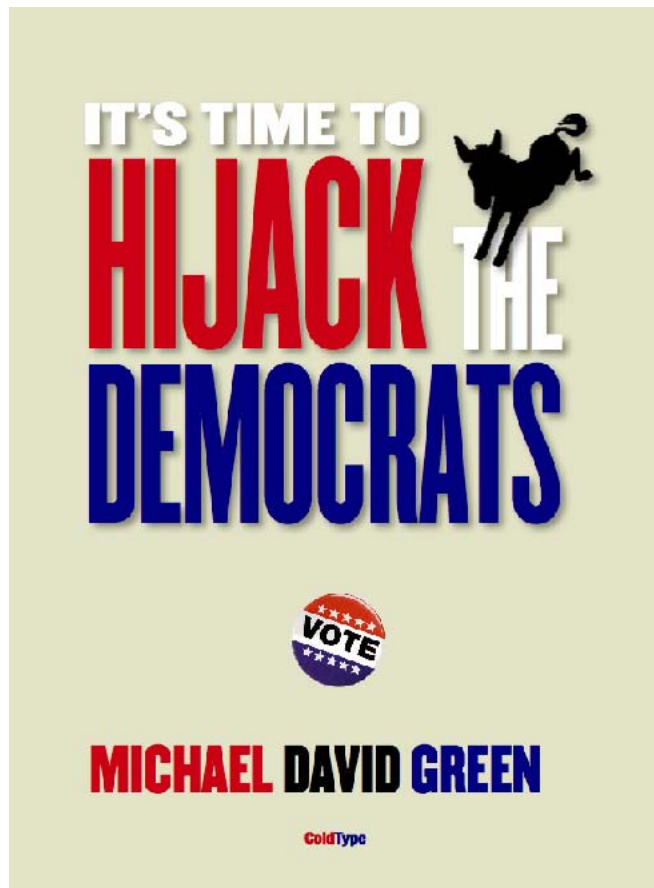


IT'S TIME TO
HIJACK THE
DEMOCRATS



MICHAEL DAVID GREEN



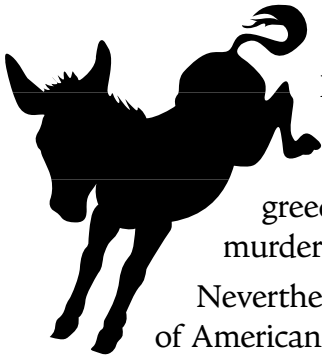
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Huge numbers of Americans are disgusted with both the Republican and the Democratic parties right now, and are hungrily clamoring for a third alternative. I know, I know – imagine that! What’s not to like about one party that stands for greed, murder and destruction, and another that stands by for greed, murder and destruction?

Nevertheless, somehow things are not going so swimmingly in the world of American partisan politics. The arch-Republican in the White House has job approval ratings in the mid-20s and sinking. The former Republican Congress, equally regressive, was tossed out on their ears, losing control of both houses last year. Not to be outdone, the Democrats who gained control of Congress as the expression of an angry public demanding change have spent the last seven months responding to that mandate by doing ... well, virtually nothing. Now their standing in public opinion is slightly lower than Bush’s.

So it comes as no surprise that tens of millions of Americans are fed up with both parties and anxious to find something else that they can not only vote for in good conscience, but can actually win. I, too, have shared that dream, have voted third party, and have even volunteered for one during a presidential election campaign. Remember Barry Commoner? Remember his candidacy for president as the leader of the Citizen’s Party in 1980?

Yeah, well, I rest my case. Third party alternatives to hopelessly nihilistic Republicans, hopelessly equivocal Democrats, and the hopelessly self-serving lot of them make total sense except for one small problem. They can’t win.

Not literally, of course. Technically, a third party could win. It’s just that they don’t, and, short of some dramatic changes in the future, that will continue to be the case – that is, they won’t.

