

Reconnecting People and Politics

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One may think of political associations as great free schools to which all citizens come to be taught the general theory of association.

—Alexis de Tocqueville

Amid the media exposés about money in the 1996 campaign were several less prominent stories about the frustrations of ordinary people who tried to participate in the elections but couldn't find a way in. A Connecticut woman sent a check to the Democratic Party, attaching a note asking how she could volunteer. Although the party sent her many more fund-raising solicitations, no one ever contacted her with information about how to get involved, and she never found any local campaign organization on her own. A woman in New York actually put together a volunteer organization for a local candidate, but the party showed no interest in her efforts (Weine 1996, p. C1).

The difficulty that ordinary people have in participating in political campaigns highlights a central challenge to progressives: How do we get people

back into politics? For most people, as political parties have ceased to be mass-based political organizations—becoming instead national (and international) fund-raising organizations—politics has become simply another form of advertising, and a particularly noxious one at that. Interest groups flourish, but they too have lost much of their popular base, focusing instead on Washington-based, staff-led activities. Politics and policymaking have become unanchored, susceptible to pressures from more mobilized minorities on the right or foundering in search of some acceptable “center.” But in a largely demobilized political context, the center has little organizational reality and, as a consequence, little dependable political force. Over the past four years, the so-called center has lurched toward the antigovernment right for lack of any meaningful grounding in the everyday experiences of most Americans, much less any strong counterpressure from progressive forces.

As ever fewer people are drawn into organized political endeavors, American democracy suffers from declining voter participation, distrust of government, and a widespread cynicism about politics, especially among the young. This disengagement has policy consequences as well. Increasingly, the assumptions that determine the menu of policy options considered in Washington and many state capitols reflect the narrow interests of elites whose primary concern is to shield themselves from the social and economic costs of growing income inequalities and social dislocations. Tapping into broad-based disillusionment with government, those who dominate today's public discussions offer well-off Americans a range of private and individualized solutions to pressing issues of economic security and well-being: medical savings accounts, privatized Social Security with individual investment accounts, and moves to ever more distant suburbs in search of physical security and decent schools for their children. In this version of the future, not only are the middle class and the poor left to the discipline of the market, but the search for common interests is abandoned. And the scope of what is public shrinks.

The challenge for progressives is to renew the connection between people and politics. There are two critical elements of such a new politics. The first is to redefine the organizational role of state and local parties in ways that make them genuine vehicles for participation, deliberation, and accountability. In particular, progressives should explore new opportunities afforded by recent court rulings that free state party organizations from regulation

state legislatures and permit them to establish their own rules, including those governing the nomination of candidates. The second is to redefine the political role of progressive constituency organizations, including unions, churches, and civic associations, in order to restore them to a central place in shaping participation and the search for common purposes in American public life.

To succeed, a new progressive politics must be grounded in an organized citizenry rooted in specific communities and at the same time linked together in larger networks with the capacity to deliberate about, develop, and carry out local, state, and national strategies. This requires the development of a critical intermediate level of leadership able to link local leaders with their regional and national counterparts. Only through mobilization across localities and levels of government will citizens begin to develop broader understandings of common interests as well as the capacity for coordinated political action on behalf of those interests. This approach calls for a clear break with the pattern of narrow interest representation that has predominated among Democratic Party constituencies since the 1970s.

Finally, if a renewed popular progressive politics is to shape public opinion rather than simply taking it as a given, it must grow out of certain moral sources that have long been part of the American civic tradition and that have so often provided the underpinning for progressive politics in the past. These moral commitments, however, must be translated into a proactive public policy agenda, an agenda that can inspire the support needed to make it achievable at local, state, and national levels. People will continue to withdraw from politics unless they believe that by taking an active part they can achieve something of real moral consequence to their everyday lives.

Not Invited to the Party

Why have Americans become so disengaged from politics? Prominent explanations point to the roles of television, the suburbanization of the population, and the general distrust that Americans have toward government (Putnam 1996). Undoubtedly there is something to each of these points, but explanations that look only at individuals do not see the transformations in the world of parties and groups that shape American politics. Instead of asking why so many people are pulling back from politics, we should wonder why they are offered so few opportunities for effective participation. What levers can

citizens use to influence politicians and government? What incentives do political leaders have to respond to their fellow citizens and invite their involvement? The most fateful developments in politics over the past thirty years have been the decay in institutions that gave people the opportunity to make a difference in politics and the simultaneous waning of incentives for leaders to mobilize people into politics.

To appreciate these changes, contrast the way that politics worked right after the New Deal. For most of American history, national political parties were federations of locally rooted county and state electoral organizations, which were responsible for nominating candidates, deploying resources needed to elect them, and distributing the fruits of office. The Democratic Party was made up of these state and local party organizations (Mayhew 1986). In many major cities, patronage-based political machines—and in a few places, reform political movements—brought people into politics. Labor unions, which organized 35 percent of the labor force at their zenith, had a strong mass base and organizational presence. Significantly, unions took an active role in politics that went beyond simply representing the narrow interests of their members. In cities across the nation, labor brought new groups into the Democratic coalition (Greenstone 1969). Because these party activities built bridges between different local groups, they reduced the role of narrow interests at the national level. This style of party organization also gave politics something of a bottom-up flavor, connecting state and local organizations to national politics.

