

The Election That Nobody Won: American Politics & the Crisis of Strategy

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The stalemated 2000 U.S. presidential election has cast a public spotlight on all the strategic and tactical weaknesses of all the political forces concerned.

It was truly an election that nobody won. To be sure, George W. Bush is now the legal president; but because of his strategic failures and the strategic failures of all the other prime players, the Bush presidency will lack legitimacy for the period ahead.

Strategy is one of the most crucial matters in politics. Success or failure here is a measure of one's ability, first, to take an accurate measure of the overall circumstances and, second, to make an accurate and fruitful determination of adversaries and allies in each successive set of circumstances. As Alvin Toffler recently put it, any political player who doesn't have a strategy is really a pawn in someone else's strategy.

So how did our political players in this election measure up on their strategies? Here's a quick review of the main points:

The Gore Campaign. The neoliberal Democratic Leadership Council was the inner core of Vice President Al Gore's campaign. Its strategy has been, for several years, to distance itself and the Clinton-Gore team from the party's traditional progressives, with the aim of uniting the country's political center and winning over elements of the right.

By trying to marginalize the left Democrats, however, the DLC ignored the crucial role of what can be called the critical force in building broad coalitions. Critical forces are insurgent constituencies that not only raise their own issues, but also pose broader questions against a main adversary that can help mobilize the more passive and static constituencies aligned with them. The Democrat's left progressives, especially among African Americans, have played this militant minority role in winning earlier mass campaigns.

This race was different. This conscious push to the center, explained the Aug. 15 Christian Science Monitor, seen in Gore's choice of Joseph Lieberman as his running mate, has distracted (if not alienated) many activist Democrats. Senator Lieberman is chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, a pro-business group (of which Clinton also is a leading figure) that has nudged the party rightward in recent years.

One example of this trend on the party's left wing: The congressional Progressive Caucus, a 53-member group of Democrats, got slapped down at the recent drafting of the party's platform. Among the group's defeated proposals were those that would have limited the president's ability to negotiate trade agreements, raised pay and benefits for low-wage workers, and expanded government-funded healthcare.



They talk about a big tent, grumbled Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D) of Ohio, a member of the Progressive Caucus. But this tent just got a bit smaller.

After spending years criticizing and dismissing the traditional progressive constituencies, Blacks, labor, feminists, greens, the DLC at the last moment expected these same activists to turn on a dime and mobilize the full strength of all those who supposedly had nowhere else to go. Some progressives responded to the call, but many others either stayed home or campaigned for Nader. One indicator: the overall voter turnout this year was about 50 percent, compared to 55 percent in 1992 when Clinton ran against Bush the elder.

“I don’t like that the DLC gets it all”, said Robert Kuttner of the American Prospect, summing up the new relation of forces in the Democratic Party, “and Gore ends up being the left wing of the ticket.”

The DLC’s policy of “distancing” its candidate from African-Americans continued even into the month-long battle over the Florida recounts and the court decisions that finally decided the election. While one exposure after another revealed GOP efforts to undercount, miscount and otherwise disenfranchise voters in Black precincts, the Gore campaign downplayed these issues and stuck to narrower technical challenges to the vote counting process. At the unprecedented protest by the Black Congressional Caucus at the time of the Congressional approval of the Electoral College vote, not one Democratic Senator could be found to join their ranks.

The Bush campaign. The GOP’s strategy was an attempt to unite the right and far right, win over the center, and defeat the progressives. The critical force for Bush was the militant insurgency around the right-wing Christian Coalition. Its only clear-cut success, however, was isolating and defeating Pat Buchanan and his wing of the Reform Party on the far right.

Bush did make some inroads in winning over the center. What was new was his campaign’s “new diversity” and “compassionate conservatism” repackaging. It made some notable gains among moderate Hispanics and Asians, while expanding the GOP’s “Reagan Democrat” blue-collar white males. In fact, Bush carried a clear majority of white males with less than a college education. (One third of all union members also voted for Bush, a point that should be pondered by AFL-CIO officials blaming Nader for their failures.)