I don’t dispute the circular determinism in a statement like that, which is no doubt the first response in the minds of those advocating an alternative to the two bankrupt political parties now running (and ruining) the country. It’s quite correct to argue that continuing to believe that third parties can never win, and that a vote for one of them is therefore ‘wasted’, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. It’s absolutely true that

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this is the first impediment to the success of a third party in America, and one which by definition must be resolved before any such party can possibly succeed. But what is too often left out of the discussion are the additional and quite enormous obstructions which are waiting right behind this first one to block the rise of a new party to power in America.

To begin with, there is the country's ideological diversity. Compared to other democracies, ours has been historically pretty muted in this regard, though the range of popular ideological positions has increased somewhat in recent years, particularly as the Republican Party migrated from the center-right to the far right over the last few decades. But the comparative diversity of ideology in America relative to other countries is not really the point here.

What is the point is that the degree of diversity we do have is prohibitive to a successful third party arising in the United States. Unless one is contemplating the rise of multiple new parties to viability (and here we've transitioned from hope to fantasy, I'm afraid), the resulting difficulty posed by this ideological diversity is pretty plain to see. Lots of people, for example, are disgusted right now with George Bush and his co-conspirators in the mainstream of the Republican Party. Most loathe him from the left, thinking he is an arrogant fool who is destroying virtually all the political values they hold dear. But others loathe him with equal intensity from the right, largely for the crime of not destroying those values fast enough. Between the Harriet Miers nomination and the immigration bill debacle, no small fraction of the sixty-five percent of America currently reviling the president are cavemen even more regressive than Bush (which may seem unimaginable to progressives, but is quite literally the case). And in-between are those of the angry middle, who are seriously disgruntled, but are reluctant to lean very far in either ideological direction for a solution to their unhappiness.

What's the relevance of all this? Well, try to imagine a third party with a presidential candidate that could be viable. Some of the current crop of disaffected voters would be happy to vote for Ralph Nader to replace Bush, but many others would equate that to living under Mao. Likewise, many of those wishing for a third party, complete with its own presidential candidate, would be delighted if someone like David Duke carried their standard. If it is imaginable for progressives that it could ever get worse than Bush/Cheney, this is certainly it. Then, of course, in the center you have the Ross Perot sort of voter, who is dissatisfied enough with existing choices to entertain alternatives, but not something 'fringe' in an ideological sense.

Put all this together and you have a sufficient critical mass for precisely nothing. Except perhaps maintenance of the status quo. Thus, one huge reason that the rise of an alternative third party in the United States is highly unlikely is the insufficient

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support for a single specific alternative, even when there is substantial general support among the electorate for some other option beyond the two parties. The idea is great in theory, and even more compelling when a significant cohort of the public says they want a third party to vote for. But unless you see redneck-pickup-truck-with-a-gunrack-driving-god-fearing-Georgia-crackers voting for Angela Davis, and unless you see long-haired-herbal-tea-drinking-Berkeley-lesbian-housing-rights-militants voting for John Bolton, forget about it. Maybe someone like Mike Bloomberg would get a healthy number votes if he ran in 2008, but the former Republican would get few from the left, nor would the Jewish mayor of New York City get many from the right.

So, after the vast bulk of voters have cast their lot once again with either Republicans or Democrats, the remaining dissenters – even if they are large in number – will dissipate their potential impact across a panoply of choices. Some will vote Green Party. Some Libertarian. Some Reform Party. Some the other Reform Party. Some Constitution, Natural Law, Populist, Taxpayers, Socialist or whatever other party is on the ballot. Even if all of the votes for these alternative parties in aggregate amounted to a numerical challenge to the Democrats and Republicans (and they are currently very far from doing so), the individual share of each of these various representations of different ideologies would completely dissipate any substantial impact, and likely any impact at all, like the air going out of a balloon.