Another feature of political organization at this time were large, widespread, but locally rooted civic organizations through which networks of local, state, and national leaders could connect with ordinary people to consider politics and public policy issues (Skocpol 1997a). While not specifically partisan, many of these organizations interacted with partisan electoral politics in ways that enhanced the connection of ordinary people to politics—often in support of a Democratic agenda.

Although local party, union, and civic organizations provided Democrats with the means for connecting people with their political leaders, this form of popular mobilization should not be romanticized in retrospect. Local party organizations and unions were both regionally concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest. In contrast, there was little popular involvement in the weak parties of the West or in the racially exclusive and elite-dominated

political organizations of the South. And even in the North, mobilization was often selective. Political machines often ignored voters—especially minorities—whom they viewed as dangerous to their political objectives. Nor were machines necessarily friendly to outsiders, as the story of Abner Mikva's efforts to volunteer for the Chicago machine attested. When it became clear to ward leaders that this would-be volunteer and future judge was politically unconnected, they sent him away, declaring, "We don't want nobody nobody sent" (Rakove 1979).

The transformation of political parties from the bottom-up organizations that mobilized voters yesterday into the top-down organizations that raise money today is key to understanding how people became disengaged from politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, the parties were transformed into today's national "service" firms with state "branches," through which they allocate resources—including the party label—to candidates able to win primaries with their own campaign organizations (Reichley 1992; Aldrich 1995). Where resources once flowed from the bottom up, they now flow from the top down. In the states, the political center of gravity shifted from state or local party organizations—which barely exist on their own today in many places—to state legislative caucuses able to raise large sums of money from interest groups and allocate it to favored candidates. State legislative leaders thus gained the power to turn "spigots" of support for individual candidates on and off regardless of the interests of voters in a particular district. Although mayors and city councils remain tied to networks of local voters or political clubs in some cities, they came to play a far less significant role in state and national politics than they once did—even as their own campaigns have come to resemble those of candidates for state and national office.

Driving this transformation were changes in presidential nominating procedures, campaign finance reform, the eclipse of patronage employment, and new electoral technologies. Ironically, the changes that Democrats initiated in presidential nominating procedures in order to widen participation ended up weakening the connection between people and politics (Polshy 1983). The older system in which party leaders selected delegates to national nominating conventions kept new groups out of the process. The reforms created a system in which campaign organizations of individual presidential candidates competed directly to elect slates of delegates already committed to them, thus transforming the nomination of presidential candidates from a

deliberative process among state and local party leaders into plebiscites of individual voters. In fact, the proportion of the Democratic electorate participating in the delegate selection process increased only modestly after the reforms (Advisory Commission 1986). At the same time, state and local party leaders who linked networks of individual voters to larger partisan structures were replaced by consultants commanding new "voter contact" technologies and those able to raise the money to fuel their campaigns. Although national nominating conventions became far more inclusive of blacks, women, and young people, they also became far more elite affairs (Advisory Commission 1986).

Campaign finance reforms enabled national parties to find a new role in the direct-mail solicitation of small contributions that could be funneled into presidential, congressional, and legislative campaigns. State parties also became important vehicles through which contributors could channel soft money to support coordinated campaigns and party-building work that benefited federal candidates whose individual campaigns could not receive the funds directly.

The emergence of new electoral technologies made it possible for consultants to contact voters directly through mail, telephone, and television. As the cost of this technology rose, it became more cost effective to concentrate on persuading voters already likely to vote, but uncertain for whom, and to avoid investing in mobilizing citizens unlikely to vote, even if they were supporters (Ganz 1994). Politicians thus found it no longer necessary to depend on what they came to view as unreliable battalions of party workers, local community leaders, and volunteers to contact, persuade, and turn out voters.

These changes in the organization of politics affected the strategies of interest groups as well, pointing them away from local organizing and toward Washington. As a consequence, much of the energy unleashed by the new social movements of the 1960s did not leave behind organizational structures designed to regularly engage a grassroots constituency. The civil rights movement and the environmental movement, for example, lost much of their organized base during the 1970s, evolving into Washington-based lobbies, where the staff called the shots, or into groups of local activists who shunned electoral politics altogether. Cultivating ties with Democratic members of Congress and pursuing legal and regulatory strategies achieved the policy results that these groups sought; they had little incentive to organize a grass-

roots base. These groups boasted large memberships because of their direct-mail operations, but such membership was largely meaningless in terms of activated support. And although some local chapters of organizations like the NAACP and the Sierra Club did have real vitality, national staffers gave them no real role in mobilizing support for a public policy agenda.

This system of Washington-based interest representation encouraged groups to become even more narrow in their approaches to politics. Instead of pursuing political alliances that would help build common interests and resources, each major interest group forged its own particular national strategy. Not entirely without reason did critics tag the Democratic Party as the party of special interests.

