

ORGANIZED FOR DEMOCRACY? LEFT CHALLENGES INSIDE THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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Socialists make their own history, but not under conditions they choose. American socialists were starkly reminded of how the nightmarish weight of the past continues to haunt the present during the 2016 presidential nomination contest between independent, democratic socialist Senator Bernie Sanders and former First Lady, Senator, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. On the one hand, Sanders' decision to forego a third party campaign and run as a Democrat provided him with a national audience, an opportunity to introduce democratic socialism to a new generation, and a mass-based fundraising vehicle that collected millions in small donations. On the other hand, running as a Democrat against the standard bearer of the party establishment seemed almost to guarantee that he would lose. And while he came closer than many expected, the outcome only appeared to confirm that when it comes to the Democratic Party, the left simply cannot win.

Unlike all other advanced capitalist democracies, the United States never produced a labour-based political party. As labour and social democratic parties emerged elsewhere during the late nineteenth century, American trade unionists debated whether or not to launch an independent party or join an existing coalition, ultimately opting for a nonpartisan strategy of 'pure and simple unionism' for fear of violent repression, partisan conflict in the union rank and file, and the off-putting sectarianism of many American socialists.¹ Almost a half-century later, amidst the Great Depression, the Democratic Party under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal successfully integrated insurgent farmer and labour groups, after which independent third-party vote shares in US elections declined and never recovered.² Since the 1930s, state laws regulating political parties have served to strengthen the two-party duopoly, legislating comparatively high thresholds for third party ballot access.³

The familiar conundrum of the American left in party politics was rehashed in a flurry of post-Sanders assessments. Many on the left were quick to disabuse Sanders supporters of misplacing their hope in a lost cause. While the Sanders campaign had improved the standing of democratic socialism as a legitimate political position in the US, a ‘capitalist party’ like the Democrats was nevertheless beholden to wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists, having moved irretrievably from its New Deal–Great Society traditions to embrace neoliberalism with a human face.⁴

This essay examines the relationship between the left and the Democrats by playing on the double meaning of the term ‘challenges’ employed in its title. It seeks to undertake a strategic assessment of the ‘challenges’ facing left political power in the Democratic Party by drawing insights from the mixed results of various ‘challenges’ the left has presented inside the party historically. That strategic assessment must be based, I argue, on an institutional understanding of the Democratic Party as an organization, requiring the development of more sophisticated analytic tools than those typically employed by Marxists and others on the left. The fundamental point to be drawn from this analysis is that while a robust, well-organized left can *conceivably* exercise power inside the Democratic Party, that power is unlikely to serve socialist ends of building the collective power of the working class due to the way the party is organized. Past efforts to transform the party organization into a party of different type, culminating in the New Politics movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, demonstrate the difficulty of overcoming this problem. Coupled with the unlikelihood of producing the labour-based third party that has eluded the American left for well over a century, the analysis presented here suggests that rather than dismissing the Democrats and pinning our hopes on a third party, the American left must rethink which kinds of goals can be accomplished in the realm of American party politics, and which cannot. The first step is to come to terms with the nature of American political parties, and specifically, the Democratic Party.

WHAT KIND OF ORGANIZATION IS THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY?

A ‘bourgeois’ party?

When Marxists are asked about the nature of the Democratic Party, it is often said that the party is a ‘bourgeois party’. While varying shades of this view are widely held, it is more often used in the pub or at a political meeting than put down and defended in print. And while it makes for good agitprop, its analytic foundations are more problematic.

The concept of ‘bourgeois party’ can be developed in two different ways:

one, as an analogy with the bourgeois state; the other, as an analogy with a working-class party – neither of which is very satisfying. On the one hand, stretching from the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin to the 1970s debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas, the state in capitalism is said to be a capitalist state due to its structural dependence on privately controlled capital accumulation for its own reproduction. This structural dependence exerts pressure on state actors to conduct public policy in ways that promote investor confidence. It may well be true that government officeholders hail from the same social class as investors, attended the same elite schools, or were trained by their economics professors to think like *homo economicus*. But even if these contingent qualities of state actors are assumed away – replaced, say, by leftist members of working-class parties – the state's structural location in the political economy would still exert pressure on policymakers to govern on behalf of capital.

Just as in the state debate itself, several causal mechanisms have been suggested to be at work in making a party bourgeois. Continuing the power structure approach of C. Wright Mills, G. William Domhoff, for instance, places his emphasis on the qualities of the personnel of the party leadership and its social roots within the capitalist class.⁵ In contrast, Lance Selfa suggests that the connections linking the party to capital 'are not ideological' in nature.⁶ Rather, the bourgeois nature of the party is due to the personnel's concern with 'the staffing of the government but not with altering the state'.⁷ In addition, Thomas Ferguson's 'investment theory of political parties' sees the major American parties as blocs of wealthy investors rather than coalitions of voters or interest groups.⁸ To secure the funds necessary for electoral success, party officials and candidates must orient their appeals to large donors found among the nation's corporate elite, who expect to reap returns on their investments in the form of favourable public policy.

These perspectives draw valuable connections between political and corporate elites, who, in the US especially, are often the same people. However, these explanations tend to muddle rather than distinguish what is contingent and therefore changeable from what is structural and enduring. The difference is important to consider, not only because it helps us understand the past, but because it holds implications for strategy in the present. To take Ferguson as an example of a structural perspective, it is at times rather ambiguous if a party's policy agenda reflects the interests of its major investors in a direct, unmediated sense, or if investors' preferences themselves reflect their strategic accommodation with competing partisan groups' interests and demands.⁹ While it is undeniably important how parties raise their resources, investors' preferences may be shaped as much by the class

struggle inside the party, which determines what they can achieve politically, as by their specific position in the political economy alone. Adjudicating this ambiguity requires opening the black box of the bourgeois party and paying adequate attention to the determinants of the intraparty balance of forces, such as its institutional structure, its mechanisms of governance, and the organization of other non-bourgeois forces inside it.

This brings us to the other way of conceiving a bourgeois party, drawn in contrast to a working-class party. For most Marxists, working-class parties are those that ‘transform the proletariat into a class’ by building the collective capacities of working people to think, organize and act as a cohesive social force, and also translate that power into votes, and votes into seats in government. Working-class parties may develop robust subcultures of proletarian community life or link more indirectly to trade union federations. But in any and all cases, working-class parties enjoy solid electoral support from a majority of working-class voters.

