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Realizing the Promise: The Meaning of This Moment (Part 1)

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“The United States has lived through 40 years of retrenchment in our national government’s commitment to social justice. We have suffered ugly culture war politics that have targeted the most vulnerable people in our country as scapegoats. The election results last night, the deteriorating economy, and changes in public mood now create an opening for transformational, progressive change. History teaches us that such openings are rare, and that we will realize the promise only if there is a dynamic relationship between political leadership and independent, organized movements that extend democratic practice beyond election day into governance.

What is the meaning of this incredible election? We’re seeing the convergence of several powerful forces that together create the possibility of transformative change: the rise of community organizing principles in our national political life; the dramatic erosion in the ideological standing of free-market fundamentalism; the seeds of a progressive alternative; and the emergence of a new progressive coalition...” [Click here to read the full text.](#)

Community Organizing to Center Stage

Who would have thought that a man whose formative experience was in community organizing would become President of the United States? Or that the very profession of community organizing would be seriously debated by the Presidential candidates? One of the most heartening things about this election is the embrace of community organizing in politics, and the embrace of politics by community organizing. The Obama campaign applied community organizing principles to an unprecedented scale—organizing volunteers to reach their neighbors through person to person contact. We’ve also seen the emergence of non-partisan, community-based voter programs as an alternative to the fly-by-night operations that parachute in and disappear after election day. Ten years ago, most community organizations avoided electoral politics. Today, nearly all are engaging their members and leaders, and the work is having an impact. CCC’s own efforts through our *Community Voting Project*, which registered more than 100,000 new voters and reached 250,000 new and infrequent voters of color, were a small part of an inspiring and broad-based movement. Progressives should keep faith with the principles of relationship, listening, volunteering, and authenticity that mark these efforts. The people engaged in this election will need to stay engaged to realize the promise of this moment.

Free Market Fundamentalism On the Ropes

The inability of free-market fundamentalists, from Alan Greenspan to John McCain, to defend their ideas or the application of them in the crucible of the current economic crisis has created an opening for a new economic paradigm. The election was a referendum on free-market fundamentalism, and it suffered a vote of no confidence. However, if we do not succeed in advancing a different set of ideas—grounded in values and manifested in bold policy proposals—the bankrupt ideology of free markets will be resurrected, to the detriment of all of us. We have a moment to make our case clearly and compellingly, as FDR and Reagan did in their very different ways, win the battle of big ideas, and create a new consensus before the moment and mandate are lost.

A New Progressive Story

At his best, Senator Obama articulates a new framework for progressive politics in America that upholds community values of inclusion, mutual responsibility, and connectedness. At a forum that the Center for Community Change organized in 2007 in Des Moines in conjunction with Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, he said that “this idea of community values is not just the cause of a campaign for me. It is the cause of my life.” He has consistently told a story that draws on the ways that we stand on the shoulders of people who came before us—from abolitionists to suffragists to union organizers—who have agitated for greater inclusion. And he talks about how our fates are linked—so that an economy that does not respect work will be bad not only for workers, but ultimately for everyone because it undermines the conditions for prosperity.

This narrative is obviously different from the toxic stew of free-market fundamentalism and culture war politics that have been the staple of conservatism since Goldwater and Nixon. But it is also refreshingly different language from the triangulating centrism of the 1990s that tried to defang the appeal of conservative ideas by accommodating them. And although it has clear affinity with the economic populist and identity politics strains that have played such a strong role in progressive movements historically, it embraces the principles in a new way that stresses our common destiny. This new story could turn out to be a warm and fuzzy rhetorical gloss for conventional, small-bore policy proposals that fail to capture the public imagination and avoid confronting entrenched interests. Or the new narrative could create the ground and rationale for more sweeping, transformative changes. One of the key challenges for the progressive movement in this era will be to develop and tell a coherent story about what’s wrong with the country, how we got here and how we can move forward—not just at the level of specific policies, but raising up larger principles. This fledgling, emergent progressive story has real promise if it is coupled with movement and with big policy proposals that reinforce the story.

A New Progressive Coalition

The election results reflect the emergence of a new majority coalition, based above all in a strategy to expand the electorate. Massive turnout by African Americans, Latinos, new immigrants, young people and women provide a foundation for progressive politics and policy

making for a generation. Voter mobilization efforts clearly played an important role in driving up turnout in all these demographics. This coalition is breaking some old orthodoxies—showing great potential for progressives in what was long viewed as the “flyover country” of the south and the southwest, and demonstrating that progressives can win a mandate by expanding the electorate and the playing field. Demographics are not destiny, however, and it is important to underscore that the durability of the coalition will likely depend on whether these constituencies feel they have been heard and heeded in governance.

The Twin Challenges for Progressives in This New Era

Progressives face two major strategic questions as we enter this new era. First, will we articulate a bold new vision for the economy and the country, and push for transformative policy changes? Or will we play small ball? Second, how will we reckon with the realities of race that have always been the shoals on which progressive movements have foundered, notwithstanding this historic victory for an African American candidate for President for the first time in our history?