The transformation of national parties from bottom-up deliberative organizations into top-down campaign organizations has enormous implications for politics and policymaking. By linking distinct networks of interest groups, local political organizations, and national politicians, parties helped to stabilize electoral coalitions and create a measure of continuity between the resources needed to get elected and those needed to govern. They also provided a critical intermediate level of leadership that could link local and national networks. In the past two decades this force for coherence in politics and policymaking has been replaced by a more complex configuration that makes the task of governing much more difficult.

The Sway of Advertising Politics

Three distinct types of linkages now organize politics: a "detached middle" in the electorate, consisting of individuals only loosely connected to politics through the advertising efforts of parties and interest groups; a politics of highly organized Washington-based interest groups often with very weak constituent ties; and pockets of grassroots political organization. Each type of politics pushes policy in a different direction, confronting politicians and policymakers with conflicting pressures and distinctive obstacles.

Designed to appeal to a detached middle that no longer has any stable connections to politics, the advertising strategy dominates presidential, congressional, and increasing numbers of state and local elections. This strategy is also important in policymaking and governing: presidents make extensive use of public-opinion soundings as they develop their policy agendas and as they seek to win support for their policies. The strategy of "going public"—

attempting to build public support in order to increase pressure on Congress—reflects the declining ability of presidents to rely on party loyalty to pass their programs in Congress. This advertising strategy is especially associated with the president but is increasingly practiced by interest groups and state and local politicians as well (Kernell 1986). It is a top-down approach to politics in which the grass roots is part of an overall public affairs strategy executed by inside-the-beltway firms that specialize in grassroots database management.

The second type of politics is that of Washington-based interest groups. In the past twenty years, the number of these interest groups has soared, but most of them approach policy from a narrow perspective and have only tenuous grassroots ties. On the Democratic side, as new groups clamored for entry, the decline of organized labor and local party organizations broke the links that had once existed. In the 1970s, labor grew increasingly defensive and inward looking, beginning to function more as a narrow interest group for its embattled members than as an aggregating force for the Democratic Party. In contrast, new groups associated with the Democratic Party adopted a very different organizational strategy than the one labor had once followed. Rather than grounding their strength in a local base associated with the party, these new organizations were Washington-based staff operations from the start. Their grassroots links were often limited to mail-in memberships. These groups sought to influence policy through their ties with Democratic congressional members and the courts. The growing decentralization of Congress facilitated this strategy by making it easier for lobbyists with little grassroots support to gain a hearing from sympathetic subcommittee and committee staffers. It was not just on the liberal side that interest groups grew. One of the most significant developments of the early 1970s was the mobilization of business organizations opposed to growing federal safety, consumer, and environmental regulation. Likewise, organizations associated with particular policies—such as advocacy groups for the aged—grew dramatically in the 1970s, but the impetus for such groups often came from within the government and remained based in Washington (Walker 1991).

The third type of politics consists of organizations with genuine grassroots organization and mobilization capabilities. Remnants of party organizations in some cities and counties continue to have such capabilities, mainly where they retain a role in nominating candidates for state or local office. But

the energy in this form of organization in recent years has been on the right, particularly among groups associated with the Christian Right (Balz and Brownstein 1996). Although these groups constitute a distinct minority in the electorate, their political significance is magnified by the breakdown of established party ties and the atrophy of other organizations with the capacity to mobilize voters at the grass roots. In the relatively demobilized political world that constitutes American electoral politics today, such strongly organized groups can have a disproportionately important impact (Green 1995).

Because each of these three types of politics pulls in a different direction, reconciling them poses difficult strategic choices for politicians and complicates the task of policymaking. The advertising model suggests that finding the average voter and gearing political appeals and policy toward the center is the optimal strategy. Yet, as President Bill Clinton has repeatedly discovered, majorities discerned through public-opinion polling are difficult to activate and unreliable as a political resource. Washington-based interest-group politics is characterized by a narrow, self-interested perspective in which there is little incentive for subordinating narrow priorities to larger goals. The proliferation of such specialized groups and their skill in blocking aspects of policy that they oppose raise a formidable barrier to enacting major policy changes. Yet, on occasion, these groups do build coalitions among themselves, and when they do, they can be a powerful political force. Finally, the ability to mobilize at the grass roots is a prized political resource in this relatively demobilized electoral world, but because it is animated by volunteers whose zeal for a particular issue drives them into politics, grassroots movement-oriented politics tends toward single-minded or extreme views (Mansbridge 1986). This may pose costs in broader political support that offset the benefits of support from grassroots organizations.

Organizationally, this politics is far more top down than the political system that emerged after the 1930s. It is fueled by money, not by people. The connections between leaders and their fellow citizens are looser; indeed, state and national politics may have little organized local activity. Because national and even state politicians now have more incentive to raise money and support from the interests controlling financial resources than they do to mobilize voters in their own districts, when organized mass politics does appear, it does so independently of most established political leaders. Politicians

focus their efforts on winning over narrow slivers of swing voters already most likely to vote, deploying the tools of the new advertising politics: computer-targeted direct mail, polling, and television.