But Bush’s strategy stumbled badly over his overall assessment of the center forces and the “Gender Gap.” The American center, in its majority, simply does not want to jail women for having abortions or to abandon the children in its public schools. In California, for instance, women voted for Gore over Bush by an eighteen percent margin. Sociologist Francis Fukiyama explained it in the November 15 Wall Street Journal:

“It is not just that women vote in greater numbers than they did, but that they constitute the key vote that has swung toward the Democrats in contemporary elections. Foreign policy, strong national defense and tax cuts were key parts of the traditional Republican formula that brought Ronald Reagan to power. But these issues are also pre-eminently male ones, and have consistently failed to gain much traction among women. Mr. Clinton woke up to the feminization of American politics and the cultural issues this spawned much sooner than the Republicans, and rode it to two election victories.... How politicians play this issue is very complex, because women are not a homogeneous voting block and have very different interests on a variety of issues. But on the whole, this shift spells

trouble for conservatives more than for liberals. The single most important social change to have taken place in the United States over the past 40 years concerns sex and the social role of women, and it is from this single source that virtually all of the 'culture wars' stem."

The Nader campaign Ralph Nader, running on the Green Party line, defined victory differently than his opponents: getting five percent of the vote nationally to insure ballot status and federal funds for future elections. To win this goal, Nader tried to implement a "citizens vs. corporations" strategy that was essentially a hard-hitting, oppositionist critique of capitalism, but without a clear alternative program for restructuring both power and the production of wealth. It either ignored, attacked or ran ahead of his potential allies.

Nader's anti-corporate vision, moreover, was distorted by an anti-China, anti-trade protectionism he shared with the AFL-CIO leadership and, to a certain extent, with Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan. As Bruce Shapiro noted in the November 1 *Nation*, "Buchanan's attacks on global trade and his opposition to U.S. military adventures abroad have led some influential voices on the left to wonder whether this is a bargain they could join. Some in the Naderite orbit, for instance, now argue privately that Buchanan will not center his campaign on social issues in the 2000 election, and that a platform based on his corporation-bashing might be worthy of support."

In practice, Nader and the Greens primarily united insurgent white youth and a portion of the older generation radicalized by the youth rebellion of the 1960s. Among 18- to 22-year-old voters, Nader ran at nearly thirty percent. This group, tied to the anti-globalist protests in Seattle and elsewhere, are crucial to future party-building efforts. He also ran slightly higher among Blacks and other minorities than among whites; and won the endorsement of Black leaders like Cornel West, Manning Marable and Adolph Reed. But instead of five percent of the vote nationwide, Nader got 2,716,231 votes, just under three percent; still not to be taken lightly.

In essence, the Greens took a get-rich-quick approach to party building. They tried prematurely to build an electoral organization from the top down before gathering sufficient strength and allies from the bottom up. While the Greens displayed some impressive mobilizing, they now face the task of consolidating their gains, but lack the infrastructure to do it systematically.

The Buchanan campaign Splitting from the GOP and taking over Ross Perot's Reform Party, Buchanan's campaign was essentially a semi-fascist attempt at empowering a nationalist united front of European Americans. Its populist anti-globalism mainly targeted immigrants of color and the third world, even as it claimed to defend American workers and jobs. Thomas Edsall put it this way in a June 22 Washington Post report on a Teamster's Union press conference:

"With Nader by his side, (Teamster President James P.) Hoffa said that 'only Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan have stood with the American workers on trade.' He added, however, that on the broad range of labor issues, union representation, health and safety laws and a host of other issues, Nader is on the side on the union movement, while Buchanan is not.... 'Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan must be included in the electoral process,' Hoffa said. "Furthermore, the (Presidential Debate Commission) should hold a debate dedicated specifically to address[ing] workers' issues and the issue of globalization."

But Pat's minions failed even to unite the far right. Buchanan completely underestimated the victory-hungry electoral pragmatism of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, which stayed with the GOP and

left him in the lurch. When he tried to compensate this loss with a temporary alliance with Lenora Fulani and the New Alliance Party, he was further isolated even in his own base. Despite winning \$12 million in federal campaign funds, he wound up with less than one percent of the vote.