From this perspective, the Democratic Party is something less than a working-class party but more than its bourgeois counterpart. Even though, as will be developed below, Democratic Party organs have rarely served as centres of community life, the party apparatus did develop structural links with trade unions in most large industrial states in the 1930s as well as at the national level in the process of presidential nomination and campaigning. In some states, such as Michigan, these institutional linkages of elite brokerage fused into tightly integrated party-union relationships. In other states, through the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ political action committee (CIO-PAC) and, later, the AFL-CIO’s Committee on Political Education (COPE), organized labour engaged in voter registration, door-to-door canvassing, literature distribution and get-out-the-vote drives for unionists and non-unionists alike. In terms of the electorate, the Democratic Party had already become home to most low-income and poor voters prior to the New Deal, which only deepened the trend. Contrary to oft-heard claims concerning reactionary white workers voting for Republicans since the time of Nixon, patterns of voting behaviour between low and high-income white voters have continued to *diverge* since the late 1970s, as those in the bottom third of the income distribution have cast ballots for Democratic presidential candidates at significantly higher rates than affluent whites.¹⁰ Moreover, while never approximating European social democracy, Democratic presidents have a fairly consistent pattern of governance that, on average, has produced less income inequality than during Republican administrations.¹¹

None of this is to suggest that the Democratic Party transforms working-class voters into a class. It does not, and, as I will argue below, it probably

cannot. (Nor should it be omitted that more straightforwardly working-class parties experience difficulty doing this too.) But the organized presence of workers in the party, whether through their trade unions or as voters, does have important consequences. Conceptually, then, the notion of a ‘bourgeois party’ fails to bring sufficient analytic clarity to the nature of power in the Democratic Party, leaving its allegedly capitalist foundations underdetermined. If it stems from its personnel, the personnel can be changed. If it is a matter of money, there appear to be conditions under which this can be mitigated. What is most problematic is the concept’s tendency to cut off more probing questions concerning how ruling parties actually work and how the left should strategically orient itself in response. Given the obstacles to a viable third party in the United States, such questions are imperative.

Openness without entry: The puzzle of Democratic Party organization

Going beyond simplistic labels requires a direct engagement with the organizational structure of the Democratic Party and the strategic options it presents. The overall pattern of American party development has been shaped by the institutional environment in which the parties are embedded. US presidentialism, the separation of executive and legislative powers, and the federal division between national and subnational levels of government have all stamped American parties with distinctive and enduring features. This is especially so because political parties in the US have no constitutionally prescribed form or rules. The federal Constitution makes no mention of them, and some of its most important framers denounced the ‘mischief of factions’ thought to act as ‘sores on the body politic’.¹² Nevertheless, sharpening disputes within the first and second Congresses over the extent of federal power in the new republic caused some of those same framers to rethink their hostility to parties. Durable legislative coalitions formed to ensure majority rule in the House of Representatives. To ensure full agenda control, these parties-in-government coordinated their partisan politicking with members of state legislatures, who selected senators, and over the selection of state electors, who elected the president and vice president. The spread of white male suffrage in presidential elections in the 1830s and 1840s gave rise to the first mass parties in the world – the Democrats and the Whigs – as each organized faction of the political class mobilized blocs of voters in support of their party’s slate of candidates for elective office.

This pattern of American party development contrasts sharply with the emergence of mass parties in Western Europe, which spread like a ‘contagion from the left’ as disenfranchised working-class parties organized large dues-paying memberships and complex, bureaucratic leadership structures,

while existing elite parties-in-government responded in kind.¹³ Rather than emerging from civil society and storming their way into a resistant state, American mass parties were an improvised invention of the party-in-government, which then spiraled outward from the state to mobilize parties-in-the-electorate for the purpose of winning elections at all levels of government.¹⁴ Partisanship was cultivated by elite appeals to voters' affective social group attachments, politicizing social cleavages along ethnoreligious lines, geography and through the use of revolutionary martial imagery.¹⁵ American parties had no formal memberships in the European sense, and partisan mobilization ebbed and flowed with the rhythms of the electoral cycle.

The American form of party development had distinctive effects on the kinds of organizations produced to accomplish state-led party building. When then-Senator Martin Van Buren, presidential candidate Andrew Jackson, and other political entrepreneurs built the national Democratic Party to facilitate Jackson's election in 1828, they minimized start-up costs by inviting existing state and local party organizations to affiliate under a unified Democratic label. However, state and local organizations already had in place their own leaders, platforms, and governing reputations. To entice incorporation, the national organization granted subnational party units significant autonomy in the design and operation of state and local party activity. While the subnational parties were expected to support the national party's presidential candidate, they were free to pick and choose their own platforms, candidates, and policies.¹⁶ All levels of the party would enjoy the collective benefits of the spoils of national office, such as jobs, contracts, and infrastructure building. But rather than functioning as branch offices of a centralized, hierarchical national bureaucratic organization, state and local parties were knit together in a patchwork of organizations, factions, cliques, and classes, with no formal process to formulate intraparty cohesion or even adjudicate intraparty conflicts. For the vast majority of their existence, American political parties have been, structurally speaking, parties of states' rights.

To be sure, the national parties developed coherent formal structures that vested nominally supreme authority in the quadrennial national conventions, their interim national committees and chairs, and the congressional campaign committees. However, to speak of 'national political parties' in the American context is something of a misnomer. For much of their near two-century existence, the national parties have been little more than loose confederations of state and local organizations. Indeed, the national party as a governing body has been so consistently weak, ineffective, and nearly

invisible in relation to its state and local counterparts that one prominent party scholar referred to it as ‘the ghost party’.¹⁷ And while there have been some recent trends to the contrary, it remains the case that American political parties are some of the most decentralized organizations in the democratic world.¹⁸ As E. E. Schattschneider once observed: ‘Decentralization of power is by all odds the most important single characteristic of the American major party. ... Indeed, once this truth is understood, nearly everything else about American parties is greatly illuminated.’¹⁹

However, rather than illuminating nearly everything about them, the decentralized structure of American parties poses a puzzle for those inclined to dismiss them as simply bourgeois institutions. Why should this structure be so systematically inclined toward capitalist interests? After all, such a loose confederation of relatively autonomous state and local organizations implies fairly low barriers to entry and influence than if the party had the oligarchical bureaucracies of the kind Roberto Michels examined in the German Social Democratic Party.²⁰ There were, of course, important analogues to oligarchical parties in the US, specifically the urban machines found in many large northern cities in the post-bellum period, as well as the authoritarian enclaves built in the southern states during Jim Crow.²¹ However, these examples only underscore the degree of autonomy local and state organizations enjoy in the context of American federalism. Northern machines and southern party-states could coexist within the same national party alongside comparatively open organizations in other locations.

