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A Politics for the 99 Percent

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Reuters/Andrew Burton

This year will feature the most ideologically polarized election since the Reagan-Carter face-off of 1980. A radical-right Republican Party, backed by big-money interests, has made itself the tribune of privilege and will do significant damage if it takes control in Washington. Staving off that outcome depends on mobilizing the Democratic base. Yet President Obama's agenda is far removed from what is needed to meet the challenges this country faces. Because of this, we believe progressives must expand the limits of the current debate, even as they rally against the threat posed by a Republican victory.

No one should discount the potential destructiveness of a victory for Mitt Romney. The widespread media assumption that he's really a "Massachusetts moderate" who adopted extreme positions to placate the Republican electorate before resetting his Etch A Sketch would be irrelevant even if it were true. A Romney victory could be accompanied by GOP control of all branches of government, with the party's

right-wing majority in the House driving the agenda. As Grover Norquist argues, “We are not auditioning for fearless leader.... We just need a president to sign this stuff.”

The “stuff” they would pass—already endorsed by Romney—includes repeal of the modest reforms enacted to police corporations after the Enron scandal and banks after the financial collapse; repeal of healthcare reform, stripping some 30 million people of coverage; budget cuts that would gut almost all domestic functions of the government, from education to child nutrition to safeguarding clean air and water; and an end to Medicare and Medicaid as we know them. These draconian measures would be used to pay for increases in military spending and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. Under the Romney plan, those making over \$1 million a year would receive an average tax break of \$250,000. A Romney victory would buoy a Republican right eager to roll back social progress, constrict voting rights and exacerbate racial divides in an era of middle-class decline. The offensive against labor and workers’ rights would escalate. And Romney’s bellicose foreign policy would make George W. Bush look dovish. If Romney wins, we will spend four years fighting to limit the damage he will inflict on the nation.

Obama has indicted the right’s extremes, arguing eloquently for public initiatives to save the middle class and revive the American dream. He’s made inequality a central theme of his campaign, and he will defend tax hikes on the wealthy and investments in areas vital to our future, from education to new energy. In attacking the vulture capitalism of Romney’s Bain Capital, defending the auto industry rescue and promoting investment in new energy, he makes an implicit case for industrial policy. Obama’s defense of human rights—for women, gays and minorities—stands in stark contrast to his opponent’s views. His re-election would help consolidate the emerging reform-coalition majority based on minorities, the young, single women, professionals and union households. Obama is winding down two wars, but his embrace of a modified “war on terror”—drones, renditions, expanded surveillance and other trappings of the imperial presidency—poses deep perils for the country. Even so, at least if Obama wins—and particularly if the Democrats manage to take back the House—our chances of reversing these policies, and winning the broader battle for reform, are vastly greater.

The System Isn’t Broken; It’s Fixed

Yet on the central issue of the campaign—the economy—the limits of the Obama agenda are apparent. In his “economic Sermon on the Mount,” delivered three months after he took office, Obama argued that we could not return to an economy built on debt and bubbles; we had to build “a new foundation” that would work for working people. He proposed moderate measures in critical areas: an economic stimulus, plus reforms in the healthcare, energy and financial sectors. But despite the economic crisis, an election mandate and Democratic majorities in both houses, Republicans combined with entrenched interests to delay, dilute and in some cases defeat reform.

Now the old economy has recovered, even if Americans have not. The big banks are more concentrated than ever and back to making big bets, certain that they are too big to fail. The trade deficit is growing, back up to an average of more than \$1.5 billion a day. Wages continue to fall, with more and more Americans struggling to afford healthcare and retirement. Student debt exceeds credit card debt, and the piecemeal privatization of public education continues. Inequality continues to grow, with the top 1 percent capturing a staggering 93 percent of the income growth in 2010.