In addition to Gore, Bush, Nader and Buchanan, there are a number of other players in the electoral arena that are important from the perspective of a strategy for the left:

The Left Democrats. Referred to variously as the Progressive Wing, the Rainbow Democrats or the New Deal Liberals, many in this cluster supported former Senator Bill Bradley, in the Democratic primaries. Others, such as Rev. Jesse Jackson, were behind Gore from the beginning, believing he was the stronger candidate against Bush. Unlike the DLC, the Left Democrats don't have a single center. In Congress, they are represented mainly by the Progressive Caucus and the Black Caucus, but they are also represented by Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, the National Organization for Women and the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education. There are also differences among them, with the Black Caucus having the most progressive overall platform.

These progressives constantly face a dilemma. On one hand, their political clout is tied to the perks and privileges they have won as members of the Democratic Party. On the other hand, they never have enough clout to displace the "Corporate Caucus," the DLC, as the primary force with the wealth and power in the Democratic Party.

Apart from the DLC's attempt to marginalize organizations of the Left Democrats, the main argument between the two factions is over how to win over the "white suburban center." According to the Dec. 16, 2000 Washington Post, "The populist wing argues that white voters without college degrees hold the balance of power while the centrist wing contends that 'wired workers' who use the Internet, and in many cases own stock, are the key voting bloc." One side wants to win these constituents with economic populism while the other wants to use social conservatism. Both miss the point that Bush made his greatest inroads into this group with a message of reform, local and individual empowerment and entrepreneurship, messages that by no means have to be conceded to the right.

The Labor Party. This trade union based organization, which has corralled the electoral ambitions of a number of left groups, was not a player in 2000. It is rooted among trade union organizers and activists to the left of the AFL-CIO leadership. Its strategy is basically to unite the working class, through its unions, against any candidates of the Democrats and Republicans. It has isolated itself through its go-it-alone ultra left tactic of abstaining from electoral campaigns until it can win big races at the top first. It opposes any fusion tactic of supporting local progressive Democrats and any potential candidate on its line must first break all ties with the Democrats. Two major national unions affiliated with the Labor Party, the United Electrical Workers and California Nurses Association, supported Nader. Most other unions supported Gore.

The New Party. This locally based independent left party, known for its cross-endorsing “fusion” tactics with progressive Democrats, was one small exception. It did not participate in the presidential race nationally, but where it did implement its tactics locally, it made gains. As Jay Schaffner summed up the New Party affiliate in New York: “In New York, the bright light is that of the Working Families Party”. On Election Day, they had some 3000 trade unionists, CORN members and others out on the streets, at the polls. The WFP vote climbed from just over 50,000 for Vallone two years ago, to somewhere between 102,000 and 110,000. The WFP vote doubled! The WFP is now the number four party in New York; previously it was number eight. (It should be noted that the total Nader vote in New York State was double that of the vote for the Working Families Party.) The WFP ran a slate of its own local candidates, but cross-endorsed Hilary Clinton and Al Gore on its own ballot line.

The Vermont Progressive Party, which endorsed Nader nationally, also did well. It won a number of local races and candidate for governor did better than ten percent.

What about the **socialist left**? It ran a few candidates in a number of states, notably David McReynolds from the Socialist Party and Monica Moorehead from the Workers World Party. Obviously, socialism in the U.S. doesn't speak with one voice. Some organizations, such as the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism and the Democratic Socialists of America, were clearly divided between Nader and Gore supporters. Some are close to Nader's anti-corporate united front, but with a greater emphasis on minority nationalities and women. Others hold to older formulas for an anti-monopoly united front or anti-imperialist united front. Those leaning to the ultra left hold to some versions of a united front of the working class against capital, while those leaning to more moderate positions uphold equally dated versions of the united front against fascism or the all-people's front against reaction.

What all of these socialist approaches have in common is that they haven't changed much in at least 25 years. And with a few notable exceptions, the tactics that derive from these ossified strategies haven't produced anything for their advocates beyond continued isolation at the margins of political life. Some even have strategic principles, but no tactics at all. Others have a variety of tactics, but no strategy. Even when they win a battle, the gains soon evaporate. Moreover, nearly all varieties of the socialist left are without any independent electoral base organizations that have been built up over the years.