The puzzle is only compounded when state and local party organizations are examined in detail. Outside the two exceptions mentioned above, most subnational parties continue to be very thinly institutionalized entities, meaning that while they may have a complete set of officers and by-laws in place – and this is a relatively *recent* development – they may lack paid full or part-time staff, a year-round office, or even a formal budget.²² Because of their proximity to the grassroots, local organizations are chiefly concerned with undertaking labour-intensive activities, such as voter registration, door-to-door canvassing, and get-out-the-vote mobilization. However, due to lack of funds, most local organizations are dependent on raising armies of volunteers to perform this work. Local parties usually fail to accomplish this, playing a supplemental role to candidate organizations. In fact, as of 2017, up to half of all local committee positions were vacant, not due to barriers to entry but because of lack of community interest.²³

What is more, the introduction of the direct primary and civil service reform around the turn of the twentieth century further limited the control that party organization leaders could exert over the nomination process

(however, these reforms also more firmly institutionalized the Democratic-Republican two-party system).²⁴ Party nominations were now conducted under state laws, using state-printed ballots, and giving self-declared partisans (and sometimes independents or even just anyone) the opportunity to cast a ballot for their preferred candidate before the general election. As will be shown below, this did not rule out the ability for organized subterfuge and manipulation, especially of the presidential nominating process. But it did constitute a significant watershed in American party development that rendered 'boss rule' mostly a thing of the past.²⁵

All this is to say that, contrary to what a notion like 'bourgeois party' would lead us to expect when we examine Democratic Party structure, the party organization's entrance appears to be standing relatively ajar. The strategic options this party structure opens up can be seen, for instance, in the course of the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement. As Eric Schickler has recently shown, what has long been understood as an elite-driven, top-down realignment of the Democratic Party in the mid-1960s was, in fact, the culmination of a quarter-century-long struggle within the New Deal coalition to bring civil rights to the top of the national agenda.²⁶ Beginning in 1936, labour-liberals in the Democratic Party and labour activists within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) broadened the meaning of New Deal liberalism by fusing concerns with economic and racial inequality into a programmatic agenda built around fair employment practices, anti-lynching legislation, collective bargaining, and voting rights. The electoral activity of the CIO-PAC, lobbying efforts by liberal organizations such as Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and the conversion of northern African American voters from the party of Lincoln to the party of Roosevelt shifted public opinion on civil rights, and pressured local and mid-level Democratic officeholders to endorse pro-civil rights planks in state party platforms and to bring civil rights legislation to state legislatures and Congress long before national party leaders responded. While the new conventional wisdom has pointed to party federalism and the role of the South in limiting the liberalism of the New Deal era, the decentralized party structure actually cut both ways, providing well-organized groups and movements with a power base from which to reshape the national party.²⁷ By the time President Lyndon Johnson overcame the southern filibuster of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the majority of the non-southern Democrats were already on board.

Clearly, when the left has a widespread, organized social base capable of affecting public opinion and the behaviour of voters, party actors have incentives to respond. Precisely because there is no 'party line' to toe, officeholders and office seekers can be pressured to shift their own positions

on issues via lobbying, public criticism, or tight nomination challenges without it resulting in them being ‘purged’ or denied the party label. With very few exceptions, no such disciplinary capacity exists in American parties. The porousness that flows from their decentralized structure, as well as the history of the left in the party, suggests that they are open to leverage. What matters most is who is best organized to take advantage of this openness.

So the puzzle remains: if there are few barriers to entry that keep the left out of the Democratic Party and, as we have seen, the left could, under specific circumstances, exert influence in the party, why is there so little entry? Part of the reason may stem from the nature of the party organizations themselves, which continue to be shaped by the legacy of their top-down, inside-out origins. Because US party organizations were developed by parties-in-government to develop a voter base in civil society, those organizations have been more oriented toward helping candidates win elections than in building the political capacities of their social base. Because American parties are not funded by dues structures, they do not build mass memberships through community-oriented organizations, activities, and citizen education. Because subnational units under the same party label are relatively autonomous from each other as well as the national organization, heterogeneous and even outright antagonistic social forces may be grouped into the same coalition, rendering partisan majorities less meaningful, more difficult to hold accountable, and often skewed toward small, powerfully positioned blocs.

These campaign-oriented party structures have the effect of inverting the classic model of party-building activity: rather than building the social base to enlist growing numbers of loyal voters, American parties direct their most sustained activism toward cultivating partisan loyalty within the business community, from whom they raise most of their money, and conduct their campaign activity through top-down, data-driven strategies of identifying and ‘activating’ pluralities of likely partisan voters in swing districts. The same party structures that are so passive at the base are vigorously active at the top, seeking out and persuading potential donors to contribute, listening to their concerns, and developing a shared sense of consciousness and purpose in the public sphere.

In short, there is an important – in fact, crucial – distinction to make between organizational openness (lack of barriers to entry) and democratic effectiveness (meaningful participation) inside the Democratic Party. Formally, Democratic Party organizations are quite democratic: whoever shows up can participate. But substantively, getting to cast a vote to approve a new budget at the annual meeting of the local Democratic Party does

not amount to much, and thus fails to draw substantial citizen interest. The lack of internal deliberation concerning major policy issues of the day and alternative political visions for society functions as a significant disincentive for widespread grassroots participation.²⁸ Relatively low levels of party-oriented activism between elections have been an enduring feature of American politics that cannot be explained as generational or cultural failures. Historically, Americans have been a nation of joiners.²⁹ Voluntary civic associations, however, offer what American party organizations do not: large, economically diverse memberships; social and community bonds of solidarity; and geographically rooted, yet federated, networks that share in a perceived moral purpose. Participatory organizations such as these did not simply bring together likeminded individuals (as, say, a party primary might), but provided forums in which shared identities and preferences were forged. Leadership roles were regularly rotated, spreading civic capacities among the rank and file, and pooling membership dues often financed group activities.

Civic organizations, however, are no substitute for parties. Often formally apolitical or nonpartisan organizations, voluntary associations focus mostly on mutual aid for members and cannot nominate people for public office. The point, however, is to show the nature and purpose of an institution may have as much influence as its structure in promoting internal participatory democracy. American political parties were not created for such a purpose, nor have they come to play that role as mass-membership civic associations have themselves declined in recent decades.³⁰ They are fundamentally electoral devices for the aid of party candidates and officeholders. The question, however, is whether they can *only* be that.

IS A DIFFERENT DEMOCRATIC PARTY POSSIBLE?

In a reflective moment following the end of the Sanders insurgency, Seth Ackerman outlined an ambitious blueprint for a new party of the left in *Jacobin* magazine, listing several key structural criteria that a truly democratic party would need to include:

In a genuinely democratic party, the organization's membership, program, and leadership are bound together tightly by a powerful, mutually reinforcing connection. The party's *members* are its sovereign power; they come together through a sense of shared interest or principle. Through deliberation, the members establish a *program* to advance those interests. The party educates the public around the program, and it serves, in effect, as the lodestar by which the party is guided. Finally, the members choose a party *leadership* – including electoral candidates – who are accountable to the membership and bound by the program.³¹

While Ackerman is correct to point out that ‘the Democratic Party has none’ of these features, he is not the first to make such an observation. Back in the 1940s and 1950s, a group of political scientists organized a special task force under the auspices of the American Political Science Association to study the consequences of what they considered to be lack of ‘responsible parties’ in the American polity. Chief among their complaints was the ‘ambiguity of membership,’ the absence of any ‘central figure or organ which could claim authority to take up party problems, policies and strategy,’ as well as the ‘excessive measure of internal separatism’ made possible by the parties’ federal structure.³² By contrast, a responsible party system required nothing less than ‘parties [that] are able to bring forth programs to which they commit themselves ... possess sufficient internal cohesion to carry out these programs. ...[and] which cannot be brought about without party procedures that give a large body of people an opportunity to share in the development of the party program’.³³

