

The Democrats as a Movement Party

BY PAUL STARR

Political parties in the United States are typically broad coalitions that bring disparate groups together to win elections. In a two-party system, those coalitions are usually the only way the different constituencies and their leaders can hope to gain a share of power. At times, however, parties become closely aligned with social movements that shift the base of party support, or the parties themselves take on the character of a movement. Much of American history is remembered this way—as a series of movements that inspired change in parties, won elections, and transformed the nation.

But that historical memory is selective: Movements haven't always produced electoral majorities. Their leaders have sometimes miscalculated and brought on their own defeat by driving out elements of the previous party coalition. Since movements bring new energy to parties and imperil old alliances, there is no general rule as to whether they lead to electoral success. They are indispensable to transformative change, but sometimes the transformations they bring about are not the ones they intend and come from victories they hand the opposition.

During the past half-century, the Republican Party has been transformed by the rise of the conservative movement in its various forms, including the Christian right of the 1970s and 1980s, the Tea Party of this decade, and the two insurgencies that have

roiled the party this year: Donald Trump's nativist and protectionist campaign and Ted Cruz's evangelically based conservatism. If Trump or Cruz and their supporters take control of the GOP, they could radically alter America's direction from the Obama years and redefine what kind of country this is—or drive enough Republicans out of the party's coalition in 2016 to hand Democrats a victory.

As the Republicans have moved to the right under movement pressure, the Democrats have shifted to the left, though not to the same degree. To be sure, the party has old ties to the labor, civil rights, and women's movements and newer ties to movements representing immigrants and LGBT people. Each of these is a distinct constituency with its own agenda. In recent decades, there has been no equivalent on the progressive side to the decisive ideological influence the conservative movement has had on the GOP. Believing they need moderate support to win, state and national Democratic leaders have sought to occupy the middle ground that the GOP's rightward shift has opened up.

In 2016, however, just as the Republicans face pressure from a party base disappointed with its leaders, so the Democratic Party faces pressure from Bernie Sanders's surprisingly strong challenge to Hillary Clinton. Clinton is the candidate of center-left party continuity. She falls in the direct line of her husband's and Barack Obama's presidencies and has the backing of most of the party's

elected leaders, including most of the progressives in Congress who have endorsed a candidate. Sanders is a movement candidate, an outsider to the party who has throughout his career identified himself as a socialist rather than as a liberal. He's a man of the left rather than the center left. Until this election, he had always run for office as an independent, frequently denouncing the Democrats as corrupt and beholden to corporate interests and the "ruling class."

she would favor tax increases only for those making more than \$250,000 a year.

As I write in mid-March, Clinton seems likely to be the Democratic nominee. But regardless of how this year's election turns out, Sanders and his campaign have raised a question about the future beyond 2016—whether the Democrats, like the Republicans, are going to become more of a movement party and what that would mean for American politics.

What would it take to get the "broken engine of progressive politics" working again?

Although many observers have downplayed the difference between Clinton's and Sanders's positions, the gulf is considerable. The two candidates' tax proposals are the clearest measure. To finance free health care, free public college tuition, and other programs that would, in total, expand the size of the federal government by about 40 percent to 50 percent, Sanders has called for 11 different tax increases that would bring top marginal rates on income and capital gains to levels higher than in the two countries he frequently mentions as models, Sweden and Denmark. Clinton wants to extend the Affordable Care Act and other recent Democratic achievements, but she has been cautious on taxes, saying

MOVEMENT, PARTY, AND PRESIDENT

The barriers to transformative political change are exceptionally high in the United States. In a parliamentary democracy like Great Britain, a party that wins an election can generally carry out its program because it controls the executive branch as well as the legislature and will not face the voters again for four or five years. In the United States, the separation of powers, the midterm elections for the House, the staggered election of senators, and the role of the Supreme Court all create additional obstacles to large-scale reform. A party intent on transformative change has to win congressional majorities as well as the presidency—and not just once, but repeatedly, in order to carry

out a program and, if necessary, shift the ideological balance of the Supreme Court. Control of state governments may also be critical, not least of all because of their power to set rules for elections, gerrymander legislative districts, disempower unions and other bases of opposition, and entrench the status quo.

If the obstacles to transformative change are so great, how have Americans ever brought it about? In “The Broken Engine of Progressive Politics,” a brilliant article published in these pages in 1998, Yale Law professor Bruce Ackerman argued that “the American change machine” has historically had three moving parts. The first has consisted of political movements that “catalyzed sweeping transformations,” from the expansion of democracy in the early republic to Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the civil rights revolution. Second, movements

movements in the 20th century sought influence through one or the other of the major parties, and often both. The role of parties as agents of change diminished. “As parties have grown weaker,” Ackerman writes, “the change engine has worked mainly with two parts—movements and presidents. Today only conservatives seem capable of recreating the classic movement-party-presidency. Progressives will continue to lack a comparable engine for change unless they learn how to put movement, party, and presidency back together again.”