A growing number of commentators are cautioning against “over-reaching” by a newly empowered President and Congress, despite abundant evidence that the public mood has shifted and that our country’s predicament requires bold, imaginative action. This cautious impulse, which has its strongest appeal inside the Beltway, stretches across partisan lines, with former Bush aide Matthew Dowd cautioning Obama to “govern from the center, where the vast majority of the country is,” while Clinton adviser Mark Penn writes an op-ed for *The Financial Times* titled “Political Lesson for America: Stick to Centrism.” The problem with these pronouncements is that the conservative consensus it reflects is breaking down and the “center” of American politics is moving: away from a “you’re on your own” conception of the role of individuals, markets and society, toward community values—the idea that we are in it together, and that our fates are linked.

We have a chance to deliver meaningful changes in people’s lives, and in so doing show people that their participation in politics actually translates into change they can see, touch and feel. A more robust role for the government through greater regulation, public investment and universal health care are examples of policies that can restore confidence in government—the essential condition for progressive governance. We can also fight for and win structural changes that fundamentally alter the ways power operates in our society—such as the Employee Free Choice Act and immigration reform that would provide a path to citizenship for 12 million undocumented immigrants. These kinds of changes would not only make the lives of workers and immigrants better, but would strengthen the voice of these constituencies, which would in turn strengthen the progressive movement.

Given the nature of the moment we’re in, a transformative agenda would necessarily begin with and center on the economy, and tie these various issues and others into a coherent story. The narrative would start from the principle of interdependence or shared fate, the idea that, as King put it, “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” When President-elect Obama said in his acceptance speech that Wall Street cannot ultimately do well when Main Street is hurting, he was making exactly this point. The second core idea, foundational to a stronger role for government,

is that individual gain is not by itself a sound basis for economic policy. The “you’re on your own” ideology has obviously failed to deliver, and the great lesson of this crisis is that we risk economic insecurity for everyone when we allow the individual drive for private wealth to trump our collective quality of life. Solutions from universal health care to mortgage relief, stronger corporate accountability and public job creation all make sense in a framework grounded in these principles.

We should all be moved by the historic significance of this election but be wary about the narrative that Obama’s election is the harbinger of a “colorblind” society, because this conception of race will be used to undercut a progressive, transformative agenda. In its extraordinary endorsement of Barack Obama, *The Economist* made the remarkable claim that one of the benefits of an Obama victory is that it would “lessen the tendency of American blacks to blame all their problems on racism.” Breathtaking.

Nearly every issue that will come up in 2009 will have a strong racial dimension. Sometimes the question will be explicit, as in the case of how progressives handle demands for immigration reform, or when conservatives try to undermine support for universal health insurance by raising the specter that undocumented immigrants will be principal beneficiaries. The first test for progressives on this score may come early, when Congress must decide whether or not to include *legal* immigrant children in the reauthorization of the Children’s Health Insurance Program. In other cases, race will be the subtext—as when we debate how a new jobs program is structured and who will be hired, or when we consider how to rebuild a safety net for the unemployed and who is and is not covered. A genuinely progressive movement will insist that race does matter—and therefore that we have to be race conscious in how we construct policies. If we do not take race seriously, we will leave people out and leave people behind, de-energize the emerging progressive coalition, and leave ourselves vulnerable to conservative wedge attacks.

The Need for Movement

One of the great themes of American history is the role of outside agitation in achieving transformative policy changes. FDR campaigned on (of all things!) a balanced budget as the central plank of his first campaign effort, but swiftly abandoned this crazy idea in favor of a radical economic program in response both to the deterioration of the economy and to pressure from below. Lincoln famously switched his position on the abolition of slavery, and the role of abolitionists (in particular, Frederick Douglas) in shaping the debate was critical. Women won the right to vote only after decades of bold activism by suffragists. It was the Selma march that finally pressured LBJ to embrace and push for the Voting Rights Act.

No one should harbor any illusions that a Democratic President and large Democratic majorities in Congress will translate automatically into transformative policy change (see: Jimmy Carter 1977-1978; Bill Clinton 1993-1994).

It will take broad and deep organizing at scale to create public will and political appetite for major policy changes. This principle applies at the micro level—the need to win public support district by district and state by state in order to generate the 218 House votes and (typically) 60 Senate votes required to pass most significant legislation. It also applies at the macro level—a

sense of movement must be created to shape the public debate and create demand, using mass mobilizations, rallies, sophisticated media work and door to door and church by church outreach to enlist people in the fight.

At the same time, for those of us who have spent our careers working largely in *opposition* to bad ideas, the task in these times is different and we are called to change our ways of thinking and acting accordingly. We will need to engage constructively on the “inside” even as we push on the “outside.” We have to push for big progressive solutions, and break the habits of technocratic policy incrementalism. We will need to articulate new ideas, plans and framing that speak to the times and deliver solutions on a scale that reinforces the progressive coalition that is emerging. Perhaps most importantly, we will need to work tirelessly to create the public will to see those policies enacted in the face of significant opposition and establishment caution. The methods and values of community organizing that were brought to bear in the elections to such great effect will now need to be applied on a massive and unprecedented scale in grassroots advocacy. And we’ll need to work together across issue, constituency, organization and function, so that our organizing, ideas and communications work drive towards common goals.

Perhaps the greatest risk in this moment is complacency, a false sense that new elected leadership can, by themselves, take us from here to there. There is no time to rest. Our work has just begun. The moral yardstick we might use in these amazing times? FDR nailed it: “the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

—*Deepak Bhargava, November 5, 2008*