

Sept 8 LINC Meeting -- Reflections on the Progressive Path Forward

by David Sprintzen PhD

The 2018 mid-term election was an astounding repudiation of Donald Trump, and an affirmation of a progressive alternative for the United States. A Democratic Party that has clearly moved to the Left on issues across the board - no doubt stimulated by the efforts of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, in particular - achieved historic gains that were only limited by the extreme gerrymandering that the Republicans have instituted following their successes in 2010. And these clearly remain serious structural impediments to further progressive politics, to a consideration of which I will turn shortly.

But we can be particularly excited by the racial, cultural, and gender diversity of the "class of 18." And this achievement itself was built upon the most significant fact of all, namely the unprecedented politicization and mobilization of vast sectors of the electorate, across the country, a mobilization without precedent in modern American history. So many from all walks of life have come to realize that basic aspects of our culture and institutions - including much that we had always simply taken for granted as the gift of "American exceptionalism" - because "God had shed His grace" on us - were not guaranteed, and were directly threatened by the Trump Administration and its transformation of the Republican Party into a willing vehicle of a burgeoning American neo-Fascism.

In the truly national scope and sustained action of this popular mobilization lies the basis of the exciting electoral success. And in the sustaining and expanding of this unprecedented national mobilization lies the hope and possibility of effectively advancing a progressive agenda that can reclaim American politics through the national elections of 2020, the consequent state-by-state redistricting, and thus for years thereafter.

Therein resides our legitimate excitement, our organizational challenge, and our potential strategic trap. And it is to that potential "trap" that I want to address the better part of these remarks. For we are engaged in a long-term struggle with the forces of reaction, which, unfortunately, are all too strong across America - as attested to by Trump's continued support at around 40%. We must build and expand the national constituency for progressive politics. And we must not alienate significant dimensions of that national mobilization by overplaying our hand. We must avoid getting carried away by some of the most remarkable progressive successes, mostly in the liberal bastions of the Northeast, mid-West and West Coast, for example, thus playing into the hands of reaction.

Let me explicate this challenge by drawing on a few excellent points developed by Michael Tomasky in the current issue of the *New York Review of Books* to which we need to pay careful attention. He first draws the following two key takeaways from the recent election: 1) the necessity for the Democrats to increasingly mobilize their base to counter the Trumpian mobilization; and 2) the need to address the increasingly dramatic split between, on the one hand, the expanding urban and suburban base of the Democratic electorate and, on the other hand, its drastically shrinking support in small town and rural Americas, the base of the Trumpian Republican Party.

Here, Tomasky observes that "There is no clearer sign of the changing shape of the Democratic coalition than the fact that going into the 2018 midterm elections, six of the 20 richest congressional districts were represented by Republicans but that when the new Congress is sworn in, all 20 will be represented by Democrats.... But by 2020, the Democrats will have to find ways to improve their performance in exurban and rural areas. This is not only for the sake of defeating Trump, but also to have any chance of recapturing the Senate."

Here, "a look at the Beto O'Rourke's defeat in Texas, compared with Sherrod Brown's victory in increasingly Republican Ohio, ... is instructive." While O'Rourke only lost by "around 220,000 votes out of 8.33 million cast, (he) carried just thirty-two of the state's 254 counties, ... (he) got walloped (in most

of the rest). For example, ... in six of the seven counties that surround (the city of Fort Worth), Cruz won 54, 68, 76, 80, 81, and 82 percent. And he won 70 or 80 percent of the vote in dozens of the smaller rural counties." In contrast, Brown was victorious by being able to keep his deficit in similar rural and small town Ohio to around 60%.

Tomasky then observes that "the electoral consequences should be clear. Consider the Senate map of 2020. Thirty-four senators will face reelection (except for those who choose to retire). Of those, twenty-three will be Republicans, and just eleven Democrats. That sounds favorable to Democrats, but if you look closer, about fourteen of the Republicans represent deep-red states where they should cruise to reelection. The other seven will not be easy to flip. The fattest target is probably Maine incumbent Susan Collins. Maine just elected a Democratic governor, who is also the state's first female governor. But beating an incumbent senator is always hard (though some believe Collins may retire). The other states where Democrats may have a shot include Colorado, Arizona, North Carolina, Iowa, Georgia, and Texas. Donald Trump carried five of those six. All have major cities, but all are states where it's hard to win by carrying only the most populous counties and doing poorly in the rural ones."

"As for the presidency," Tomasky continues, "there are a number of states—the Great Lakes states, North Carolina, Florida, and even Arizona and Georgia—where the pro-Trump vote in the rural counties will be so amped up that the Democrat, while winning the big counties, will have a tough time overcoming it."