Just as Ackerman’s analysis has been prompted by a poignant display of Democratic Party deficiencies in the 2016 primary campaign, the Committee on Political Parties undertook their critique of the American party system in the shadow of the infamous Dixiecrat revolt at the 1948 Democratic National Convention. After the CIO, ADA and other labour-liberals had fought successfully for the inclusion of a strongly worded civil rights plank in the party platform, delegates from Mississippi and South Carolina walked out in protest to launch the rival States’ Rights Party. While their immediate goal of denying President Harry Truman a majority in the electoral college failed, the aftermath of the revolt displayed the ability of state parties to discipline the national organization: Truman only temporarily withheld patronage from several Dixiecrat supporters in Congress, and the national leadership spent the 1950s walking back its commitment to civil rights.³⁴

As these instances display, party procedure and organization are likely to become objects of scrutiny in the context of larger political battles inside the party. It should be no surprise then that the most far-reaching attempt to reform the Democratic Party in light of its perceived organizational deficiencies came in the wake of the party crisis of 1968. The post-1968 party reforms were driven by the New Politics movement operating within and outside the Democratic Party’s official Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection (known as the McGovern–Fraser Commission for its two chairmen). Hailing from segments of the civil rights, student, antiwar, and feminist movements, as well as the labour-left, New Politics activists viewed party reform as the opportunity to assert greater membership control and officeholder accountability, and thereby change the fundamental dynamics of American politics.

Their reform agenda was shaped in part by the many instances of abuse, chicanery, and even outright exclusion antiwar activists had experienced in the 1968 battle for the Democratic nomination. The campaigns of senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy had forced President Johnson out of the race, but Vice President Hubert Humphrey had taken his place as the party's standard bearer. Unlike the gradual persistence of the civil rights movement moving up through the party structure, the nature of the antiwar cause and its sense of urgency, as well as its countercultural flair and its antagonism to longstanding Cold War policy, created a near ubiquitous backlash from low and mid-level party officials. Throughout the nominating process, McCarthy and Kennedy supporters were frustrated by undisclosed caucus meeting locations, arbitrary rulings from committee chairs, abusive uses of proxy voting, locked doors, massive filing fees, and nonbinding primary results. While the insurgents had collectively wrapped up the majority of primary victories, Humphrey had a majority of convention votes without having contested a single primary contest. As the reform commission concluded in its official report in 1970: 'meaningful participation of Democratic voters in the choice of their [1968] presidential nominee was often difficult or costly, sometimes completely illusory, and, in not a few instances, impossible.'³⁵

In the wake of the disastrous Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the narrow loss in the November election, the McGovern-Fraser reform commission issued binding guidelines to ensure that no candidate would again achieve the party's presidential nomination in the way Humphrey did. State parties were obliged to comply with a set of 'reasonable standards' meant to ensure all rank-and-file Democratic activists and voters had a 'full, meaningful, and timely opportunity to participate' in the selection of the party's nominee. These included codifying transparent rules regarding procedure and holding open meetings at publicized times and locations. More controversially, the guidelines also banned proxy voting, closed slate making, and ex officio or automatic delegate status for party officials and officeholders, meaning that all aspiring delegates – whether movement newcomers or sitting members of Congress – had to run in their home districts and publicly pledge their support for a presidential candidate. Furthermore, convention delegates were to be allocated proportionally according to candidates' state-levels of support rather than in winner-take-all contests. Slates of delegates were bound to cast their first ballot for their candidate, curtailing the opportunity for party leaders to broker over the nominees in the infamous smoke-filled rooms at the back of the convention hall.

Ironically, though the American New Left is remembered for its emphasis

on the virtues of decentralization, the New Politics project required a significant *centralization* of party power in the national convention, the national committee, and the reform commission they created. It was precisely the decentralized structure of party federalism that had enabled local and state committee chairs to improvise rules and procedures to exclude insurgents. To ensure that insurgent voices were heard, the nominally supreme power of the national 'ghost party' had to be actualized. Decisions made at the national level regarding the conduct of party governance, including the installation of very strong affirmative action provisions, were imposed on all fifty state parties. If they failed to comply, as did Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's defiant Illinois delegation at the 1972 convention, they were stripped of their credentials and ejected from the convention.

Crucially, New Politics reformers understood that removing the barriers to participation that kept the insurgents out in 1968 would not be sufficient to transform the party going forward. At the heart of the reform commission's work emerged a perspective critical not just of the technical specifics of the presidential nomination process, but of political parties' role in linking society and the state. As one internal report put it:

These hearings [have] revealed that reform goes much further than simply reforming internal structures. Making the party 'open' is only a first step ... for even if the doors of the party are opened wider to the grass roots, it is not at all certain that the grass roots will rush in to seize the opportunity. ...It is not enough to 'democratize' party procedures if large numbers of people are not interested in participation.³⁶

Participation, some argued, had to go beyond 'just ratifying someone else's choice' of party candidates.³⁷ There had to be positive incentives for meaningful citizen participation, incentives that were compromised by the structure and operation of the party, which threw together racial egalitarians and Jim Crow proponents, as well as peace activists and cold warriors, into the same partisan coalition. The party would be unable to draw in popular participation without some way of forging a significant degree of ideological coherence and policy cohesion. A more programmatic party therefore required 'losing some of the allegiances' of the past (e.g. southern conservatives), who received the benefits of majority party status but were 'allowed to scab on us at the ballot box and in Congress'.³⁸ The party would have to develop some policymaking capacity if platforms were to be more than just a 'hodgepodge of platitudes' from which officeholders felt free to distance themselves between elections.³⁹ Indeed, the electoral focus could

no longer be the exclusive concern of the party, which ‘must serve the people between election years’. What was needed, they said, was ‘a new kind of political service organization’ that was ‘activist’ in orientation.⁴⁰

Thus, beyond merely ‘opening the party’ to new entrants in the presidential nominating process, as significant as that was, the New Politics movement pressed ahead in the years after the 1968 crisis with a comprehensive blueprint for building a different Democratic Party. The plan, its authors hoped, would ‘discard the frustrating weaknesses of the present system ... and usher in a new and vastly strengthened structure, based on grassroots support’.⁴¹ The proposed Democratic Party Charter not only institutionalized the new nominating process in the party’s first-ever constitution, but also sought to transform the loose confederation of state and local parties into a national, mass-based, participatory organization. This was to be accomplished by introducing a new set of regional party organizations to interface between the state and national levels, expanding the national committee and creating an executive council, which would include congressional party leaders, and implementing a mass-member dues system to alleviate the party’s fundraising reliance on wealthy contributors. Regional and national party organizations would convene midterm policy conferences so that party officials, officeholders, and rank-and-file party members could formulate a platform without the added pressure of nominating a presidential candidate. These ‘mini-conventions,’ it was imagined, would act as ‘a transmission belt between movement politics and party politics’.⁴²