To put “movement, party, and presidency back together” means revitalizing the missing element—party—and giving it the impetus of a movement. There is little hope for transformative change from electing a president alone without also electing a congressional majority and winning control of major states. Although presidents have considerable power

been prone to magical thinking about the presidency, imagining that presidents can effect change if only movements put enough pressure on them. Activists often illustrate how movements work by telling a story about a delegation of movement leaders who presented their case to Franklin D. Roosevelt while he was president. Sometimes the story is told about labor leaders, sometimes civil rights leaders. Supposedly, FDR responded: “I agree with everything you have said. Now, make me do it.” The quotation is almost certainly fictitious (there do not appear to be any references to it before the 1990s), but like other oft-told tales, the story says more about those who tell it than about its subject. The assumptions are presidentialist. The key word in the line “Make me do it” is “me”—the idea that Roosevelt would urge movement leaders to focus pressure on him rather than Congress

both the judiciary and Congress. When conservative Republicans overreached and nominated Barry Goldwater in 1964, they handed liberals a transformative opportunity, enabling Lyndon Johnson to win a landslide that brought in a large enough Democratic majority in Congress to pass the major programs of the Great Society. Of course, as a previous Senate majority leader, Johnson had a singular ability to get what he wanted out of Congress, and as a Southern successor to John F. Kennedy, he had a lot to prove about his liberal bona fides.

The productive relationships of Roosevelt and the labor movement and of Johnson and the civil rights movement provide the main models for today’s understanding of how progressive movements and presidents bring about change together. But it was only because of big Democratic congressional majorities in 1935 that Roosevelt could pass the Wagner Act and enable industrial unions to organize. It was only because of the breadth of the Democratic landslide in 1964 that LBJ was able to pursue the War on Poverty. If recent Democratic presidents haven’t delivered comparable reforms, their personal qualities aren’t the primary explanation, nor is it because movements haven’t made them do it. They haven’t had the sustained congressional majorities they would need, much less the partisan mobilization in the states that would make reform a reality throughout the country. The hopes that ride on presidents are destined for disappointment if there isn’t a party capable of carrying them to fruition.

BUILDING THE PARTY UNDER THE PRESIDENCY

Despite winning the popular vote in five of the past six presidential elections, the Democratic Party has been in decline for the past two decades. In their first midterm elections, Bill Clinton in 1994 and Obama in 2010 both lost control of Congress and major states to the Republicans and were severely

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have been linked to parties. Early in American history, rising movements organized new parties—“movement-parties,” Ackerman calls them—from Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans and Jackson’s Democrats to the Republican Party before the Civil War and William Jennings Bryan’s Populists. The third key element has been the presidency as the focus of transformative leadership.

The central mechanism of political transformation in the 19th century, according to Ackerman, was the combined “movement-party-presidency,” but after the defeat of Bryan and the Populists in 1896, insurgent movements no longer developed into new parties. Instead, the turn-of-the-century Progressives and the feminist, labor, civil rights, and other

to determine foreign policy, they have little capacity on their own to institute new domestic policies and no power to do so if those involve new taxes. The sustained power necessary to effect change in the American political system—and to avoid devastating midterm reversals and state-level opposition—requires more than campaigns built around an individual presidential candidate. Yet the rise of freelance candidacies and diminished organizational role of parties encourages a focus on building up individuals rather than building institutions.

The preoccupation with personalities and presidents is so strong in America that it even affects those who ought to have a more institutional understanding of politics. Progressives have

and that the president would be the one with the power to do whatever needed doing.

With the benefit of overwhelming Democratic congressional majorities, Roosevelt did bring about a great deal of lasting change. Nonetheless, the New Deal went only as far as Southern Democrats in Congress allowed it to go; when they deserted Roosevelt and allied with Republicans, he was stymied. FDR’s failed purge of conservative Southern Democrats in 1938 ended the possibility of thoroughly remaking the party and recreating the full “movement-party-presidency” Ackerman talks about.

In the next transformative era, the civil rights revolution depended on support from moderate and liberal Republicans in

hamstrung from then on. In his second term, Clinton was able to secure some modest but important policy goals, such as the Children's Health Insurance Program. But Obama has faced resolute GOP obstruction, and on his watch Democrats have suffered big losses at both the federal and state levels.

Barring a major Democratic sweep, Republican control of the House may be baked into congressional districts until at least 2022, when states will redistrict in the wake of the 2020 census. Currently, of the 99 state legislative chambers, Republicans control 69, a historical record (I count the unicameral legislature in Nebraska as Republican, though it is officially nonpartisan). The GOP has undivided control of 24 state governments, Democrats of only seven—and Republicans are using their power in the states to enact voter-ID and anti-union laws, stack the judiciary, and adopt other measures that will make it difficult to reverse what they have done.