A New Proposal on Strategy

What do we need to win elections and build the independent left in American politics? First, we need a good strategy, one that not only determines friends and enemies in a general way, but concretely, in the battles before us today. Just to name imperialism or corporate capitalism doesn't help much. We need to know which sectors of capital are currently the most dangerous, most reactionary and greatest obstacles to human progress today. We need to narrow the target and focus our fire on the worse and most dangerous of the bunch in a way that takes advantage of divisions in their ranks. This enables us to form broader alliances among the masses and to find tactical allies that we can use to develop our strength.

We are not in a revolutionary situation or crisis. Socialism itself is not on the electoral agenda or even a matter for mass agitation at this time. This doesn't mean we shouldn't be serious about socialism. To the contrary, we need to be very serious about it, but mainly as a matter of theoretical

development and revolutionary education. The process of critiquing the failed, second-wave, anti-market socialism of the last century still has to be deepened, so that a third wave socialism—ecological, market-employing, high-tech, globalist and radically democratic—can be further developed.

What we urgently need now, however, is a strategic vision and ensuing set of tactics appropriate to enhancing the political and economic preconditions for a third wave socialism in a non-revolutionary situation. In fact, it is precisely how well we can develop our forces in these conditions, which may last a long time that will determine our ability to act decisively in periods of upheaval and crisis.

I have argued elsewhere that we need to take up the new strategic thinking put out by the Center for Labor and Community Research. It calls for the formation of a broad alliance against speculative capital, especially the low-road globalists whose financial manipulations are deepening poverty and creating havoc with labor and environmental standards in this country and across the world.

Notice that this is not a broad alliance against all capitalists, all big corporations or even all global multinationals. Instead it singles out a particular grouping of parasites who do little to organize new wealth or productive forces, but mainly manipulate market inequalities to loot and pillage. It seeks a strategic relationship with progressive “third sector” capital, such as nonprofit institutions and employee-owned firms. It leaves open the possibility and the desirability of tactical alliances with productive capital, even very large but productive corporations with a global reach. It distinguishes between high road and low-road capital strategies, between those who, on one hand, want to level down working conditions and wreck the environment and those who, on the other hand, want to develop a high-skill, high-design, sustainable future.

Here’s just one example. According to a November 22, 2000 report by American Viewpoint, a GOP polling firm, a poll of the Fortune 5000 finds U.S. business executives split on the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty being negotiated, with the help of Al Gore, to halt global warming:

“Thirty-four percent of business executives polled said they support ratification of the agreement by the U.S. Senate, 26 percent opposed it, and 38 percent had no opinion.... U.S. business executives are not monolithically opposed to the Kyoto Protocol, as some lobby groups would like everyone to believe,” Philips Clapp, president of the National Environment Trust, which commissioned the poll, said today. “More than a third actually support Senate ratification of the treaty, and roughly another third say they don’t have enough information to make a decision,” he said.

“The poll also found that 75 percent of Fortune 5000 executives believe that global warming is a serious problem. Arguments by the Global Climate Coalition and other groups that the scientific evidence of global warming is inadequate seem to have been rejected by a majority of business executives. Fifty-five percent of those polled said that majority of the evidence supports the existence of global warming or that it is established scientific fact.”

Does this mean an end to class struggle against capitalists in any anti-low road alliance? Of course not. In fact a critical form of class struggle is precisely to engage and challenge these class forces on firmly taking the high road rather than the low road, to curb their own speculative, “make money rather than create value” tendencies, and to adjust and focus the struggle on the main targets at a given time.

Among the people, we also need to change our thinking and make new assessments. It doesn't help just to think in terms of static class formations, working class, small producer, petit-bourgeoisie, underclass. It is far more fruitful to think in terms of insurgent constituencies as primary forces and the relatively more passive constituencies as secondary allies. Today the inner city poor, the working poor and the student youth are the main insurgencies, with the traditional progressive forces taking a relatively more static and passive role.