Beneath Washington’s polarized politics, an establishment consensus has congealed around austerity. After this fall’s election, the United States will face a fiscal train wreck: the Bush tax cuts will expire at the end of the year, as will the payroll tax cut and extended unemployment benefits. The debt ceiling must be

raised again, and Republicans are threatening to hold the country hostage once more. The legacy of the last negotiation is an automatic sequester that requires cutting about 10 percent of the discretionary budget—both domestic and military programs. If all the cuts are made, the still-weak economy will plunge back toward recession. That specter is used to justify the call—made by both parties—for a grand bargain based on “shared sacrifice,” in which “everything is on the table.” In this construct, deficits pose the biggest threat, with austerity the needed remedy. Since we have all lived beyond our means, the argument goes, we should all share in the necessary sacrifices.

In fact, mass unemployment, not the deficit, poses the biggest threat to the economy. A turn to austerity would essentially be a declaration that chronic, widespread joblessness—with the declining wages and rising insecurity that accompany it—is the new normal, to which Americans must adjust. The mantra of shared sacrifice ignores the reality that most Americans already have sacrificed—in reduced wages, lost savings, collapsed home values. The question now should be: Who pays the tab for the mess created by Wall Street excesses, costly wars and thirty years of failed conservative policies? The “shared” sacrifice of austerity saddles the most vulnerable and the middle class with the tab. Wall Street gets bailed out and the rich get lower tax rates, while the 99 percent get unemployment and cuts in education, government services, retirement security and affordable healthcare.

The situational populism of presidential campaign rhetoric cannot mask the limits of the Obama mandate. He will offer no transformational agenda, no new foundation for an economy that works for working people, no plan for reviving the middle class. And no matter who wins, only sustained popular pressure will forestall a debilitating “grand bargain” that will further undermine the middle class and the poor.

The Progressive Response

Not surprisingly, the high stakes of 2012 have fueled the perennial debate over the importance of electoral politics versus movement politics. In the face of the threat posed by the right, Democrats urge activists to swallow their disappointment with the president and pull together to get out the vote. In contrast, many movement activists scorn electoral politics, arguing that both parties are so corrupted and compromised that energy should be focused on building independent movements and protests.

Frances Fox Piven terms this a false dichotomy. “Elections and movements do not proceed on separate tracks. To the contrary, electoral politics creates the environment in which movements arise.” And movements can challenge the limits of the electoral debate, forcing politicians to address issues and adopt positions they might otherwise shun. The dedication and imagination of Occupy Wall Street forced inequality, mass unemployment and declining wages onto the national agenda, issues that Romney argued should be talked about only “in quiet rooms.” Popular movements in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere have won dramatic victories in repelling the right’s offensive against unions and working people—even as they have also compelled Democratic politicians to talk once more about workers’ rights. Successful movements build their own narrative, mobilizing activists around a cause and forcing politicians seeking a majority to change their calculations.

In 2012 progressives have little choice but to do both: to take the election seriously while continuing to organize independent movements and challenge the limits of the debate. Committing to electoral politics need not mean—*cannot* mean—simply folding into an existing campaign and trumpeting a politician’s exaggerated promises. Progressives should see elections as an opportunity to identify champions, drive issues into the debate and hold politicians in both parties accountable. This requires building an infrastructure independent of the Democratic Party, and a movement willing to challenge compromised

incumbents. A prime example was Ned Lamont's 2006 campaign against Joe Lieberman in Connecticut over the Democratic senator's support for the Iraq War. After Lamont's stunning upset victory in the primary, Democrats who had begun the campaign arguing about the supply of bulletproof vests finished it calling for an end to the war, which helped them win a majority in the House.

In this election, there are several high-profile races that could send Washington a message—notably the Senate campaigns of Sherrod Brown and Elizabeth Warren, both of whom have argued forcefully for taming Wall Street, and both of whom are prime targets for the right. In the House, there are more than a dozen progressive challengers who, if elected, would strengthen the “democratic wing of the Democratic Party.”

At the state and local levels, the stunning mobilization against Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin, followed by recall challenges of Republican senators, helped inspire progressives (and sober conservatives) across the country, who will push their own campaigns no matter what the outcome of the recall. Progressive Majority will field hundreds of local and state candidates while targeting key races that could flip state legislatures.

