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The Poverty of "Elect More Democrats"

There is a flaw in the core motto of the liberal netroots--as a handy shorthand for the current generation of liberal activists--as laid out by Markos Moulitsas and adopted to various degrees by the other major netroots networks and organizations: "Elect more, and better, Democrats." The flaw is the word "better". With no real left ideology (and therefore, no attendant analysis of the current political and economic situation) there is no real way to gauge what makes a "better" Democrat. With no definition of "better" in this context, we are left with "Elect more Democrats;" not only this, but without an ideology--an analysis--we can't gauge legislative

progress--meaning [we will never know when we have "enough" Democrats](#). Electing more Democrats is not a worthwhile goal until we know what makes a politician a "good" or "better" Democrat.

That is to say, without a party-independent movement capable of providing analysis of current political and social crises, we'll end up with a constant tension between those who think espousal of particular issues, versus partisan loyalty, define "progress", "the left" or "progressivism".

I would offer as my primary piece of evidence the Honorable Michael J. Madigan.

Who has been better at electing More Democrats and consolidating Democratic power than Mike Madigan? [Who has been better at liquidating his political opposition and enacting one-party rule?](#) The Illinois Republican Party is amongst the politically weakest in a country where they are, electorally and legislatively speaking, extraordinarily weak.

From the Crain's piece:

If Mr. Madigan is like many other pols in wanting to keep his power and help his family, what's rare is how little he uses his power elsewhere. Mr. Lawrence recalls once asking Mr. Madigan if he was passionate about any issue or cause. "His answer was that he was more about being a political strategist."

Think about this for a minute. The most powerful legislator in the state of Illinois not only has no ideology--he has no interest in issues whatsoever. In this way, Madigan is different from the netroots, and most Democrats. But only by degrees.

Speaker Madigan contains in one man the acumen and brute strength of the liberal netroots. Sure his methods are different, and are by definition autocratic, but I see little practical distinction in what he has accomplished in Illinois and what the principle "Elect More Democrats" would accomplish (and to a degree has accomplished) in D.C. Sure the netroots--or the generation of Democratic Party activists that has arisen since the first Bush administration--has involved millions of people across the country in the political process--but in more than a superficial way? The Illinois Democratic Party has activists in every corner, too; local precinct committeemen and women, municipal and county level officials, union rank and file, etc. Do they have any operational influence in Springfield? Do the netroots in DC?

It is fair to say that the Illinois Democratic Party has mismanaged, or failed to stop the mismanagement, of the state, while also effecting some good. But even excusing Blagojevich, can we really say that the Democratic dominance of the state has brought much fundamental change for people? Is Illinois markedly different today from the way it was eight years ago? We can't even raise the income tax by 1%. The state is privatizing the schools. How can the Illinois Democrats be considered a party of the left, even the center left? Has public transportation infrastructure markedly improved?

So what has the material difference been with one-party dominance? That they've just not been Republicans? That is ludicrous. That is not a positive program; and it makes life too easy for politicians who can just fear-monger on how much worse things would be if the "other side" was in power.

That is why we need to know what makes a "better" Democrat before we can devote our energies to electing "more" of them.

Does "better" mean "more loyalty to the President's agenda"? Because that would set the bar right at the lowest points of the President's progressive leadership. And probably make hypocrites of lots of people along the way; Cf., the Republicans during Bush's presidency.

Does "better" mean "more like the New Deal"? Because as great as the New Deal was, it's not New anymore.

The federal government is a New Deal government. Not even Reagan's draconian cuts really undid that much of the New Deal bureaucracy. While the regulatory regime has changed drastically, the machinery to re-regulate is right there waiting. And Democrats have refused to reanimate it. The further problem is that the economy is no longer a New Deal economy, because *that was 80 years ago*. Almost a century. The solutions that worked back when horse was still a common conveyance may not be the paint-by-numbers stencil we want to go with this time around.

Or does "better" mean "more in line with the interests of special interest institutions"? That is probably just as often going to alienate the general public as it will align with them.

When this current financial kerfuffle and recession began, there was no analysis on the left. We mocked the movement conservatives and Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman devotees ("free market fundamentalists") who [hilariously stuck to their guns](#) that regulation and the public was the problem, that "unfettered" capitalism, left free enough would lead to utopia. Like the Leninist utopians before them, they blindly clung to their ideology as the material evidence of its real world consequences raged around them. It would be admirable if it wasn't so destructive.

