

A Party, Not A Movement

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David Sirota

The difference between parties and movements is simple: Parties are loyal to their own power regardless of policy agenda; movements are loyal to their own policy agenda regardless of which party champions it. This is one of the few enduring political axioms, and it explains why the organizations purporting to lead an American progressive "movement" have yet to build a real movement, much less a successful one.

Though the 2006 and 2008 elections were billed as progressive movement successes, the story behind them highlights a longer-term failure. During those contests, most of Washington's major labor, environmental, antiwar and anti-poverty groups spent millions of dollars on a party objective -- specifically, on electing a Democratic president and Congress. In the process, many groups subverted their own movement agendas in pursuit of electoral unity.

The effort involved a sleight of hand. These groups begged their grassroots members -- janitors, soccer moms, veterans and other "regular folks" -- to cough up small-dollar contributions in return for the promise of progressive movement pressure on both parties' politicians. Simultaneously, these groups went to dot-com and Wall Street millionaires, asking them to chip in big checks in exchange for advocacy that did not undermine those fat cats' Democratic Party friends (or those millionaires' economic privilege).

This wasn't totally dishonest.

Many groups sincerely believed that Democratic Party promotion was key to achieving progressive movement causes. Additionally, during the Bush era, pushing progressive causes and helping Democrats was often one and the same, because those causes primarily indicted Republican obstructionists.

But after the 2008 election, the strategy's bankruptcy is undeniable.

As we now see, union dues underwrote Democratic lawmakers who today block serious labor law reform and ignore past promises to fix NAFTA. Green groups' resources elected a government that pretends sham "cap and trade" bills represent environmental progress. Health care groups, promising to push a single-payer system, got a president not only dropping his own single-payer promises, but also backing off a "public option" to compete with private insurance. And antiwar funding delivered a Congress that refuses to stop financing the Iraq mess, and an administration preparing to escalate the Afghanistan conflict.

Communications Workers of America Local 4250
3055 Glenwood-Dyer Road, Lynwood, Illinois 60411
Steve G. Tisza, President (708) 757-4065(Office)
stevetisza@sbcglobal.net (E-Mail)
<http://www.cwalocal4250.org> (Website)

Of course, frustrated progressives might be able to forgive the groups who promised different results, had these post-election failures prompted course corrections.

For example, had the left's preeminent institutions responded to Democrats' health care capitulation by immediately announcing campaigns against these Democrats, progressives could feel confident that these groups were back to prioritizing a movement agenda. Likewise, had the big antiwar organizations reacted to Obama's Afghanistan escalation plans with promises of electoral retribution, we would know those organizations were steadfastly loyal to their antiwar brand.

But that hasn't happened. Despite Democrats' health care retreat, many major progressive groups spent the summer cheering them on, afraid to lose access and, thus, Beltway status. Meanwhile, The New York Times reports that Moveon.org has "yet to take a clear position on Afghanistan" while VoteVets' leader all but genuflected to President Obama, saying, "People (read: professional political operatives) do not want to take on the administration."

In this vacuum, movement building has been left to underfunded (but stunningly successful) projects like Firedoglake.com, Democracy for America, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee and local organizations. And that's the lesson: True grassroots movements that deliver concrete legislative results are not steered by marble-columned monoliths, wealthy benefactors or celebrity politicians -- and they are rarely ever headquartered in Washington. They are almost always far-flung efforts by those focused on real-world results, not partisan vanity -- those who don't care about congressional cocktail parties or White House soirees they were never invited to in the first place.

Only when enough progressives realize this truism, will any movement -- and any significant change -- finally commence.

David Sirota is the author of "Hostile Takeover" and "The Uprising." He hosts the morning show on AM760 in Colorado and blogs at OpenLeft.com. E-mail him at ds@davidsirota.com.