However, a different Democratic Party never fully materialized. The prospects for transformation diminished as the party leadership deserted the 1972 Democratic National Convention in droves, even as new entrants of women, African Americans, and people under thirty soared. The most critical defection came from the AFL-CIO leadership, who, in addition to their open distaste for the counterculture and their ‘softness’ on communism, also promoted a narrative that cast the New Politics movement as ‘elitist’ and ‘anti-working class’ in nature. In fact, these accusations were belied by the United Auto Workers’ financial support and active participation in the reform process from the outset, as well as the dozens of AFL-CIO unions and locals that openly defied federation president George Meany’s policy of neutrality in the presidential election and endorsed antiwar candidate and New Politics spokesperson George McGovern. Moreover, the proportion of working-class people and unionists serving as convention delegates increased significantly in 1972, which, along with the entrance of more women, young people, and people of colour, made the event ‘more representative’ than the 1968 Chicago convention.⁴³

Beyond Cold War ideology or cultural differences between the old left and the new, many labour leaders saw the reforms as a threat to their primary source of power in the selection of presidential nominees, which had relied on deals brokered in the smoke-filled rooms that the reformers were in the process of dismantling. Many unions' longstanding pattern of elite brokerage with party leaders appeared unable to adapt to new participatory institutions that would require unions to invest significant resources in the political education of their own rank and file. Other unions however, especially those historically subordinated within the AFL-CIO hierarchy, saw party reform as an opportunity to refashion the labour-liberal alliance at a moment when the power of conservative southern Democrats was waning. Indeed, their enthusiasm for a different Democratic Party helped resurrect 'a guaranteed job for all' in the 1972 party platform for the first time since Roosevelt introduced it in 1944.

However, as the party charter was being rolled out amidst the nomination of McGovern, counter-reformers began laying the groundwork for subverting the reform project. McGovern's landslide defeat in November provided the rationale the anti-New Politics forces needed to argue that the reformers and their project for transforming the party was reckless, and that their effort to 'Europeanize' the Democratic Party would continue to result in electoral disaster.⁴⁴

Branding themselves as the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), counter-reformers of various stripes (southern Democrats, conservative labour leaders, cold warriors, elected officials and neoconservative intellectuals) made a well-publicized case that it was 'unrealistic to talk of the desirability – even the possibility – of a united, liberal "national" party driving out the impure and arousing new converts by trumpeting a sweeping national program'.⁴⁵ In contrast to the blueprint for a wholly new party, they argued, Democrats 'should continue to build along the lines of a federative, pluralistic party, in keeping with the character of American politics,' especially 'the peculiarly limited roles and duties of an American-style national political party'.⁴⁶

The CDM's internal party lobbying campaign successfully unseated McGovern's choice for chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), weakened the New Politics' affirmative action provisions, and revised the party charter into a vehicle for institutionalizing the old order. As mandated by the 1972 McGovern convention, the party held its first-ever midterm policy conference in 1974, only to have its agenda limited by the DNC chair to approving the new constitution, which was rammed through in a single session with no allowance for amendments or motions to adjourn.

The result was, as some supporters observed, ‘a piece of paper that, in effect, codifies the existing system – a loose coalition of state parties and interest groups,’ which stood as ‘testimony ... to the primacy of candidates over structure’ in American politics.⁴⁷

Skirmishes between reformers and their opponents continued to flare sporadically within the Democratic Party throughout the 1970s, especially around the fight to implement the 1972 platform resolution for guaranteed full employment.⁴⁸ But the New Politics movement had decisively lost the initiative with McGovern’s devastating defeat and the dissipation of social movement activity outside the party. The structure of party federalism had imposed an all-or-nothing scenario on reformers. Failure to win the presidency prevented them from consolidating their victories and continuing the project of party transformation. While counter-reformers lacked the ability to fully roll back the clock on most of the reforms to presidential nominations, they weakened the guidelines for affirmative action, scrapped the mass membership scheme, and eventually restored automatic delegate status for top Democratic officials and officeholders under the guise of ‘superdelegates’ who were guaranteed a voice as unpledged voting delegates at national conventions. The upshot was that while reformers had permanently altered the process of presidential nomination, their larger vision for an ‘activist’ party organization was left unrealized.

THE SANDERS INSURGENCY AND ‘OUR REVOLUTION’

The next phase of Democratic Party development is well known: amidst staggering landslide defeats in the presidential elections of 1980, 1984, and 1988, moderate and conservative Democrats grouped within the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) waged a concerted campaign to move the party away from what they considered to be ‘special interest groups’ and toward the political centre, all in the name of ‘saving’ the party from its ‘headlong dash into social democracy’.⁴⁹ In language reminiscent of the CDM during the previous decade, DLC leaders warned their fellow Democrats that ‘we cannot afford to become a liberal party; our message must attract moderates and conservatives, as well’.⁵⁰ The DLC’s neoliberal ‘Third Way’ placed the party’s ideological emphasis on equality of opportunity, personal responsibility, and private sector initiative. This reorientation was evident in the governing strategy of the DLC’s Bill Clinton as well as the presidential candidacy of Al Gore. Indeed, so effective was *this* transformation of the party that midway through President Barack Obama’s first term, the DLC officially closed its office doors, declaring ‘we had accomplished our mission’.⁵¹

The socialist surprise

The apparent hegemony of the Third Way in the Democratic Party made it all the more surprising that an independent senator and self-described socialist from Vermont could so effectively rattle the almost preordained status of Hillary Clinton as the party's standard bearer in the 2016 nomination contest. Beginning with only 4 per cent support among Democratic primary voters in March 2015, less than a year later Bernie Sanders had achieved near victories in the early Iowa and Nevada caucuses and scored a commanding 22-point win in the New Hampshire primary. These were followed with victories in ten other caucus states as well as nine primaries, including Wisconsin, Indiana, West Virginia and Michigan, the last of which the pollsters at *FiveThirtyEight* called 'one of the greatest upsets in modern political history' (and one that foreshadowed Clinton's rust belt difficulties in the general election).⁵² All this occurred despite Clinton's advantage in fundraising (though Sanders raised money from more people), her near solid support from party establishment superdelegates, as well as DNC chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz's efforts to shield Clinton from criticism by scheduling originally only six debates (down from twenty in 2008) during weekends and other inconspicuous times. While probably not decisive, the anti-Sanders sentiment within the DNC (as illustrated in staff emails disclosed by Wikileaks) did not help Sanders either, except by forcing Wasserman Schultz's resignation.