Those are two monumental obstacles to the potential success of a third party in this country, but we still haven't even discussed what amounts to the biggest – namely, our electoral system. The term refers to the mechanism by which votes at the ballot box are translated into parliamentary delegates (or members of Congress) in a representative democracy. That might sound painfully straightforward and obvious, but the methods available for doing this are anything but, sometimes producing (far more painfully) obscure and mathematically complicated schemes which voters sometimes don't begin to understand. Don't know whether you prefer the Borda count over Bucklin voting, the Condorcet method, Single Non Transferable Voting (affectionately known as SNTV), the Gallagher Index, the Sainte Laguë or d'Hondt methods (or perhaps you are all about the cloneproof Schwartz sequential dropping method, instead)? No worries, neither does just about anybody else. This confusion is not a good attribute for an electoral system to possess, but there are many other factors to consider as well, and politics are frequently experimenting trying to find the best system (none are perfect).

The question of electoral system choice may seem mundane in the extreme, but the consequences are enormous. Arguably, one of the factors which brought the Nazis to power was the flawed electoral system of the Weimar Republic, Germany's

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first (and, obviously, tragically failed) experiment with democracy. But even if a given system doesn't crash that badly, another of the consequences to the choice of electoral systems – and one which is highly relevant to the present discussion – is the number of viable political parties which they tend to produce.

All the multiple variations of electoral systems can be boiled down to essentially two types, plus a third and increasingly popular form, which is simply a hybrid of the first two. One of the two types is known as proportional representation (PR). Among other attributes, it can have a satisfying simplicity to it and, more importantly for our purposes, it tends to encourage the existence of multiple parties that are at least moderately prominent in a given system. That is because the basic principle, as the name implies, is that each party is awarded a number of legislators in parliament that is proportional to the vote it receives in a single polity-wide election. Therefore, even a small party which could only garner, say, six percent of the vote would nevertheless gain representation in the legislature. In fact, it would have six percent of the seats, which would be likely to mean, depending on the size of the body, more than thirty representatives (most lower houses of parliament – the ones with the most power – seem to be about 500-700 members in size). And, since there can be a certain (virtuous or vicious) cyclical quality to the growth or demise of political parties – such that having representation in parliament makes it easier to gain more of the same, and not having it makes it harder – this system is good news for small parties.

But there are also certain prominent downsides to PR, as well. First, progressives should remember that it wouldn't only be lefty parties benefitting from this system in America. Where PR produces Green parties in parliament, it also produces the National Front. Second, so many parties usually means the necessity of coalitions to form governments, and that often means instability – coalitions break apart, and governments fall in-between elections, sometimes frequently. Too much instability and enter the Nazis, stage right. And, on top of all this, even PR systems have a tendency to produce two major parties alternating in government (usually in coalition with one or more smaller ones), anyhow, which somewhat defeats the purpose if our goal is get a third party to govern, not that America is anywhere remotely near converting to PR, anyhow. No one is even talking about it.

The main alternative electoral system to PR doesn't tend to suffer from these maladies, but also doesn't typically produce many small parties in government. This is the district model, and the way it works is to divide the polity into geographical districts and hold simultaneous elections in each. There are many variations possible on how to identify a winner from those separate mini-elections, but in the United States we use a plurality criterion. Do you have one more vote than anyone else in your dis-

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trict (even if you have far less than a majority, as would likely be the case in a district with multiple candidates)? Congratulations. You have a plurality, and you're going to Congress.

It's easy to see why such a system is hard on third parties. Let's say there was a prominent third party in the United States – I'll use my buddies the Greens, since they were kind enough to name their party after me! – and they won perhaps twenty-five percent of the vote nationwide, in a Congressional election cycle. A very respectable showing, no? But, of course, there is no national election, per se – only a bunch of simultaneous district contests (435 for the House representatives, every two years). Nevertheless, for the sake of exposition, let's say that the Greens got 25 percent of the vote in every district. Let's also say that in half the districts the Democrats get 40 percent of the vote to the Republicans' 35 percent, and vice-versa in the other half. In a PR system, the Greens would be awarded 25 percent of the seats in the House for this showing. Under the district model, however, such as is practiced in the United States, their twenty-five percent of the votes translates into precisely zero seats in Congress (arguably disenfranchising one-fourth of the electorate).