Grassroots Politics, Right and Left

Despite these changes in the organization of politics, activists on the right and the left continued to organize. Both encountered significant obstacles, but the right has been more successful in connecting its local efforts to state and national politics. Although some of this success can be explained by the greater challenge that progressives face in uniting a far more diverse set of people with far fewer financial resources, there are also important differences in how conservatives and progressives have gone about connecting people to politics.

Although the national electoral debut of the modern conservative movement, the 1964 Goldwater campaign, resulted in a major defeat, its organizers used it to create a grassroots foundation on which they continued to build. When the conservative movement eventually regrouped, a number of the national right-wing organizations that emerged—such as the Moral Majority and the National Conservative Political Action Committee—operated through direct mail. But others did not. The 7-million-member National Right to Life Committee, the 3-million-member National Rifle Association, and the 2-million-member Christian Coalition developed ongoing organizations capable of intervening in politics from the grass roots up. These organizations have an advantage that labor unions in their heyday possessed: they tap into preexisting religious, recreational, and social networks that have real and continuing significance in their members' lives.

In addition to groups motivated primarily by social issues, federations of business organizations are also based on local chambers of commerce and other small business associations. These groups are organized on at least three levels—local, state, and national. They are based in membership groups, and at each level, members participate in programs, join in deliberation, and select leadership. Leaders of these groups thus have the opportunity to come together, deliberate about their purposes, develop leadership skills, and support one another in a variety of ways. And although funds are often available from state or national organizations for the development of particular initiatives, their local organizations rely on a local dues structure.

These organizations of the right have become increasingly partisan, generally in reaction to federal policies or laws that they oppose, such as *Roe v. Wade*, the tax status of Christian schools, and gun control legislation. The Christian Coalition has from its inception been involved in electoral politics, having formed from the organizational base created by Pat Robertson's 1988 run for the presidency. Furthermore, by making use of surviving precinct, county, and state partisan structures, the Christian Coalition has consciously sought to replicate the kind of organizations that once made the unions such an important presence in national politics. Organized through church networks, the Christian Coalition recruits and supports candidates for school boards, city councils, county commissions, and legislative races, creating new depth in the ranks of conservative Republican officeholders. Given the current weakness of much local political organization, the Christian Coalition was able to colonize the state and local Republican Party apparatus so effectively that by 1994 it was the dominant influence in a majority of Republican state parties.

Conservatives have also built strong leadership networks to connect with grassroots activity. As the engine behind the insurgent congressional conservatives, Newt Gingrich built a candidate recruitment machine that developed a strong farm team of Republican candidates. Most significantly, however, in the 104th Congress Gingrich melded this network of politicians with the popular base of the National Rifle Association and the Christian Coalition. Such cooperation allowed the Republicans to come very close to commanding the kind of power that they needed to oversee major transformations in the social role of the federal government.

The problem for the Republicans was that this interlocking network was still a decided minority, with ideas significantly to the right of the detached center. Republican efforts to reframe the issues for advertising politics—their claims to be saving Medicare, for example—were not sufficient for them to win the advertising game, especially with a Democratic president who was a master at that political genre.

Impressive as they are, the durability of these connections between politicians and voters on the right should not be taken for granted. Much has been made of the fact that the Christian right now controls a considerable portion of the Republican Party state apparatus. Yet the 1996 election revealed that the ties between state parties and the national party are actually

contingent. In the past, when parties were more bottom-up affairs, local organizations were the building blocks of national parties. Today they are more like parallel organizations with many overlapping interests, but given the different natures of their tasks—national parties for fund-raising and electing a national candidate, local organizations for attracting and mobilizing supporters—their fundamental interests also conflict. These organizational characteristics suggest that the ties between mass and elite politics on the right may be inherently unstable and difficult to sustain over the long run.

Although the unsuccessful 1964 Goldwater campaign laid a foundation for subsequent grassroots organization on the right, the equally unsuccessful 1972 McGovern campaign seemed to have just the opposite effect on the left. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the political upheavals of the 1960s is their paltry legacy of grassroots political organization. Activists formed many new groups—especially in the areas of civil rights, environmentalism, and women's rights—but while some abandoned grassroots organizing as they came to focus on specific policy objectives, others, who remained committed to grassroots organizing, abandoned electoral politics. To be sure, the movements of the 1960s created grassroots groups committed to local organizing, but most of it was nonpartisan, focused on limited policy goals, and fragmented along lines often dictated by funding sources (Paget 1990).

As a consequence, politics on the left had only weak ties linking national, state, and local politics, creating a political configuration of headless bodies and bodiless heads. In addition, groups organized around different goals—such as cities or the environment—found little need to consider what interests they had in common. These divisions fostered an advocacy system that promoted distinctive national strategies for each set of interests and spurred the formation of thousands of local groups that largely abandoned efforts to influence national public policy directly. This is one reason that progressive politics seems to be far less than the sum of its parts.