Even without primary challenges, movements can raise the public's awareness of progressive issues and force politicians to adopt positions they might otherwise avoid. Activists are moving to put the housing crisis and corrupt banking practices at the center of the national debate. While Occupy Our Homes mobilizes in communities to defend citizens against foreclosure and the Campaign for a Fair Settlement demands that we hold Wall Street accountable for the pervasive fraud that inflated the housing bubble, the Home Defenders League is organizing underwater homeowners in targeted states to demand that banks pay for resetting mortgages, which would bring dramatic benefits in jobs and growth to the overall economy. If these movements gain traction in Florida, Ohio and Nevada, the presidential and Congressional candidates will have to respond.

With student debt greater than credit card debt, students and Occupy activists have started to challenge university tuition hikes, demanding relief from Washington and Wall Street. The president has pushed for extending lower interest rates on student loans, in part to appeal to young voters.

This fall the biggest challenge for progressives will be finding a way to use the election to break the establishment consensus on post-election austerity. This requires mobilization around the demand of Good Jobs First and condemning a premature turn to austerity that would force working families to pay for the mess that Wall Street created. In addition, a broad-based coalition could join the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Senator Bernie Sanders and prominent economists to lay out a common-sense approach to growth and deficits. The most effective deficit-reduction measure is putting people to work—as soon as the unemployed start collecting paychecks, they spend and stimulate the economy, putting even more people to work and expanding tax revenue. Fair tax reform that shuts down corporate loopholes and tax havens and hikes taxes on the wealthy can help pay for the investments we need to build a new foundation for growth. Borrowing money at current interest rates, which are cheaper than free, and investing it in renovating our decrepit infrastructure—roads, sewers, energy systems—will put people to work and have a positive economic return. After we do this, we can focus on getting our books in order over the long term—not by cutting Medicare or Social Security but by fixing our broken healthcare system.

With Romney and the Republicans championing a return to the policies that have devastated the middle class, the election also offers an opportunity to overcome what has been the most baffling of Obama's failures: his unwillingness to “re-litigate the past,” to educate Americans about the bankrupt ideas and policies that served the 1 percent as they failed the country. It is a measure of that stunning default that

after the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the right could be revived electorally without being forced to rethink its assumptions or agenda, and without having to change even a comma of its creed.

Occupy Wall Street has helped to expose how a rigged system threatens our democracy and our economy. Progressives should use the election to hone our narrative on how we got into this mess and how we can get out of it. The conversation shouldn't simply be about an agenda, though. It should be about values—about the standards we hold in common, now offended by a system that tramples the basic beliefs most Americans hold about their country. In this post-*Citizens United* world, big money and both parties are flooding the airwaves with billions of dollars in negative ads, but this election can serve as a perfect teachable moment—if progressives counter with teach-ins, house parties, demonstrations, nonviolent protests and marches.

An Honest Politics

Americans understand that the system is broken—and rigged against them. They increasingly see both parties as compromised, and they have little sense of an alternative and even less of a sense that anyone is prepared to fight for them. Progressives must therefore be willing to expose the corruption and compromises of both parties. This requires not only detailing the threat posed by the right but honesty about the limits of the current choice.

We also must go from opposition to proposition. Broad coalitions and campaigns are needed to lay out alternatives and fight for them. Occupy Wall Street challenged the heart of darkness, and the commitment and sacrifice of the thousands who took part in that movement have inspired hope. That's why sustained efforts to mobilize and drive issues into the debate, while using nonviolence and direct action to defend people in peril, are vital. At the same time, progressives can champion candidates who will fight to transform the Democratic Party into an instrument of the 99 percent.

Defeating Romney and the right's ruinous agenda is necessary but not sufficient. We need to worry less about co-optation and more about collaboration and expansion. A new course will require electing progressive champions and holding them accountable. It will require bold mobilizations around neglected issues to break the establishment's stranglehold on our politics. It will require new ideas, new ways of organizing, new strategies of reconstruction.

We are still struggling to free ourselves from the ideas and institutions of the conservative era. We see more clearly than ever the flaws of a system rigged to benefit the few. The money politics that supports market fundamentalism has been exposed. The perils of the politics of division—enforced by a beleaguered, aging white minority against an emerging, more diverse America—are clear. Now we must reach out, teach, engage and mobilize millions of Americans. We must provide them with a sense of hope, a story of possibility, and enlist them to create change. It won't be easy. But it never is.

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