(By the way, the presidential election works essentially the same way, and would even were we to eliminate the Electoral College. You can't readily split the presidency like you can a parliament, so only one person can claim the prize, leaving voters for all the other candidates holding the bag, even if these losing voters represent a majority in total – as was the case, for example, in 1992, when Clinton won the presidency with only 43 percent of the popular vote.)

What does all the foregoing discussion ultimately mean? The bottom line here is this: One, we're not likely to change electoral systems in America any time soon. Two, unless we do, it will continue to be enormously difficult for any third party to gain enough traction to achieve viability, let alone to govern. Three, even if we did opt for PR, there are serious downsides to that system as well (a hybrid seems to be the best alternative, in which half of the legislature is chosen using the district model, and the other half using PR – Germany, Italy and other democracies employ this method), not least of which would be the concurrent rise of some nasty gangs of parliamentary thugs on the rabid right who could make Cheney's little GOP horror show seem tame by comparison. And, Four, even though it would likely provide representation in Congress, PR would still probably not bring a third party to power, except possibly as a junior partner in some sort of coalition government. Such a party would chronically occupy the role of a small fry swimming among big sharks, though it might have some improved chance over decades' time to rise to greater prominence.

In short, for reasons involving ideological diversity, electoral mechanics and more,

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the third party path is not the solution to the present crisis of democracy in America, especially from the perspective of forwarding the progressive agenda.

If you're dubious about the above theoretical analysis, feel free to try on the empirical one instead – it's even more grim. Here are two statistics that more or less say it all. There are 535 members of Congress in America. Guess how many come from a third party. The answer is zero. Not a single one. Doesn't that suggest rather infertile ground for such a plant to take root? But if you're still not convinced, how about this, then: When was the last time the United States experienced the reshuffling of the party structure such that a new party rose to the level of sustained viability? The answer is about 160 years ago, with the birth of the Republican Party. That, in a country which has only had political parties for about 200 years. In other words, this country has had two primary parties vying for power for almost its entire existence, and the last time even the name of one of those changed (but not the number of them, which has essentially never changed) was 4/5's of our history ago. I, for one, would argue that the ground for our multiparty plant has gone from infertile to downright toxic.

But here's where the good news comes in. If the above description sounds like rather an inconceivable degree of stability for a political system spanning that many decades and myriad crises, that's because it is. And it is this observation that brings us closer to the true remedy for our problems. How could such a rigid two-party system – of the same two parties, no less – survive against all the powerful changes, strains and pressures of the last century and a half? And these are considerable. Such a laundry list would have to include, minimally, the Civil War, Reconstruction, industrialization, immigration, expansion, imperialism, civil rights movements for minorities, women and gays, the national rise to global prominence, the Cold War, about seven major hot wars and two impeached presidents, just to get started. Why the incredible stability of the party system, then? The answer is that the American political system doesn't tend to adopt new third parties, and it doesn't implode from the pressures of frustrated change, because what it does instead is to accommodate various political aspirations within the malleable shells of the existing parties.

A look at either one of them amply demonstrates the point. The Republican Party was born as essentially the political vehicle for the anti-slavery movement, when the existing parties failed to provide an outlet for that rising sentiment. Could today's regressive GOP amalgamation of robber-barons, religious troglodyte foot-soldiers and nearly outright racists possibly look any different from the party of Abe Lincoln? Indeed, the GOP of today would have been reactionary even in Lincoln's time. So what happened? How could the party of emancipation become the party of kleptocracy? What happened was that the robber-barons stole it and morphed it, growing

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increasingly clever over time as to how to employ nationalism, jingoism, imperialism, racism, sexism, external bogeymen, general fear and cultural backwardness in order to line up sufficient votes, augmenting those of the richest two percent of the country, necessary to form a viable party. The examples of this are as endless as they are depressing, running from red scares to race-baiting and back again. More contemporaneously, suffice it to say that not for nothing did Karl Rove arrange to place gay marriage initiatives on the ballot in eleven states for election day 2004. (My personal fantasy is to find every fool who voted for one of those but now hates Bush and shake them vigorously by the shoulders, yelling in their faces, “Are you happy now? Isn’t it great that there won’t be any gay marriages in our crumbling excuse for a country?”)