From the 1970s on, advocacy organizations run by professional staff members at the state and national levels found that they could operate more effectively if they focused on single issues that could be addressed with specific insider strategies based on lobbying, litigation, and fund-raising. This was true even for coalitions, which focused on one issue at a time to maximize their effectiveness. The direct-mail, telemarketing, and canvassing

fund-raising (largely directed at upscale contributors) that these groups came to rely on could all be done more effectively when focused on a single issue. In addition, the funding for many of these groups came from foundations whose tax exemptions permitted issue advocacy but not partisan politics, encouraging a single-issue, nonpartisan focus disconnected from an active grassroots base. Even major national membership organizations that grew during this period—such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), with some 35 million members—are essentially benefit associations with a mailing-list membership.

A second major legacy of the 1960s was the revival of local organizing activities. Some of these groups, supported by small grants from liberal foundations, served as incubators for the emergence of various forms of identity politics, often thriving on their distinctiveness from other similar groups. An organizational culture suspicious of authority, leadership, and orderly democratic process also made collaboration across groups and levels of governance and coordination very difficult.

Community development corporations (CDCs) and local social service providers were a specific legacy of the War on Poverty, which was targeted primarily on low-income communities of color. Most community development activities, which are widespread in many urban neighborhoods, also draw on foundation support and are explicitly nonpolitical. Many of these groups have become so heavily focused on development they do not engage in organizing. Others must avoid controversy because they depend on local politicians for funding. Led by their full-time staff, most CDCs try to make the most of the meager resources available to them, rather than join in a broad political assault on the inequalities responsible for their difficulties in the first place (Weir 1997).

Another current of local organizing was initiated by networks of organizers in the Alinsky tradition—the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing, the Camille Foundation, and others. These organizations, rooted primarily in local churches and neighborhoods within low-income communities of color, focus on intensive leadership development, training in civic deliberation, and mobilization on local issues. They are not strictly local, however, because their activities are often supported by national organizing networks that develop organizing models, disseminate information, pass on experience, train organizers, and provide

ongoing guidance to organizing efforts. Supported by churches and foundations, these networks have made organizing a more stable profession than ever before, one with higher salaries and pensions and other benefits. For the most part, however, they have not been able to connect local organizing activities to broader political or policy goals. The IAF, for example, with a staff of about 120 professional organizers and fifty-five local organizations around the country, has imaginatively leveraged its influence with public institutions and politicians to achieve concrete community improvements, such as Project Quest in San Antonio and the Nehemiah Homes in New York. Unlike groups on the right, however, they refrain from partisan electoral involvement, especially as tax-exempt funding is usually involved. Until recently they also avoided entering into broader coalitions or becoming involved in proactive advocacy of public policy. While this "outsider" strategy may have made sense in Alinsky's day, when claims could be made on a strong liberal establishment, it makes little sense today, when that establishment has long since passed into history. Further, when most decisions that affect the fortunes of local communities are made at regional, national, or international levels, the network's failure to create bodies of elected leadership capable of deliberating over and implementing strategies beyond the local level is a serious limitation.

Exceptions to this local apolitical stance of community organizing groups do exist. For example, in the late 1970s the National People's Alliance, a coalition of neighborhood organizations, was instrumental in passing the federal Home Mortgage Disclosure Act and the Community Reinvestment Act, which have been critical tools for local nonprofit housing organizations all over the country. These laws' requirements that banks invest in communities in which they do business have provided a lever for broad local campaigns to promote new investment in poor neighborhoods. They have been particularly important in providing poor neighborhoods with access to resources when public funds fell substantially in the 1980s. Significant as this legislative achievement and the organizing that it facilitated were, they did not provide hooks for broadening the focus beyond poor neighborhoods and beyond the functional area of community development.

Despite the transformation of the party in the 1970s and 1980s, not all groups on the left abandoned attempts at electoral politics. In California, the Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED), which grew out of Tom Hayden's

unsuccessful 1976 campaign for the U.S. Senate, attempted to create an ongoing electoral organization. The porous organization of the California Democratic Party made it a good target for the CED but also made it a prize hardly worth winning. The CED elected delegates to the Democratic State Central Committee, but the central committee could not nominate candidates, determine policy goals, or control money; nor could it get anyone elected (since 1989, the party has been permitted to make preprimary endorsements). Although the CED tried to build local chapters, they took root only in counter-cultural communities like Santa Monica and Santa Cruz. And once its first leaders won state or local public office, they took little interest in the further development of the organization. Unlike many groups on the left, the CED did not have a money problem because it was endowed with profits from Jane Fonda's workout book. The fact that it could not survive points to a deeper difficulty in maintaining ongoing electoral organization when political parties are so weak. When they cannot link up to ongoing partisan institutions, grassroots campaign organizations disintegrate because successful candidates have little reason to maintain them. In fact, most candidates prefer forms of "instant organization," such as paid canvassing, bounty registration, and bounty absentee-ballot programs, which conveniently disappear when the election is over.