In addition to the institutional disadvantages he largely overcame, Sanders' socialist moniker – a non-starter in the US politics since the first Red Scare after the First World War – also failed to spoil his candidacy. While his brand of democratic socialism amounted to little more than Scandinavian social democracy, his tenacious defence of an avowedly redistributionist agenda was a significant and positive departure in the context of bipartisan neoliberalism. By championing universal healthcare, a livable minimum wage, business regulation, and progressive taxation, Sanders returned to and expanded on Franklin Roosevelt's unrealized 'Second Bill of Rights' – often explicitly – positioning himself as both an outsider capable of breaking elite control over Washington as well as a legitimate successor to a venerable, if now marginal, Democratic tradition.⁵³

The reasons underlying Sanders' surprising success are difficult to pin down definitively, and in any case probably do not reduce to a simple explanation. Structural and conjunctural factors include decades of rising material inequality, the lingering effects of the Great Recession, the impact of Occupy Wall Street, and the disappointments of the Obama administration as well as the near dynastic coronation of Clinton despite a decimation of

Democratic officeholders over the course of the Obama presidency.⁵⁴ While few saw Sanders coming, his message found a significant amount of traction that sent shockwaves through activist circles, the news media, trade unions and, particularly, the Clinton campaign organization.⁵⁵

However, narratives that cast the nomination contest as a battle for the ideological soul of the Democratic Party are not clearly borne out by the primary entrance and exit polling data. While self-described conservative and moderate Democrats preferred Clinton by a ratio of 61 to 36 per cent, liberal Democrats still preferred Clinton, if by a far narrower margin of 53 to 46 per cent. What's more, voters who identified as 'very liberal' split their support evenly between the candidates: 50 per cent for Sanders; 49 per cent for Clinton. Evidently, while accepting the limits of plotting ideology along a unidimensional scale, increasing liberalism among Democratic voters did not correlate with candidate preference as well as one might have expected. And it is worth emphasizing that the first figure reported above indicates that more than a third of self-described moderate and conservative primary voters cast ballots for Bernie.⁵⁶

More than ideology, income, education, or any other single factor, support in the Sanders–Clinton contest split along partisan lines. At the aggregate level, Sanders did particularly well among young, white voters who identified as independent and prioritized income inequality as a top issue. Accordingly, Sanders did best in contests where state laws allowed independents to participate or easily register as Democrats, but came up short in states where independent voters were excluded or found registration processes restrictive, such as Pennsylvania and New York. In 2016, however, independents made up only 22 per cent of the Democratic primary voters, the vast majority of whom were diehard Democratic partisans, two-thirds of which supported Clinton.⁵⁷ It is not very surprising, then, that Sanders did relatively poorly among older voters of colour, whose degree of Democratic partisanship far outstrips their rate of ideological self-identification as liberal.⁵⁸ To be sure, aggregates can obscure important underlying trends, such as the fact that within the millennial age cohort, support for Sanders was higher among Latino/a, Asian American, and African American voters than among whites.⁵⁹ But for all the commentary about the purported favourability of millennials toward socialism, a Harvard Institute of Politics youth poll conducted in the spring of 2016 found that, despite Sanders being their most popular presidential candidate, a majority of 18- to 29-year-olds reject both capitalism *and* socialism, with capitalism getting the plurality of support.⁶⁰

These figures serve two important purposes. On the one hand, they serve as an antidote to the longstanding article of faith among data-driven political

analysts that demography is destiny, and the complacent view of politics that optimistically looks to generational change as the guarantor of a brighter political future.⁶¹ While rooted in history and political economy, political identities are constructed through political, social, and cultural processes and the institutions and narratives elites, social groups, and everyday people create to try to deal with them. They are not simple reflections of ‘objective’ conditions. Additionally, demographic change does not automatically translate into increasing numbers of voters, as those groups projected to be growing fastest are the most likely to encounter structural and circumstantial barriers to voting.

On the other hand, the figures serve to refute the commonplace assumption that Sanders’ appeal was limited by the hegemony of Democrats’ liberal ideology, which brooks no dissent, especially from an avowedly socialist perspective. On the contrary, it is more productive to interpret the data as evidence of the party’s lack of ideological coherence. In an era where concern is growing about polarized partisanship, it has become all too easy to project a mirror-image relationship between the parties as the Republicans, by all measures, have shifted *dramatically* to the right and Democrats have moved only modestly to the left since the 1970s (due mostly to the decline of its southern conservative wing).⁶² Whether examining the mass electorate, activist and donor networks, or elite officeholders, Republicans display much greater consistency in identifying as ideologically conservative and viewing politics in terms of clashing political principles, whereas Democrats display a much greater array of perspectives, ranging from very liberal to conservative (with a plurality of moderates), and see politics as a means of securing concrete benefits for target populations.⁶³

The absence of a unifying liberal vision in the Democratic Party was perhaps best exemplified in Clinton’s attempt to paint Sanders as a single-issue candidate. As she addressed one campaign rally:

If we broke up the big banks tomorrow ... would that end racism? Would that end sexism? Would that end discrimination against the LGBT community? Would that make people feel more welcoming to immigrants overnight?⁶⁴

Clinton’s disingenuousness notwithstanding, her statement is indicative of the group dynamics of the Democratic coalition, as well as the limitations of group coalitional politics when united by party rather than worldview. While the laundry list of Democratic issue items has expanded (for good reason) and become more internally compatible over time, it has not been

articulated within a new vision of society where most, if not all, these agenda items might be realized. Instead, groups' discrete demands are left to compete against each other for recognition and influence within a diverse field of separate identities.

The absence of any animating, unifying liberal ideology in the Democratic Party is nothing new, of course. As we have seen, it is an outcome that has been produced deliberately by sets of historical actors, including preventing the creation of internal party forums that could ostensibly forge such a partisan ideology. The Sanders insurgency did not so much represent a clash between competing worldviews within the Democratic Party than an attempt to inject a coherent, class-based worldview into an environment that has traditionally been hostile to all-encompassing perspectives. Party federalism and the Democratic group-interest coalition militate against such a unified movement. Whether or not a partisan clash between insiders and outsiders can be elaborated into an ideological contest over the kind of society we want to build, this is a project that requires sustained organization spanning more than one electoral cycle.

Continuing 'the political revolution' by 'transforming the party'

Clinton's narrow loss of the presidency to Donald Trump spurred widespread speculation that the Democratic Party had nominated the wrong candidate. It is impossible to know what would have happened had Sanders prevailed in the nomination fight. However, Clinton's defeat certainly did open greater space for Sanders Democrats to make the case that the 'millions of people who voted for Mr. Trump did so because they are sick and tired of the economic, political and media status quo'.⁶⁵ Accordingly, Sanders and his post-campaign successor organization, Our Revolution, have launched an ambitious project meant to continue the 'political revolution' galvanized by his candidacy, and to eventually 'transform the Democratic Party'.