Ahem. Uh, where was I? (Please stop me before I fantasize again.) Ah, yes – morphing parties. Similar to the GOP experience, it was not so long ago that the main component of the Democratic Party was the Solid South of white voters below the Mason-Dixon line. It was FDR who turned the party into a much broader coalition that came to include the working class, union members, Jews, Catholics, intellectuals, liberals, urban-dwellers, immigrant communities and more, as well as the white South. It was LBJ (fully knowingly, and with lots of help from the likes of Nixon, Reagan, Atwater, Rove, Bush I, Bush II and the rest) who alienated white racists, both North and South, by pursuing various civil rights agendas, principally concerning race.

In short, both parties look a lot different today than they once did, and that happened largely through the efforts of activists seeking to achieve precisely that end. And this, it seems to me, remains the only viable solution for the progressive community today – not a continuing hopeless quest for a prominent third party that has a very low probability of materializing, especially given the institutional and ideological obstacles described above.

What progressives need to do today is what regressives began doing forty years ago. We need to seize the party closest to our politics and take control of it, marginalizing DLC types like Clinton or Lieberman into irrelevance, just like the old Gerry Ford centrist wing of the Republican Party was shoved aside by the radical right. We must become the parasites that infect the host until we eventually take it over completely.

It would be lovely if there was an alternative, but to my mind the above concepts and historical precedent amply demonstrate the improbability of a third party rising to power. Moreover, even if one did eventually arise, in the meantime we continue to risk producing the Nader 2000 effect – such that following our best instincts splits the left-of-regressive vote and succeeds only in empowering the worst alternatives.

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(For example, imagine a race in 2008 between Clinton and Giuliani, with Gore running as the nominee of the Green Party. Clinton and Gore would collectively receive far more votes than would Giuliani, but Giuliani would be the next president, even without the Electoral College effect.)

And let's not kid ourselves, way too many Americans presently worry if the Democratic Party is too liberal to govern, not whether it can become progressive enough. A large part of that has to do with the complete collapse over the last decades of the progressive message and especially the Party, in the arena of public debate. The American public is going to have to be deprogrammed and reprogrammed after decades of regressive Moonyism (including by the Moonies themselves). That is a separate issue, albeit one which is much better addressed by an ideology that has the benefit of a solid institutional platform from which to operate. But the point is that a third party to the left of the Democrats would not at present be anything like an easy sell. Far easier to win by turning one of the only two alternatives available to voters into a progressive party (especially when the other one has become reprehensible in the extreme).

All of which leaves two questions. First, can the Democratic Party serve that function, or is it hopelessly lost, a permanent captive to its corporate masters? I know of no evidence whatsoever that Paul Wellstone or Bernie Sanders (an independent who caucuses with the Democrats and an avowed socialist, for chrissakes) have been ostracized by party elites or subjected to attempts made either to force a change to their politics or to drum them out of the party. Ditto Barney Frank, Dennis Kucinich, Maxine Waters, John Conyers (or, should I say, the Congressman formerly known as John Conyers), or Henry Waxman. Howard Dean was something of a threat to the status quo party hacks in 2004, it's true, but my guess is that that was mostly because it wasn't yet hip at that time to be anti-war, and they feared that a Dean candidacy would take down the whole party with it (which, no doubt, must be why they brought in a real fighter like John Kerry to go up against Rove and the GOP). Anyhow, nowadays Dean is chairing the damn thing, so their resistance to him can't have been that intense.

All of which suggests to me that the party is ours for the taking if we want it. Given enough Wellstones, we can own this thing and shape it into a force for true progressive change. And if you still require additional evidence that it can be done, just remember that it has been done – twice already (or even three times if we count some of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy ideas). Both the New Deal in the Thirties and then the Great Society in the Sixties were periods of substantial and meaningful progressive flowering in American government, even if they weren't ultimately

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everything we might have wanted them to become (and let's not forget that we are dealing here with the most politically backwards populace amongst all the Western democracies). Moreover, and again following on those models, the ascension of a relatively progressive president such as perhaps Al Gore could help expedite this process from the top down.