A more sustained effort to engage in electoral politics was undertaken by Citizen Action, an electoral coalition created by a network of organizers trying to build a progressive political base within working and middle-class communities in the late 1970s. Citizen Action has taken shape as a federation of some thirty-two state coalitions, such as the Massachusetts Commonwealth Coalition, Connecticut LEAP, Ohio Public Interest Campaign, and Illinois Public Action Council. A number of the state groupings that founded Citizen Action, such as Massachusetts Fair Share, initially set out to become local chapter-based organizations. But they soon found themselves financially constrained by the difficulty of creating self-sustaining local chapters, the volatility of public financial support, the limited reliability of funding by supportive unions, the electoral limitations tied to tax-exempt foundation grants, and the attractiveness of canvassing and telemarketing fund-raising technologies.

Because they were fundamentally motivated by a commitment to progressive policy goals, Citizen Action organizers responded to these challenges by

shifting their focus from local grassroots organization to mobilization around specific issues, candidates, and campaigns. The state coalitions that emerged encompassed progressive organizations (unions, senior groups, pro-choice groups, and so on) called upon to mobilize for specific campaigns at specific times and places. In often unfriendly political settings, Citizen Action has built a 2-million-person contributor base that is more populist than that of most issue organizations, and it has won notable electoral and policy victories. But its reach has remained limited because it has a limited local base. Citizen Action has created little deliberative capacity beyond the board meetings of representatives of their affiliated organizations, while executive leadership remains in the hands of the professional organizing staff. Its members have no real access to local organizations through which they could participate. And even when it has elected candidates to state legislative office, it has few resources of its own to use in challenging the powerful leadership of more conservative legislative caucus organizations.

The most important organizational exceptions to this pattern are public sector unions such as the 1-million-member American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the 2-million-member National Education Association. Particularly at the level of state and local politics, these organizations play an increasingly important role in electoral politics and policymaking. These statewide groups are rooted in local organizations that generate both financial and human resources. They act through local, state, and national elected deliberative bodies, command their own resources, and are capable of coordinating state and national campaigns. Indeed, the virulence with which the right has targeted them is itself the best evidence of their significance. Teachers are now routinely replacing lawyers as an important source of candidates for state legislative offices and constitute the largest blocks of delegates at state and national Democratic conventions. Yet because these unions are weakly connected to any broader political movement, their defense of the public sector can appear increasingly self-serving and unconcerned with the public good. Alone, these unions are more likely to take narrow approaches to public problems, and alone, they cannot articulate a convincing rationale for a strong public sector, particularly when faced with counterarguments that define the public good as less government.

Organizationally, then, the politics of the left that emerged after the 1960s was ill equipped to support broad coalitions. Above all, it was ill suited to support a new version of the bottom-up coalition that had been the keystone of Democratic political strength during the New Deal era.

Building Civic Engagement

Bringing people back in to politics is more than a "nice thing to do," and it requires more than a gesture in the direction of grass roots. The real problem is that ordinary people—their ideas, time, energy, commitment—have come to count for very little in determining who is nominated for public office, who is elected, and what they do when they are elected. Unless ordinary people resume a role in the processes of nomination, election, and policy development, we cannot hope to build a genuinely progressive politics. Because control of the new electoral technology that dominates politics today rests squarely in the hands of those with the most money to buy it, it is urgent to find ways to create new, powerful, democratic alternatives. Getting money out of politics is important, but getting people back in is more important.

Getting people back into politics requires a dual effort. On one hand, powerful membership organizations have to be rebuilt—organizations that are locally widespread, nationally coordinated, and oriented to the accomplishment of public purpose. On the other hand, partisan mechanisms also have to be rebuilt in order to restore links between fractured elements of a progressive coalition and to reconnect citizens and their leaders in pursuit of their common interests.

Local organization that links networks of individuals to broader political structures is crucial to rebuilding a progressive infrastructure. Through local organization, new people are recruited, new networks form, deliberative engagement occurs, genuine commitment emerges, new leadership develops, and real mobilization takes place. Local organization cannot be sustained, however, unless it is rooted in activities of importance in people's everyday lives and unless it can generate the revenue needed to support itself. To be effective, local groups must be connected to broader networks that can operate in state and national centers of economic and political power. Such coordination cannot be limited to a few professionals but should include deliberative bodies at state and national levels so that elected local leaders can

take part in state and national decision making. In this way they can bring a local perspective to national decisions and gain a national perspective on local decisions. Local leaders can also earn the right to occupy state and national office.

If popular progressives are to move beyond mere public opinion, organizing must tap into those sources of moral energy that inspire people to make the commitments, take the risks, and endure the sacrifices required to do new things. It is the combination of interest and moral purpose that can draw us into deliberative engagement with others through which we begin to discover new common interests even while constructing the capacity to act on them. This sense of public purpose drove the labor movement, the civil rights movement, and other movements of democratic renewal in the past—and continues to animate the environmental movement, the women's movement, and the commitment of so many young people to public service. The challenge will be translating this sense of purpose not only into proposals for policy but also into campaigns capable of mobilizing enough public support to enact such policies.