But they had an analysis. And because they had an analysis, they were able to recover and reorganize and bring people under their banner. Mock the paltry turnout of the Tea Parties, but the right wing has undoubtedly regrouped, and paralyzed the ability, or chilled the will, of the President to make any drastic changes to the role of government or the structure of power in DC. Now we have yahoos showing up screaming about the big bad government trampling the little guy*, having been made certain by a worldview and ideology that can present an analysis of the current economic and political situation: wealthy liberals and poor minorities conspire to rob the middle class through state power. Only spontaneous order can preserve your freedom. That's the analysis, dressed up in Founding Father worship and focus-grouped locution.

Talking about individual liberty in a state where the economic system requires the vast majority of people to be dependent on an employer for their survival and health is nonsensical. Can you have a capitalist system where everybody is self-employed? Where everybody is an entrepreneur? No; you need workers. But despite their being necessary if not sufficient, they are treated as expendable. The Randists just re-classify them as "consumers". Freedom is refocused on consumption. Inside that analysis, it's easy to argue that having a "single payer" robs of you freedom. How can you have freedom (to consume) if consumption is limited to one dominant single payer? If the government is using its coercive power to control a market, where does that leave the freedom of consumption?

They have an analysis. Does the left, as embodied in its most "radical" organizations in the netroots? Absolutely not. Hell, even the economy's largest worker organizations refuse to engage in any real oppositional analysis--that questions and challenges the status quo. Does the labor movement define itself outside of the right-wing analysis of Free Markets and Freedom to Consume?

Lacking analysis, the netroots can't make any real material advances. They will just be empowering the Madigans of the world, sending malleable politicians into a system specifically designed to shape them. Has the new generation of activists reinvigorated the progressive wing of the Democratic Party? I don't see how. They have picked off weak Republicans by providing an organizational and monetary edge to moderate-to-conservative Democrats. Meanwhile, they [descend into arguments](#) around whether being a [good progressive simply means being loyal to the President](#).

It is nearly impossible in American politics for one party to have more of a political advantage than the Democrats currently have over Republicans. Enormous majorities in both houses of Congress and the Presidency, a significant majority of state legislatures and governorships, and control of nearly every major city in the country. As the Democratic Party grows in strength, they grow weaker in ideology.

Which brings us back to Michael J. Madigan. His party grows in strength and as it does so becomes more attractive to the large institutions that benefit from the status quo. Mike Madigan's tactical and strategic political brilliance is predicated on the idea of not provoking the status quo into reaction. It's praised in him as a trait by "moderates". They purr in the lap of power rather than take it on, and voila. We end up with Illinois.

The Democratic activists, embodied in the netroots, have a series of issue positions, but lack a unifying analysis of why things are not working; lack an explanatory framework, or at least one that goes much deeper than "conservative policies are bad for average people". If such an analysis exists, it isn't regularly discussed.

The blame isn't on them; they're party activists. But engaging in a bit of plain-spoken analysis can go a long way. On the right, the Manhattan Institute, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Federalist Society, and Americans for Tax Reform form a cornerstone of a powerful intellectual movement that informs political organizations and the average American's worldview. On the left, policy organizations (The Brookings Institute, the Economic Policy Institute, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, Natural Resources Defense Council) push legislative compromises that say nothing about how the status quo power structure needs to be changed, but just how that structure should treat different groups of citizens.

The problem isn't Democrats, or even one-party rule. The problem is that the left has no coherent analysis and therefore no unified movement that can act outside of transaction and identity politics. While conservatism, particularly the strain informed by the neoliberal/neoconservatives, has suffered as a consumed identity (fewer people "call themselves" conservatives), it is as resilient as ever as an ideology. The left shrinks by the day, refusing to provide any analysis and instead rallying around a Party that considers a lack of analysis to be a badge of honor ("centrism") and as a result keeps its thumb on progress.

*Gigantic insurance conglomerates that [regularly murder people](#) by denying them care they paid for.

— *Ramsin Canon* / [Comments \(0\)](#)

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