

Thoughts on the National Elections, California Elections, and Strategic Implications Going Forward

By Anthony Thigpenn 11/25/16

All of us in the progressive movement are still reeling from the results of the November 8 elections, and trying to figure out what it means for our work and the way forward. There have been many articles, discussions, and gatherings on this topic, and many more are planned in the coming weeks. As I have been thinking about the causes of the loss to Trump and what the new environment means for our work and the way forward, I found it useful to write down what we think we know about the causes and implications as a way to get beyond reaction to the results and think more strategically. I share the below in that spirit.

WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT THE RESULTS OF THE NATIONAL ELECTION

While the final results of the national election turnout is still being tallied, and there are differing analysis on why Trump won, the following eight factors that seem increasingly clear to me:

1. Trump won by a combination of consolidating much of the white vote (particularly white non-college educated voters), AND key segments of the “Obama coalition vote” (voters of color and young people) not turning out at the needed 2012 levels.
2. Trump’s consolidation of the white vote appears to be a combination of:
 - Using racism, misogyny, and various forms of xenophobia to energize a segment of the population that embraces a set of values and a worldview that has been the counterpoint to organizing for justice since the beginning of this country. They include: Exclusion and Intolerance -- Racism, White Supremacy & Privilege -- Sexism and Misogyny - - Heteronormativity and Homophobia -- Acceptance of Inequality (Social Darwinism) – Susceptibility to Demagoguery.
 - Tapping into economic fear and anxiety particularly among white non-college educated voters, but also among other social segments as well. There is a right-wing expression of this that was a key part of Trump’s base, and also a left-wing expression galvanized by the Sanders campaign. It’s unclear how much of the Sanders’ base went to Clinton, Trump, or did not vote.
 - Tapping into anger, frustration, and alienation from many societal institutions (government, political parties, the media, etc.). Here there is also right-wing and left-wing expressions.
 - Trump’s hardcore base is driven by the first bullet above. However his ability to win predominately white counties that Obama won in 2012 seem to be driven by the second and third bullets. I believe this also explains why he won more of the people of color vote than Romney.
3. The Trump victory was not the result of some massive new wave or major increase in the turnout of white voters. **Trump and his allies had an explicit strategy to win by shrinking the electorate.** This included making the election so ugly and distasteful that a significant number of Obama voters would sit the election out, and overt voter suppression measures in key states (voter ID laws, reducing the number of poll locations, shortening early voter time periods, etc.). We should also remember that it appears that only 58.6% of eligible voters voted, meaning that 41.4% did not participate in the election. That’s over 90 million people eligible to vote but didn’t.
4. There were major weaknesses and missteps on the part of the Clinton campaign:
 - The candidate did not inspire or motivate key segments of the Obama vote to turn out at needed levels. There is much that has been written about this that I won’t take the time to repeat here. The main point being the candidate does matter.

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- There were a number of Clinton self-inflicted wounds (the email server, Clinton Foundation, huge speaking fees to wall street bankers to name a few).
 - Key states in the “blue wall” were taken for granted and seriously neglected. Michigan and Wisconsin stand out. Even with Trump winning predominately white counties in those states that Obama won in 2012, if Detroit and Milwaukee had turned out at 2012 levels Clinton would have won those states.
 - The “invading army¹” approach to voter turnout which was the model used in this, and most, presidential election campaigns has major limitations. While I am a proponent of using contemporary analytics to understand and motivate target voters, it cannot replace community organizing and movement-building for building and exercising power which voter turnout should be an expression of. More on this in point 7 below.
5. FBI director Comey’s late intervention with the letter sent to Congress regarding the discovery of new emails had an impact. There is some debate on how much of an impact, but most exit polls showed late deciding voters breaking for Trump.
 6. We leftist and progressives also bear some responsibility in that we clearly did not do an adequate job of communicating the potential devastating impact of a Trump victory to segments of our base, particularly young people and voters of color who are rightly angry, frustration, and alienation from many societal institutions.
 7. The traditional approach of seeing elections as an event to mobilize around versus a milestone in movement-building and organizing power around a set of values, a worldview, and a compelling policy agenda is, in my view, a major factor in the 2016 defeat.
 - Trump did not create the reactionary movement he claims to lead, he opportunistically took advantage of it. In many ways this movement took its current form in reaction to the 2008 election of Obama with the formation of the Tea Party movement. It was driven by a fear of the loss of white privilege and a mix of reactionary economic and social policy goals (small government, tax cuts, “free enterprise”, anti-choice, heteronormativity, cultural hegemony to name a few). It utilized multiple forms of exercising power (mass demonstrations, local organizing, building and exercising electoral power).
 - There have been expressions of mass progressive movement: the immigration mass mobilizations in the mid-2000s, Occupy Wall Street, Obama’s 2008 election, Black Lives Matter, the Bernie Sanders campaign. However with the exception of Obama 2008 and the Sanders campaign these movements did not (or have not) made the transition to organizing for power. In the case of Obama 2008 and Sanders 2016 these movement moments were driven around charismatic candidates, not a coherent organized political movement such as the Tea Party.
 - In the absence of a charismatic candidate in 2016 the approach to turning out base voters was in my view the invading army approach based on what was learned from the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns. There is not the space in this thoughts piece to do a thorough critique of this approach. I would just counter pose the invading army approach to an approach that utilizes organizations and grassroots leaders indigenous to target communities who work year-round to build a base of voters who can be turned out during an election as a milestone in organizing power as part of a broader movement. Many call this integrated voter engagement.
 8. The pervading role of sexism in the perception and treatment of Clinton.

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¹ By invading army approach is meant the practice of hiring and deploying large numbers of field organizers from outside a target community and recruiting and deploying large numbers of activists and volunteers also from outside a community to do the voter contact and turnout work.