Three kinds of organizations provide the building blocks for this kind of political engagement: unions, churches, and civic organizations. Union leaders have a crucial role to play in rebuilding a progressive infrastructure—not only because of their constituency or the work that their members do (increasingly, human service work in the public sector) but because of the unique organizational capacity that they possess. Unions are locally based, capable of coordinated strategies, and beginning to rediscover their sense of moral purpose. Their funding base is tied to organization building—the more members, the more dues—and is relatively unrestricted by nonpartisan requirements. Through local labor councils and state federations, unions have organizational mechanisms for mobilizing coalitions of other groups. The major challenge facing union leaders is to accept their responsibility for leadership of a coalition that can grow only if they are committed to nurturing it rather than dominating it. Labor leadership must also come to understand its interests far more broadly than it often has in the recent past. Fortunately, precisely this kind of move may offer unions the best hope for broadening their support among unorganized workers, the public, and the committed leadership they must attract to their ranks. If it chooses to do so, labor *can* go beyond the politics of "message manipulation" and under-

take the serious work of reconstructing a constituency for progressive politics in America.

Urban churches and some national denominations have been active supporters of community organizing around the country, but with a few exceptions, these have been nonpartisan efforts limited to the inner city. Perhaps it is time for mainstream suburban congregations—many of which played major roles in the civil rights and antiwar movements—to return to the fray. After many difficult years focused within, struggling with vexing but important issues involving gender and governance, religious leaders may be able to renew their focus on questions of justice in the community as a whole. In particular, polarization around the abortion issue has seriously dampened the political significance of a generally progressive Roman Catholic position on economic and social issues. And women's religious organizations remain among the most dynamic multitermed voluntary associations in America. Although middle-class churches are solicited to support inner-city efforts, they could play a far stronger role as collaborators in a common effort to address *shared* community, regional, and national concerns—something that is being attempted by the IAF's metropolitan-wide Greater Boston Interfaith Organization.

Civic associations have always played a crucial role in progressive politics in America, a role that they must recapture if the progressive enterprise is to succeed. Locally based organizations that are already part of wider networks, like those affiliated with the IAF, must develop structures that permit them to address the real problems that their members face. They also need to reach out to other partners, as has already occurred in the association of BUILD with AFSCME in their campaign to establish a living wage for employees of city contractors in Baltimore.

Issue advocacy organizations, on the other hand, must confront the fact that their opposition will always have the upper hand in a politics organized around money and technology. Some organizations, such as the Sierra Club, are based on local chapters but have had difficulty mobilizing them to take effective political action. Indeed, because so many young people are attracted to it, the environmental movement as a whole is an important and growing source of progressive energy. Other organizations, such as the AARP, are trying to bring viable state and local organizations into being and may be encouraged to do so as part of a broad strategy of rebuilding democratic

infrastructure. Still others, such as Working America, are trying to address the needs of newly mobile professional workers. The redefining of gender roles at work and at home has generated a raft of new challenges for both men and women, but it has also released enormous energy for addressing these challenges, especially among women. Indeed, one of the most positively regarded accomplishments of the Clinton administration was the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1994. Perhaps there is an opportunity for something new, a variation on something old: the mutual benefit association, focused not only on retirement but on the wide range of family security concerns that face most working families—child care, medical care, educational needs, and so on. This could take the form of, say, the League of American Families, an alliance composed of local groups, coordinated at state and national levels, and tied to a moral purpose central to the lives of most Americans.

Revitalizing the Democratic Party

But what of the second part of the puzzle? Revitalization of constituency organizations alone is not enough to relink people to politics. Direct participation in electoral campaigns is one tried-and-true way of generating new volunteers. In the 1996 elections, organized labor's efforts to reengage politically were particularly notable. Although much of their highly publicized budget of \$35 million was spent on advertising, unions also sought to energize more local political activity. Because the Democratic Party's coordinated campaign was primarily a vehicle for moving money around and because little effective party infrastructure existed on which to build, labor jerryrigged its own field operation. The aim was to mobilize labor activists for door-to-door campaigning, and the AFL-CIO claims to have recruited twenty thousand of them. In addition to labor's operation, selected candidates, foremost among them Minnesota senator Paul Wellstone, consciously built field organizations to supplement other campaign activities.

Campaign field organizations can provide short-term forums for building connections across different constituency groups, thus helping to generate a broader progressive perspective, but they provide no enduring organizational structure between elections. As a result, organizers have to recreate the activity anew for each race, and politicians, once in office, are unaccountable to a grassroots base. Individual groups attempting to build participatory structures designed to operate between elections face considerable obstacles.

Organizations whose main focus is not electoral soon move to other priorities. These electoral step-children are extensions of the parent organization, offering limited leadership roles for those from other groups. One possibility, which organized labor is now considering, is to engage more fully in state and local elections, including elections for school boards, much as the Christian Right does.