Rolling out Our Revolution in a webcast to many thousands of supporters, Sanders dedicated the organization to aid progressive candidates 'fighting at the grassroots level for changes in their local school boards, in their city councils, in their state legislatures and in their representation in Washington'.⁶⁶ Formally established as a 501(c)(4) non-profit social welfare organization, Our Revolution functions as a candidate-oriented fundraising vehicle. It is allowed to raise unlimited amounts of money from undisclosed recipients (though its Board of Directors has made it a policy to disclose the names of donors contributing more than \$250 on its website), but it is not allowed to engage in partisan political activity as its 'major purpose'. This means that while the organization can endorse candidates for office and raise

and use resources for their election, Our Revolution cannot coordinate its activities with candidate organizations directly. This has led some to criticize Our Revolution's status as a non-profit rather than a traditional political action committee, especially after the defeat of Tim Canova in a high-profile primary challenge against former DNC chair Wasserman Schultz in the summer of 2016. Due to the inability to strategically coordinate with Canova's campaign, Our Revolution invested itself in redundant phone banking and failed to schedule an expected appearance from Sanders, who only listed Canova in a string of sixty personal endorsements.⁶⁷ The organization also came under fire from a number of young staffers who resigned in protest after the leadership appointment went to Sanders' campaign manager Jeff Weaver, whose decision to file the organization's designation as a non-profit appeared to jeopardize its mission.⁶⁸ Normally, 501(c)(4)s have functioned as 'dark money' channels for large, multimillion dollar corporate funds to be used for issue and candidate advertisements. However, Our Revolution's website boasts 140,000 individual donations during its first six months of operation, with a \$22 dollar average contribution.

Notwithstanding this rocky start, Our Revolution has persisted and stabilized with a board of directors composed of civil rights, human rights, and labour leaders, as well as environmental activists. The organization has had a modest success rate of candidate endorsements, backing winning candidates in just over half of more than one hundred contests in 2016, and a third of winning candidates in 2017 contests as of this writing (June), mostly at city and state levels.⁶⁹

The continuation of the Sanders movement in the post-election period also spilled over into what was easily the most contested fight for control of the DNC chair, a position few usually pay close attention to outside party officialdom. Keith Ellison's stated intention to 'transform the party' from the grassroots level up, as well as his embrace by leading Senate Democrats, rattled many officeholders and DNC members, triggering frantic behind-the-scenes efforts from within the Obama White House to offer up attractive candidates to counter the influence of the Sanders wing of the party, which they feared would push the party in too liberal a direction.⁷⁰ While Obama's pick for DNC chair, former Labor Secretary Tom Perez, narrowly prevailed, Perez's creation of a new deputy chair position for Ellison suggests that the new chair may see the path to party unity and electoral success as requiring some recognition, rather than suppression, of the party left. Perez's own partnership with Sanders in a 'come together and fight back' tour around the country seems to confirm this. It is also worth noting in this context that the radical reform agenda of the New Politics movement received the

pragmatic acquiescence of, rather than principled support from, then DNC chair Lawrence O'Brien. Chairpersons' actions as well as their inactions can be of enormous importance to the internal balance of party forces.

However, for the Sanders movement, 'transforming the party' evidently does not mean the same thing it did for reform activists who invoked the same rallying cry in the past. In contrast to the New Politics movement, few Sanders Democrats have suggested a wholesale restructuring of the party apparatus to facilitate new forms of grassroots engagement or community organization, or that new party mechanisms must be put in place to hold Democratic officeholders accountable to principles determined democratically and prioritized in the party platform.⁷¹ In fact, in his post-campaign book, *Our Revolution*, Sanders makes no mention of Democratic Party organization in his blueprint for a transformative agenda.⁷²

True enough, Sanders supporters' ire for the party's superdelegates and the artificially inflated lead they gave Clinton in the nomination contest resulted in the formation of a new internal party 'unity commission' to explore possible rule changes for future conventions. But it is more likely that the commission will tinker with primary rules than produce game-changing reforms on the scale of its McGovern-Fraser predecessor in the 1970s. For all the surface level similarity between 1968 and 2016 – when the chosen successor of a sitting Democratic president, preferred by party insiders over a left-leaning candidate, loses in a close election – the experience of the Sanders supporters through the campaign and convention was quite unlike that experienced by antiwar activists nearly fifty years ago. Due in part to the lasting legacy of the reforms engineered by their New Politics predecessors, Sanders supporters fought on a playing field that, while certainly tilted against an independent insurgent, was not literally closed off to them, as it was in 1968. While a fanciful scenario, it is difficult to imagine that had Sanders swept the primaries and racked up more delegates than Clinton, the superdelegates would have dared to cast their votes as a bloc to swing the nomination to Clinton. Such a manoeuvre would have plunged the party into crisis, assisting Trump's path to victory and exiling the Democrats to the electoral wilderness. Had Sanders' delegate lead exceeded the 15 per cent margin of superdelegate votes at the national convention, even this last ditch effort would have failed to deny him the nomination.

Rather than transform the party by reforming its structure, the Sanders movement has emphasized shifting the internal balance of power in government by filling local, state and federal offices with progressives, whether under the Democratic label or not, united by a common policy agenda. This is an implicit acknowledgement that what the left must do

now is organize a widespread power base inside and outside the state, not get bound up in complex negotiations over delegate selection devices in which it lacks the requisite influence to prevail. What remains to be seen is how far a candidate-oriented fundraising vehicle such as Our Revolution can carry forward the momentum of the Sanders insurgency. Its chances will be improved if movement forces and partisan forces continue to push in the same direction in opposition to the Trump administration. However, the true test of left power in the Democratic coalition will only come when Democrats inevitably retake control of the federal government, when movement and partisan forces are more likely to diverge.⁷³

CONCLUSION

Given the preceding analysis, it is theoretically conceivable that a widespread, well-organized left movement could penetrate the Democratic Party, exerting significant influence within state and local organizations, and perhaps even having an important presence in national nominating contests. Such a hypothetical scenario, while straining the party's financial dependence on capital, might result in important changes in the Democratic Party brand, its programme, and perhaps even public policy. History has shown that the permeable structure of the party can be leveraged by well-organized political groups, especially during moments of sharp party crisis, whether they work through the party from below or take advantage of momentary openings at the top. Both strategies have their risks and downsides, to be sure. But it seems unjustifiable to dismiss the possibility out of hand with a reference to the Democrats' unchanging nature as a 'bourgeois party'. While the Democratic Party is a complex organization that cannot be transformed into a working-class socialist party, it is not necessary impenetrable to such forces should they organize outside it and enter. The party may court the bourgeoisie, but it cannot close the door on uninvited guests.

However, even if left power could be achieved in the Democratic Party – and that is a big if – it will not in and of itself serve the purposes of the socialist project of strengthening the class capacities of everyday working people. Ironically, it is precisely the thinness of Democratic Party organization that makes it so penetrable on the one hand, and renders it so unsuitable for democratizing purposes on the other. The party, from the local to the national level, is not built for participatory democracy. The experience of the New Politics reform movement suggests the practical limits to transforming the party organization in ways that facilitate community engagement, capacity building, and internal party democracy. This means that while a strong left might make effective use of the Democratic Party for winning

seats in government, the Democratic Party cannot be used to build the left.

