

What Democrats Can Learn from the Republicans about Political Power

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August 10, 2020

For as long as we've had reliable data on the matter, evidence tells us that when it comes to public policy, Americans lean **significantly to the left**. And yet, the party of the right continues to win elections, control the institutions of governance, and enact major elements of its (relatively unpopular) policy agenda. This begs the question: What do Republicans know about political power that Democrats don't?

Having worked on both sides of the partisan fence, I can confidently answer this question. I began my career as a New Right political operative before becoming a staff director at the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC; **the 800-pound conservative gorilla of state politics**). After that, I spent more than two decades engaged in public policy work at the influential libertarian think tank the Cato Institute. In 2014, however, I took a sharp pivot and launched a **moderate think tank**, which works on both sides of the political aisle.

From the start, this has been an eye-opening experience—starting with my initial meetings with center-left policy analysts. Most of our meetings were spent discussing ideal policy design. To my frustration, discussion about the politics at hand was largely sidelined. While this model can result in excellent policy ideas, it also leads to a lot of wasted time. If a policy idea is not politically viable, or the challenge of a heavy political lift is not carefully considered, you're asking politicians to blow up political capital to no positive end. Too many liberals seem to think that good ideas sell themselves, and that the political terrain is far more conducive to their agendas than it actually is. They assume political power the same way one might assume a can opener.

On the flip side, when I was on the right discussing policy with allies, the politics occupied most of our time, and the policy design (to my frequent frustration) occupied a meager remainder. While that often led to poorly thought-out policy ideas, it also led to politically promising initiatives. Passing legislation is hard, and the political need to overcome opposition, pick off members of the rival coalition, and seduce potential allies must be reflected in the policy choices being made.

I am also struck by how ineffective liberals are at building the institutions necessary to stand up a political movement. Where is the liberal version of the Federalist Society? ALEC? Americans for Tax Reform? Club for Growth? CPAC? What has the left built to advance its agenda that equals the NRA? Or the extensive **Koch web**—which in turn, breeds right-wing activists in college, advances their work in graduate school, and embeds them in high-level political networks throughout the nation?

It's not that liberals don't have the money, and it's not that they don't try. They just aren't very good at doing this for a few reasons.

Conservative philanthropists invested for the long term, patiently allowing organizations the time to mature and evolve. Like venture capitalists, they made bets on leadership and strategic plans, and prepared for many of those bets to fail. The successes, they believed, would more than make up for the failures. And they were right.

That's not what liberal philanthropists tend to do. Many lack patience, demanding "deliverables" based on unrealistic and off-point metrics for success. They overwhelmingly invest in dedicated projects, not organizations. Too many draw up elaborate policy campaigns far from the political battlefield, and only support those organizations that promise to execute the political playbook that some grant officer has drafted from afar. They are undisciplined, pivoting from one issue to another in response to ever-changing political tides. There is no way that the Federalist Society, **which took two decades to fully blossom**, could have survived long enough to have the impact it now has were it a project of the left.

Worse, rather than take careful stock of their own political strengths and weaknesses—and building their institutions accordingly—liberals too often adopt the blueprints and strategies used to inform conservative organizations and operations. But those organizations were built to address institutional and political needs on the right that are often different than those facing the left. Conservatives have achieved success by building where they are weak (something they've gotten less good at lately). Liberals have different weaknesses than conservatives, and should not necessarily play follow-the-leader.

The lack of vibrant organizations on the political left has contributed to what Eitan Hersch calls **political hobbyism** in the Democratic Party. Liberals are fond of saying "knowledge is power" (a phrase MSNBC host Larry O'Donnell, for instance, uses in advertisements to draw viewers to his show). But it's not. *Influence* is power. Knowledge can be a useful tool in the course of *securing* power, but it is no substitute for power itself. There is simply no substitute for active, savvy political engagement.

This lack of seriousness about political strategy starkly manifests itself in agenda-setting. Regardless of what the campaign that brought them into office was about, conservatives invariably attend to policy initiatives designed to cripple Democratic power. Right-to-work statutes, public-employee contracts, campaign finance regulation, the promotion of conservative judges: all are top priorities for a right that understands the long-term political advantages that accrue from hobbling muscular Democratic constituencies and the future scope of liberal lawmaking.

Democrats, on the other hand, rarely spend political capital on these matters. And when they do, they lack the infrastructure to execute those operations. There is a critical disconnect between the Democratic party's elites and its activist base given the lack of effective institutions and organizations to bind the two. Consequently, the right has slowly but surely stacked the deck in American politics.

Finally, liberals too often confuse the critical matter of political meta-narratives with marketing and communications. Conservatives overcome the public's tilt to the left **by campaigning on a compelling, easy-to-understand mythos** about American identity and its foundation in liberty,

which (the right argues) is sacrificed by excessive government power. It's a powerful creed that resonates deeply with American character, and it is reinforced by a network of conservative organizations grounded in institutions that govern people's lives (churches, workplaces, recreational clubs, etc.).

Democrats have great difficulty producing a simple, compelling creed to rival this mythos, and lack the institutional organs necessary to pound a liberal creed home to the public. Consequently, they invest huge sums of money in marketing research and communications strategies premised on granular surveys of public opinion to inform their meta-narratives in any given election.

This is problematic because voters, despite their liberal tilt, have **few firm and informed opinions** about public policy, and **no coherent ideology to speak of**. Public opinion and the political landscape can be moved by powerful rhetoric and **political leadership**. Democrats, however, take the political landscape as a given and do little to change it. They build political strategies upon sand, while conservatives build political strategies premised on shaping that sand to suit their needs, and then mixing it into semi-concrete.

It's not that the left thinks that it has nothing to learn from conservatives. Unfortunately, the left is learning the *wrong* political lessons from the right. Progressives yearn for Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and "the squad" to form their own Freedom Caucus to challenge Democratic House leadership—despite the fact that the Freedom Caucus has **failed** to achieve either political power in the House, or to advance its professed policy causes. The left is increasingly embracing partisan policy absolutism, forgetting that conservatives have recently lost power by embracing extremism and eschewing the political entrepreneurship **they once used** to pick off elements of the Democratic coalition. Given the heterogeneity within the Democratic Party, single-party governance is as unlikely to prove any more fruitful for Democrats than it has proved for the more homogenous Republicans.

Power, of course, isn't everything. Democrats need not—and should not—ape the amoral Machiavellians now overwhelming the Republican Party. But if they want to contest the right's control over the American government, the Democratic elite—who control the resources and institutions that govern how the party runs elections and governs when in office—need to get more serious about power. Given where the right seems to want to take us, nothing in American politics could be more important than that.