This is the reality that Democrats confront. Electing a president obviously matters for foreign policy, Supreme Court and other judicial appointments, budget appropriations, and the interpretation and enforcement of environmental, civil rights, and other laws. Given the huge gulf between the parties and their presidential candidates, no one should minimize the significance of those differences. But if progressives want large-scale institutional change, the prerequisite is rebuilding the Democratic Party under the presidency and animating it with a progressive agenda.

That is not what's happening, however, at least not yet. If 2016 were a genuine transformative moment comparable to those in the past, we would be seeing a lot more than a contested presidential primary. We would be seeing more progressive candidates running for Congress and state government; indeed, some of those progressives would already have won office and used their states as



“laboratories of democracy” to test out new policies. There are some examples of progressive innovation in cities, but not many in the states. Democrats with those ambitions have yet to show in significant numbers that they can win statewide office, carry out an expansive program, and—in the critical test—get re-elected.

While Sanders and some of his followers are clearly interested in building a movement that lasts beyond 2016, movement-building and party-building are not the same thing. Throughout his career, Sanders has taken pride in not having anything to do with party politics. “Outsider” is his self-description in the title of his autobiography; for decades, he described Democrats and Republicans as Tweedledee and Tweedledum. As recently as 2013, he told *The Progressive* magazine, “I am not a Democrat.” The writer Ignazio Silone once said the crucial political judgment is “the choice of comrades.” Sanders has had his comrades, but they haven't been in the Democratic Party. He initially planned to run in 2016 as an independent for president, but in an interview on MSNBC on March 14 he said he became convinced to run as a Democrat because of the media coverage he would get. “In terms of media coverage, you have to run within the

Democratic Party,” Sanders told Chuck Todd.

That history of not just standing apart from the Democratic Party but frequently denouncing it helps explain why Sanders has had so little support from elected Democratic leaders. On a practical level, they owe him nothing. He hasn't raised money for Democrats, and the same arguments he uses against Hillary Clinton for her fundraising would apply to most of them, too.

Beyond 2016, the question is how the model of the Sanders campaign could work as a strategy for party rebuilding on a national scale. The party undoubtedly could use the grassroots-organizing capacity the Sanders campaign has developed. But winning national elections does require raising a lot of money. If money weren't a factor in the outcome of elections, campaign finance wouldn't be something to worry about. Sanders's purism on campaign finance—no super PACs, no big financial donors—can work in states like Vermont with low-cost media markets and in congressional districts with lopsided Democratic majorities. It might even be enough to win a presidential nomination, thanks to all the free media coverage. But it is not feasible in most congressional and statewide elections. Candidates who follow that approach are likely to be outspent by a wide margin, and the difference will doom many of them. That's why most Democrats who want to reverse *Citizens United* and see more public financing have nonetheless decided to work within the regime the Supreme Court has established.

This contrast in thinking about campaign finance highlights a broader difference in theories of change. One approach insists on observing ideal alternative rules even if they lead to defeat; the other seeks to make gains under the existing rules in order to get into a position to change those rules. If you want public financing of campaigns, you still have to

get legislators elected in a world with private financing. If you want to pass laws strengthening labor and voting rights, you still have to win elections under laws that have weakened labor and voting rights. Before you can change the institutions, you have to use the available resources to your best advantage. If you get ahead of yourself, you may enjoy an initial flash of success, only to suffer a crushing defeat in the end.

The Democrats do need an infusion of movement energy to confront the deepening inequalities in American life. They also need to take advantage of the opportunities in the center that a radicalized Republican Party creates for them. Taking advantage of those opportunities in 2016 may be the best way to create the preconditions for more substantial change; Supreme Court nominations are the first and most obvious way. If one party goes to an extreme and hands the other side the chance of a big victory, the other party would be foolish to miss its chance. The precedent for 2016 could turn out to be 1964. And in the long run, it's a close call as to whether America would benefit more if Democrats became more of a movement party or if the GOP reacted to a loss in 2016 by becoming less of a movement party.

The tumult of the 2016 presidential primary season has led to some brash judgments about the parties' future. I am reluctant to jump to any conclusions. There isn't enough confirming evidence from trends in congressional or state elections or public opinion surveys to demonstrate that the two major parties are moving for the long term in the directions represented by Trump and Cruz, on one side, and Sanders on the other.

But there is no doubt about how big the immediate choices are. The voters this year are not just choosing between different candidates and parties. They are choosing between different Americas. After November, we should have a much clearer idea about what kind of country we live in. ■