Nor is this participatory, organizational dimension merely a superfluous addendum, something that need not bother those who understand left political power as primarily about advancing a better policy agenda. Those who today espouse a 'Tea Party of the left' fundamentally misunderstand the asymmetry between left and right-wing movements and the incommensurability between the foundations of right and left-wing political power.⁷⁴ The Tea Party played an important role in the sweeping Republican gains in the 2010 congressional elections, as well as shifting the ideological centre of House Republican members – freshmen and incumbents alike – far to the right. But once the uprising of angry white Republican activists had been effectively put to use by Fox News and DC-based, free market PACs, the hundreds of genuine grassroots Tea Party organizations that had sprouted up across the country in the wake of Obama's election were left to atrophy. The uprising was 'successful' because it aligned with the goals of well-funded ideologues intent on transforming the GOP, who in turn posed as spokespersons of a mass movement. But these self-selected leaders were unaccountable to the leagues of activists for whom they claimed to speak, nor were their priorities – privatizing Social Security and eliminating Medicare – even compatible with the desires of the mostly older civic activists who composed the Tea Party rank and file.⁷⁵ While the sentiment of rolling back the horrendous Republican Party and stopping the Trump agenda in its tracks is understandable, it speaks volumes about the elite orientation of the American left that such a proposal is going viral as 'model' for progressive activists during the Trump era. While such a project could deliver Democratic electoral victories, it is unlikely to be accompanied by any political empowerment for constituents themselves. And without a new politics, new policies are likely to remain elusive.

Given the present insurmountable odds facing any third party project in the US, this leaves the left in a difficult spot. Strategies to deal with this dilemma are beyond the scope of this essay – indeed, any one essay. But one productive development that is implicit in much of the post-Sanders activism is for the left to divorce the twin tasks traditionally assigned to the working-class party, separating the organization of the proletariat into a class from the imperative to win governmental power. Both are indispensable activities that cannot proceed in isolation from each other: organizing workers as voters does not in itself build class capacities; class power that fails to become state power also fails to change the world. For third party advocates, these twin tasks would be married in a labour-based socialist party. In the context of the really existing USA, however, this is not a viable option.

In the post-Sanders moment, what is needed is for the left to begin to build a working-class party surrogate: a geographically rooted network of mass-member civic organizations, oriented toward building a base within working-class communities and labour unions that can also act as an effective independent pressure group on the Democratic Party. Social movements, while invaluable forms of social power, are no substitute for mass-based organizations and inevitably decline. Such an organizational network must focus its activities around concrete demands that are responsive to working-class needs such as expanding public institutions and de commodified access to basic resources, which challenge the logic of neoliberal social and economic policy. Precisely because this effort is not premised on exiting the Democratic Party to launch of third-party alternative, it would avoid the pitfalls experienced by the 1990s Labor Party project of expending precious resources in negotiating state ballot access and the spoiler problem that can result in Republican victories.⁷⁶ It would also provide space for dissident voices inside unions, many of whom vocally protested their leaderships' undemocratic endorsement of Clinton over Sanders in the 2016 primaries. Moreover, the permanent existence of this structure would provide a year-round centre for working-class community life rather than the typical American party organization that is reanimated only with the coming of campaign season. Its focus on educating and developing its constituents would empower them to act collectively, which would include engaging in the electoral process, but would not be limited to it.

Most importantly, such an organization would break from the illusory notion underpinning Green Party strategy and other third-party perspectives that presumes that a left constituency and electoral potential already exists in a dormant state in American society, awaiting only activation by a sufficiently progressive platform or candidate.⁷⁷ If the left is ever to enjoy widespread popularity, a broad-based left constituency must be created. The second annual People's Summit, which drew some 4,000 activists to Chicago in June 2017, including many from the swelling ranks of Democratic Socialists of America, is a very positive development and serves the vital purpose of galvanizing a collective sense of purpose, strength and enthusiasm. But when dispersed across the half-million political jurisdictions that exist in the US, that cadre, however essential, remains a minority incapable of shifting the balance of social and political power on its own, however militant it may be. Victories that may occur in the San Francisco Bay Area or in New York City are significant and can figure as important showcases that educate and inspire movement groups elsewhere. But as the history of the postwar labour-left shows us, gaining only regional footholds in a federated polity

mitigates the ability to translate hard-won electoral successes into lasting policy achievements that institutionalize a more favourable basis for future struggles nationwide.

To avoid repeating the past, the American left has to build *extensive* power across the country, especially in places where it lacks pre-existing enthusiasts. This strategy entails shifting from what Jane McAlevey has astutely distinguished as the difference between mobilizing and organizing, and necessarily requires resurrecting the lost art of political persuasion – a technique that has atrophied with the rise of data-driven activation email blasts, paper membership organizations, and the moralizing tactics of the left's online outrage industry.⁷⁸ While the extent of Trump's working-class base has been exaggerated, Sanders has himself demonstrated in post-election televised town hall events that scapegoating perspectives found amongst alienated midwestern workers are convertible into class-based grievances. Such an enterprise requires going beyond fundraising organizations, non-profits, and media-based PACs. How such an organizing project could be undertaken on a mass scale without the institutional resources of a new labour movement is admittedly difficult to envisage. But beginning from a perspective that accepts the need to build the base will minimize misplaced hopes in Trump's own self-destruction, the 2018 elections, or finding the next Bernie Sanders.

This working-class organizational network implies that the left break from understanding political parties as vehicles emergent from civil society for the conquest of government. This theory of party fuels the perspective that the major parties fail to perform this task in a democratic and representative way, and thus should be supplemented or displaced by a different kind of party, organized from below. The truth of the matter is that American parties are products of state actors, invented for the purposes of facilitating officeholders' legitimacy to advance their preferred agenda and cultivating a base for reelection. Their age, endurance, flexibility, and legal status make them akin to organs of the state itself, straddling a semi-private, semi-public boundary that renders them more similar to 'public utilities' than civil society organizations.⁷⁹ Their hollow structures and campaign operations help organize the bourgeoisie and disorganize the working class. Yet, their nebulous status between civil society and the state make their internal politics rather sensitive to changes in the societal balance of power and prone to contradiction. Historically, the terrain of American parties – beset by competing group demands, factional conflict, and no shortage of palace intrigue – has been a flood land of insurgent movements. Rarely in the vanguard, American parties have nonetheless been at the centre of past

transformative political projects – emancipatory and reactionary – that have shifted the fundamental dynamics of the political economy.

Accordingly, from a strategic point of view, the existing major political parties in the US should be considered as sites of class struggle, just as the rest of the governing apparatus has been conceptualized for many on the left since the days of the 1970s state debate. While it is true that we lack the kind of party capable of playing the lead role in organizing the working class, our response must be to invent extra-party organizations that compensate for this deficiency, which develop people's potential to think, strategize, and act collectively, and can engage strategically and effectively inside the Democratic Party.

The burden of the American left is to build the power of the working class without the assistance of the working-class party. When it comes to translating that power into votes, and votes into seats in government, which is necessarily part of the struggle, we have very few options. The party we need is not the party we have. That will continue to be a constraint under which we labour to make our own history.

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