While not exploring the causes of this electoral divide, which bears on the political and economic failures of both parties over the last 50 years, to which I will turn shortly, Tomasky offers the following "stunning statistics. The United States has experienced three recessions since 1990(:) ... after the early 1990s recession, 71 percent of the new business growth occurred in counties with fewer than 500,000 people (and within that, 32 percent in counties with fewer than 100,000 people). After the 2002–2003 recession, that 71 percent shrank to 51 percent. And after the Great Recession of 2007–2009, the number was 19 percent—and in counties under 100,000 growth was literally zero. That is a crisis. It's at the root of the opioid epidemic, and it's why so many young people leave these towns." And this highlights one of the central reasons these regions are so desperate for change, and so angry at all political establishments, but especially those they see as aligned with urban cosmopolitan interests and values, which they primarily identify with the Democrats.

There is so much more than can and should be said about the causes and scope of this problem which I cannot address here, except to note that this economic situation and political divide is a direct result of the process of Neo-Liberal Globalization that has dominated the Western World since at least the arrival of Thatcher and Reagan. And it has had similar results across the "advanced West," not to speak of its more global consequences. For example, it is the essential background for the almost unprecedented nationwide mobilization of the French people against the Neo-Liberal policies of the Macron Administration, that has effectively brought that government to its knees.

But I only want to underline here the fact that a progressive Democratic program, if it is to be successful, must begin to address this economic and cultural divide. And to do that, it must break from the Neo-Liberal orthodoxy of its Clinton-Obama establishment, that has left behind so much of America. Here, Tomasky highlights "the Democrats' two big electoral tasks as they head into 2020: to invest in maximizing turnout among their base voters in cities and diverse suburbs, and to take steps to ensure that they can become more competitive in the exurbs and the countryside. These goals may seem as though they contradict each other, but they need not; both constituencies would be open to an agenda emphasizing public investments that help middle- and working-class people. There will be some tension on cultural issues, and Democrats shouldn't go overboard in pandering for rural votes. After all, they're not trying to win those areas; just to perform about 10 or 15 points better—at Sherrod Brown's levels rather than Beto O'Rourke's."

Progressives Must Avoid The "Trumpian Trap"

It has become quite clear that Trump's electoral strategy is built on mobilizing racism and anti-immigrant nationalist xenophobia. It seeks to create a narrative framed around the threat that "they" pose to "us". He knows that his base of support, while remarkably durable and fanatically committed to him, is much too small to insure his re-election. Thus, in addition to insuring their maximum mobilization, he needs to draw many uncommitted to his side, while engaging in systematic voter suppression of constituencies that oppose him. Thus his strategy is to turn that "we" v. "them" mobilization into a "white" v. "black and brown" electoral strategy. Trump knows that, in a country that is about 65% "white", if he can do that he wins.

The challenge for progressives is to counter this Trumpian strategy without falling into that trap of making this a fight between the races. We know that Trump will continue to stoke the racist and xenophobic fires. And that he will be able to control a significant amount of public air time and tend to dominate social media and the public debate. Progressives will not be able to avoid this issue, and must not fail to combat his racism and xenophobia clearly and directly. The challenge for us is to know how to do that without falling into the trap he is trying to set of making this a "color war," a fight of white against black and brown. For that is a war we will lose. And we cannot afford to lose this fight.

The stakes could not be higher. It is not an overstatement to say that if we do not stop Trump in 2020, we may not be able to stop America's slide into neo-fascism. And the reason is clear. The strategy of the now Trumpian Republican Party is to re-write the rules of the electoral process so that it becomes practically impossible for even significant majorities of the population to influence policy. From voter suppression, and extreme gerrymandering, to unlimited campaign expenditures and drastic constitutional revisions, their strategy is clear: protect corporate wealth and disempower the populace. While I cannot dwell on those details here, a detailed understanding of that strategy and its historical development can be obtained in Nancy MacLean's brilliant book *Democracy in Chains: the radical right's stealth plan for America*.

Thus, I repeat, progressives must not fall into the Trumpian Trap of letting him make this a fight between the white majority and the black and brown minority. We must confront his racism and xenophobia head-on with a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, inclusive program of economic and social justice. We must address the sufferings of all Americans, and advocate clear progressive programs that speak to the needs and offer practical solutions to the problems that are felt by working people across this country. From global warming to opioid addiction, from outrageous income inequalities to the failing social safety net, Democratic candidates need to present an inclusive vision and program that transcends racial, ethnic, and regional divides and offers all Americans a realistic hope for a better future. That can be a winning message. We cannot afford to fail.

David Spuntzen
dspuntz@lin.edu
www.davidspuntzen.com