These insurgent constituencies are also in tune with the current trends of development, especially the impact of the information revolution: increased demand for technically trained labor, repression of inner city youth and expansion of the prison-industrial complex, stagnation of the blue-collar sector, and the growing demands for a social wage with health care, school reform and workforce development programs.

A new strategic thinking rooted in high road vs. low road development also means a break with the primarily oppositionist and redistributionist politics of the old liberalism. Our aim is not just the redistribution of wealth, but primarily the restructuring of power and a redistribution of the means of creating new wealth.

It is interesting that Bush's "compassionate conservatism" makes some of its stronger inroads into former or potential Democratic constituencies with its own variation on this theme. Stephen Goldsmith, former mayor of Indianapolis, puts it this way in the conservative journal, *Hoover Digest* (2000/4):

"Government has a responsibility, not to redistribute the wealth of citizens, but to provide the underprivileged with the skills and opportunities to create their own wealth.... For the most part, Democratic liberalism, instead of creating opportunities for people to enter the mainstream, has sought to 'buy out' the less fortunate by creating a system of government that actually disempowers those most in need by giving them less control over their lives. And by promoting the redistribution of income rather than the creation of new wealth and new opportunities for investment, liberals have consigned people in need to the sidelines, where they remain dependent for their survival on the largesse of the state and the decisions of bureaucrats."

Compassionate conservatism, however, gets tangled up in its own conflicting principles. Without redistributing current wealth, except toward the military-industrial sector, it undercuts the ability to create or implement its individual empowerment plans except in ways that add to the crisis or expand inequalities. This would be the consequence of its school voucher proposals and welfare reform, especially with an economic downturn.

The left, of course, should never give up its goal of redistributing wealth; rather the left needs to subordinate redistribution to empowerment and the creation of new value

That means we do not simply denounce and oppose present outrages and demand relief. Instead we offer and fight for an alternative, sustainable plan of development and a popular effort to take hold of the political power needed to implement our program. It is precisely our task to show that the popular forces can run towns, cities, counties, states and countries better than the low-riders can, even without socialism. In fact, it is through this means that the working class and its allies develop their ability to be the masters of society.

We need to develop a new majority on a new basis because, as this election shows, neither the old liberalism nor neoliberalism nor compassionate conservatism can unite a broad new majority. We need a new vision that combines a democratic, wealth-creating, ecologically-sound entrepreneurial program with a radical democratic reform of political power and a sustainable safety net for society's weakest and most vulnerable members.

But strategy and vision are not enough. Every strategy requires organizational forms to mobilize political power and transform policy into results and deeds.

First, organizations that link this strategy's two main insurgent constituencies, the inner city poor and the younger wired workers and student youth, need to be multiplied and developed. These would include school reform coalitions, the community technology center movement, the universal health care movement, and movements against sweatshops, criminal justice abuses and toxic waste dumps.

Second, these insurgencies need to be linked to traditional progressive groups, labor, women, people of color, gay and lesbian, with proposals for radical democratic structural reform. These would include workforce development and business incubation initiatives, wider and more affordable access to higher education, organizing contingent labor, environmental cleanup and recycling initiatives, anti-discrimination and affirmative action measures, and social wage legislation. Many of these initiatives would also involve representatives from high road and green businesses, small and large in scope.

Third, the high-road coalitions need to develop an independent electoral organization rooted in the local political precincts, wards and districts of its grassroots members. A key starting point would be a Black-Green-Blue Alliance, united around radical democracy and a high-road economic agenda, that would cooperate in fielding candidates for local offices and building upward.

Finally, no significant progress can be made in the electoral arena without critical changes in the current election laws that unfairly buttress incumbency and the two-party system. First would be measures that would allow for instant runoff (preferential voting) rather than the winner-take-all plurality system we now have. This would disarm the "wasted vote" argument against minor candidates. Second would be to allow the cross-endorsement "fusion" option to vote for a single candidate across several party lines, as currently exists in New York state. Third would be reforms making it easier to get ballot status in states where it is unfairly difficult for minor parties. The more difficult issues of campaign financing and the electoral college can be dealt with in good time, but without these measures, the progressive movements will forever remain the captives of two-party "corporate caucuses" or consigned to the margins of American electoral politics.