An effective progressive politics must go further and systematically link ongoing grassroots activism with party—a route pursued by the Christian Coalition and its allied groups with considerable success. Although the party reforms of the 1970s eventually established a fairly uniform presidential nominating process, as we have seen, nominating procedures for candidates for state and local offices—the vast majority of the more than 490,000 elective offices in the United States—remained under the control of state legislatures. As a result, wide variation exists in the regulations governing 50 state, 3,600 county, and more than 150,000 precinct-level party organizations: these range from such “party-friendly” states as Colorado, Connecticut, New York, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania to such “party-unfriendly” states as Alaska, Hawaii, Louisiana, Montana, and Vermont. A variety of measures affect the strength of state and local party organization, including closed primaries, “sore loser” laws, and straight party ballots. Most significant, however, are nominating conventions and preprimary endorsements—ways in which party organization can affect the selection of the party's candidates. Conventions provide opportunities for potential candidates and party leaders to negotiate differences and offer an avenue of participation and influence for party activists and local party organizations (Advisory Commission 1986). Preprimary endorsements by state and local party organizations or control over ballot positioning gives local leaders an opportunity to influence the electoral process based not on how much money they can raise but on how good a job they can do in turning out their supporters. In New Jersey, for example, county committees remain active year-round largely due to their ongoing role in nominating candidates for the local freeholder races held every off year. It is also no coincidence that the site of the effective Wellstone field organization was Minnesota, a state in which caucuses continue to have an active part in nominating Democratic candidates. Not surprisingly, in states where local party organization continues to play a role in the nomination procedure, local organization tends to remain strong. And where party

organization remains strong, party-affiliated candidates have a better chance of being elected (Bibby 1994).

Progressives should take advantage of recent court rulings (*Tashjian v. Connecticut* [109 SC 1013 1989]) that free state parties from legislative regulation and permit them to establish their own governance procedures. These changes provide an opportunity to put people back into the electoral process by strengthening the role of caucuses and conventions in preprimary endorsements. In the 1960s and 1970s, progressives sought ways around state and local party organizations because they were often controlled by the Democratic old guard. Rather than challenge entrenched party leadership for control of the organizations responsible for deliberating about candidates, policy, and accountability, progressives supported the very measures, such as direct primaries, that now make politics the advertising game that they ultimately cannot win. A concerted effort to nominate progressive candidates for public office through caucuses and conventions could help shift the electoral battle to an area where organizing has a chance to compete with fund-raising. Winning nomination by a caucus or state convention requires organizing people, turning them out, and getting them elected. If progressives cannot out-organize their opposition, they have little claim to being advocates of a popular politics that supports the interests of ordinary Americans.

People with doubts about this approach are haunted by the specter of the 1972 McGovern campaign; they warn of a nominating procedure likely to produce candidates who are too "extreme" to get elected. By privileging the mobilizing capacity of groups able to draw on high levels of commitment from their supporters, they fear, caucuses and conventions will become meetings of zealots in which the most righteous, not the most electable, will be nominated. There is undoubtedly some truth to this. But the current system, which privileges the capacity to mobilize money, not people, and which sustains an electoral process almost devoid of real debate, is certainly not one that we should prefer. Nor should we prefer a politics only of the immediately possible, which is characterized by the familiar culture of world-weary cynicism, over a politics of engagement, which holds out the prospect of genuine change. Indeed, although the zealous religious right has from time to time nominated unelectable candidates, by taking control of the Republican nominating machinery they not only gained a major influence over Congress but also shifted sharply to the right the political debate within the country as a

whole. Those who wish to restore a progressive sense of moral purpose to public life must risk outcomes in which dedication to moral purpose really matters.

Other skeptics argue that trying to take control of the state and local Democratic nominating mechanism is a waste of time. But we disagree. Although state and local party organizations may have little widespread presence and few resources of their own with which to elect candidates, they do control the party's name. Despite extraordinary levels of alienation and disaffection, millions of ordinary Americans continue to think of themselves as Democrats. This is no trifling matter. People do not think of themselves as members of the New Party or Citizen Action or as participants in a progressive electoral coalition. As long as America retains its "first by the post" elections and single-member representative districts, it is much more meaningful to contend for influence over Democratic Party nominations and candidates than it is to contest elections through alternative groups with much less popular meaning.

Bringing People Back

We have argued that progressive Democrats need to place a priority on bringing people back into politics. This is not to suggest that the moral commitments and policy choices required to renew the American social contract matter less than the way politics is practiced. Vision, program, and practice must be transformed together. Nor are we opposed to legal reforms designed to reduce the role of big money in politics. Still, popularly oriented progressives need to be very clear about what really ails the system today. Campaigns, advocacy, and elections have lost their moorings. We cannot rest content with getting big money out of politics; we must find new and better ways to bring people back in.

The revitalization of American democracy cannot come from politicians always searching for some chimerical and receding center. Nor can it come from national issue advocacy or local organizing alone. Renewal depends on making new linkages, on promoting groups and networks that pull people in, tie them together, and enable two-way conversations between leaders and their fellow citizens. The reconnection of people and politics has to be made, day to day, in how we actually *do* politics, not only in how we talk about it.