanted to transform the Democratic Party into a more programmatic, progressive party. The means by which to accomplish this, they argued, was its democratization. By opening the party to greater grass roots participation and holding officeholders accountable to the will of the rank and file, the Democratic Party would be realigned to the left. While the reformers were quite successful in opening the party up to greater participation of previously marginalized groups, the practical effects of that participation, and the notion of “democratization” underpinning it, suggests the internal limitations of the project and the movement that sponsored it.

The limits to the reformers’ notion of democratic participation can be seen in the longest lasting legacy of the New Politics movement: the proliferation of primaries in the presidential nominating system. While the McGovern-Fraser Commission guidelines did not require delegate selection to be conducted by primary election, many states found it the easiest way to comply with them. Whether or not they were an intended outcome of reform, as electoral institutions primaries did meet the New Politics criterion of curtailing the influence of party leaders whom reform activists indicted for their undemocratic practices at the 1968 Chicago convention. But rather than creating a nominating system based around the party rank and file, primaries have promoted a candidate-centred system in which enthusiasts are welcome to express their political preferences, but in individual, atomized ways that do little to promote democratic deliberation or any collective political identity. Ironically, primaries appear to push in the opposite direction of the midterm conferences, proposed by the New Politics movement as a means of enhancing deliberation and consensus formation. Had the latter initiative not been defeated, the reformed party could have balanced the atomization of open primaries with institutions that encourage civic organization and more deeply democratic participation in developing program and a shared political identity. In the absence of party conferences, the “democratized” Democratic Party meant only that it was more permeable to organized interests outside it.

That the tension between open primaries and policy conferences did not strike most New Politics activists as potentially contradictory reflects that the reforms were shaped by

61 Several political scientists have speculated, based on limited but fairly reliable evidence, that some state party leaders switched from open caucuses to primaries in the hopes that the latter would disadvantage issue-oriented activists like those in the New Politics movement, who were particularly adept at “packing” caucus meetings. See James Caesar, Presidential Selection: Theory and Development (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 263, n. 3; Leon Epstein, Political Parties in the American Mold (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 376, n. 46.
the overriding priority of empowering those already mobilized by late-1960s activism. This aim was indicated early on in the reform process when the McGovern Commission solicited public testimony in seventeen cities across the country as it formulated its guidelines set down in *Mandate for Reform*. In these hearings, activists from the new social movements and the labor-left expressed a range of ideas and recommendations to achieve what the Commission staff defined as their purpose: “to attract the interest and enthusiasm of the concerned citizen” into a reformed and renewed Democratic Party. To be sure, many of these proposals were radical, including: “losing some of the allegiances we have had in the past” (for instance, the Old South); making the national party “less subservient to the whims of its elected officials”; and reforming party procedures to ensure that “popular judgment of its members will … be translated into party position.” But crucially, the transcripts of commission testimony reveal a generalized orientation toward “concerned citizens” rather than trying to raise concerns within unorganized or depoliticized populations. From this perspective, “democratizing” the party meant removing barriers to participation for those who were already demanding access. The reformed Democratic Party was meant to be a vehicle for the democratic movements of the 1960s and 1970s rather than an agent of democratization within the wider society, which would involve taking on the responsibility of educating and politicizing citizens to support a new political project. This also meant that the New Politics movement was dependent on independent, extra-party sources of mobilization. Thus, when the wave of popular activism receded, the vitality of the New Politics movement went with it.

In the end, the experience of the New Politics movement offers a cautionary tale for the Sanders campaign and future progressive efforts in American politics. Pursuing a progressive Democratic Party program without creating new institutions to build the political capacities necessary to carry it out will experience limited success. As progressives have been painfully reminded over the last eight years, the American Congress has the power to thwart a president’s agenda, no matter how open the latter may be to compromise. While it looks unlikely to happen, a Sanders presidency would make the Obama years look relatively successful by comparison. Due to the lack of any coattails effect, a Sanders administration would probably face strong bipartisan opposition in Congress. To his credit, when posed with this likely scenario, Sanders has referenced the example of the 1960s civil rights movement with overwhelming recalcitrant southern legislators in Congress. Unlike Obama, he claims he would not demobilize his electoral coalition following his election, but would instead encourage them to take their demands to the steps of the Capitol. But the civil rights movement was not put together through electoral mobilization. It is beyond the ability of any electoral campaign to build the kinds of civic capacities necessary to effect the political revolution Sanders and other progressives would like to see.

Pursuing a new progressive agenda in the absence of a new kind of politics is likely to be a self-defeating exercise. A party’s political program, no matter how good, cannot create a new politics on its own, which requires new organizations, new practices, new discourses—
short, the creation of new “political subjects.” If political revolution is to become a majoritarian project, revolutionary constituencies must be created who will not only vote for it but also actively participate in its implementation. Those who assume that a left project should naturally appeal to the majority of citizens’ “objective” interests ignore the practical meaning of politics at their peril. Rather than a depository where citizens register a predetermined set of demands, politics is the critical space where disparate sets of interests, identities, and demands are “sutured” together into a coherent force. This is a task in which party politics is essential, though far from sufficient. But as the mixed experience of the Democratic reform movement reminds us, the search for a new politics is as vexed as it is necessary.

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Notes on contributor

Adam Hilton is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Political Science at York University, Toronto. His research focuses on democracy, political institutions, and progressive politics in the United States.

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