But then comes the second question, could a progressive Democratic Party win? Again, it seems to me that both history, contemporary conditions and loads of polling data provide a pretty compelling affirmative answer. That it has happened twice suggests that it is certainly possible. That polling data consistently demonstrate the public tending to favor progressive positions on almost every issue put before them, despite decades of unanswered regressive brainwashing, is further argument that this is possible. Finally, Americans are growing increasingly anxious today as their prosperity, their empire, and their sense of security are diminishing right before their very eyes. These conditions are likely to grow more, not less, acute, particularly as Baby Boomers transition from being net contributors to the welfare state system back to being net recipients (never underestimate the depth or the power of Boomer selfishness!).

Such insecurity-inducing scenarios radicalize politics, if that's not too strong a term, pushing the electorate either to the right or the left. One of those alternatives has just recently been tried. Its chief exemplar now has Watergate-level job approval ratings, which will only get considerably worse in the ensuing months. It is true that the public could theoretically be persuaded to turn further still to the right, but you don't much hear those voices out there clamoring for that direction amongst the political class. Even the few remaining droolers like Bill Kristol who advocate for something idiotic like bringing Bushism to Iran now that it has demonstrated its wonderful virtues in Iraq and Afghanistan are increasingly being sneered at like the laughable but still dangerous morons they are. The right-wing experiment in American politics is a complete and utter failure, of course, but more importantly it is increasingly recognized as such. It has totally come a cropper in terms of public opinion. This is 1932 all over again. No more Hoover, no more Bush. The country began its retreat from this horror show in 2006, and would have started even earlier had not John Kerry been such an abysmal presidential candidate. It is now turning decisively to an alternative somewhere to the left of the current GOP, as it more or less must. The only question (further national security 'emergencies' aside, of course), is what will be there for it to turn to, and how far down that path we go from here.

Personally, I don't give a damn about the Democratic Party (which for decades has

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almost never failed to disappoint anyone possessing any progressive expectations for it), or any other party. In fact, I share many of the concerns about the general pernicious effects of partisanship that the Founders held – though I also recognize that, as a practical matter, it's pretty hard to envision doing national politics in a polity of 300 million people (and politically lazy ones, at that) without the organizing benefits and programmatic shorthand that parties bring to the table. While I don't care about parties, what I do care about are policies. Do we have healthcare, or not? Do we rescue people after a hurricane and flood devastate their city, or not? Do we act like a predatory empire, or not? If the Democrats can deliver the right policies, then fine. If we need the Greens to do the job instead, hey, that's groovy too. If we have to import SWAPO from southern Africa to get it done, then whatever. Heck, I'd even vote Republican (gulp) if they somehow miraculously managed to stumble into some good politics (though that's probably about as likely as Dick Cheney volunteering to become a soldier). I could care less about the label and the organization, as long as it delivers progressive policies for the country.

As a practical matter, though, a third party – let alone a viable leftist third party – is extremely unlikely to develop for all the theoretical and historical reasons outlined above. Our mission, therefore, should be to capture the Democratic Party and lead it toward a series of increasingly progressive (and already publicly popular) legislative accomplishments, starting with ending the war and providing universal national healthcare coverage. It won't be that hard to do, and we can thank the Dark Side in part for creating the best conditions in half a century for this opportunity (just the same, though, I think I'll pass on sending a nice note of gratitude to Mr. Rove). After all, it's not exactly like avoiding unnecessary wars, providing healthcare and quality education for all, pursuing economic justice, or saving our little planetary spaceship from the threat of global warming are such radical ideas that would be hard to sell.

I share the sentiment of many in the progressive community that the Democratic Party is, with a few notable exceptions, a cesspool of ambitious sell-outs, ready to mortgage any policy position or principle in service to their own petty personal gratifications. It would be wonderful, for that reason, if we could just nuke the thing and move on to something else. Wonderful, but not possible.

Fortunately, there is another alternative. I say we hijack it instead.





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