Even with all of the above the election was very, very close. A percentage point or two gained our way in key swing states from factors 4 – 8 would have resulted in a difference election outcome. And as of this writing on November 25 Clinton has 2 million more votes than Trump in the popular vote, with that gap growing. This of course points to the serious structural problem with US democracy known as the Electoral College.

Given the above I draw the following developing conclusions:

1. The election was not a massive wipeout, huge surge in white reactionary voters, and rejection of progressive values and policies (remember the 1980 Reagan victory where he had 489 Electoral College votes, won 44 states, and had an 8.5 million popular vote gap). The election confirmed that the country is still deeply divided between contending values, worldviews, and policies that has been going on since the founding of our country. I had thought we were further along in this epic battle. We are not, but we are not starting from scratch and everything we have done up to this moment has not been wrong.

- A. We have work to do in organizing and mobilizing our natural base² (vast majorities in communities of color, majorities of millennials, white liberals/progressives, significant sectors of women and the LGBTQ community) as an increasingly powerful political force. **The ultra-right has developed clearly identifiable political forces based on a conjoined worldview and policy agenda (i.e. the Tea Party, Evangelical Right) independent of any political party. The progressive movement has yet to do the same.**

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- B. There is also work to do challenging racism among the white working/middle class, and articulating a narrative and policy agenda that can win over significant segments (in my view some are a lost cause). Both challenging racism and articulating a compelling narrative/policy agenda are necessary to win over significant sections of the white working/middle class. **To try to ignore racism/issues of justice in dealing with the white working/middle and put forward some sort of pure economic populous scheme would be to repeat seriously flawed strategies of the past.**

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2. Be that as it may be, the election results are a devastating setback in our march toward a more just and humane world, and millions will be hurt very badly. This does requires us to think differently about our work and the way forward. Not because we are way behind in the battle or everything we have done has been wrong. But because reactionary forces now control all three branches of government and this power equation threatens to undo as much as 75 years of progress made by the historical forces we are a part of. I believe **this distinction between a panicked reaction questioning everything progressive forces have achieved and a sober assessment of the new power equation we are operating in is an important one in figuring out effective strategies going forward.**

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² Being clearer on who our “natural base” is, why, and its size in terms of the contending forces in the US is important. By natural base I mean those segments of society who have an objective self-interest in a society based on the values of justice, equality, inclusion, tolerance, and freedom as modified by the first four values.

3. The mounting of determined and fierce resistance to the federal policies we know are coming is absolutely essential, but to make resistance our sole or predominant call would be a strategic mistake. We must resist, but to just resist is to accept our status as “the loyal opposition” for the foreseeable future. It seems imperative that we develop plans for resistance in conjunction with serious power-building strategies based on points 1A and 1B above.

WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT THE RESULTS OF THE CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS

The results of the election here in California confirmed that we are a solidly “blue³” state, significantly different than the political dynamics going on in the country at large.

- Many of us believe that California represents one potential future for the country in terms of changing demographics, organizing for power, pursuing a set of values and a worldview based on inclusion – tolerance – and justice, and advancing a progressive policy agenda.
- We also don’t believe that this is a result of demographics being destiny.
- We remember the dark days of the 90’s when California was considered a red state exporting reactionary narratives and policies across the country. We were very familiar with the feelings of major defeats.
- We remember just 13 years ago the election of a celebrity governor and his destructive policies for the state.
- We remember the soul searching among labor, community, and progressive funder leaders that resulted in long-term power-building strategies.
- We also have looked at Texas, a state with somewhat similar demographic composition and trends, as an alternative potential future for the country (although progressive leaders in Texas are working to change that).

A detailed analysis of the California elections will be done elsewhere, however there are several things worth noting:

- ◆ With a deluge of 17 ballot propositions, many thought that voters would be so confused, or turned off, that they would vote No on everything. Instead, with a few exceptions, most progressive ballot measures won. Significantly voters approved extending increased taxes on the very wealthy, a major increase in taxes on cigarettes (which Tobacco industry spent \$71 million to defeat and had been defeated several times before), and another significant step in criminal justice reform.
- ◆ Though we will have to wait for all the ballots to be counted and the who actually voted data to become available, exit poll data indicates that the percent of the California electorate that was white dropped to an historic low of around 56%. Most pre-election modelling had the white share of the likely voters being around 60%.
- ◆ There were two large get-out-the vote field programs for the November elections focused on turning out new and infrequent voters.
 - The Million Voters Project Action Fund, a strategic collaboration of six statewide community networks, engaged 1,059,038 target voters over the course of 2016 including: 154,899 who signed petitions to qualify 3 progressive ballot measures for November, 198,635 target voters engaged in the June Primary, 83,454 new voters registered between July and October, and 658,504 engaged in its November get-out-the-vote program. **Over 6,000 grassroots leaders participated in these efforts.**

*There is great confidence that the increase in the turnout of voters of color, young voters, and low-income voters, and the winning of the many progressive ballot measures, were greatly influenced by these **voter engagement efforts which are the result of years of relationship-building and strategic collaborations.***

³ I use the terms “blue” and “red” not in the partisan context of Democratic vs Republican parties, but as shorthand for the battle between progressive values/worldviews/policies vs ultra-right/reactionary values/worldviews/policies

- The Proposition 55 campaign (to extend the increased income tax on the top 2% won in 2012) ran a field program that included 9 unions, the Million Voters Project Action Fund groups, and its own large field program. **1.5 million target voters were contacted through this effort.**

Again we'll have to wait for the who voted data to determine the actual impact of these efforts, but there is great confidence that the increase in the turnout of voters of color, young voters, and low-income voters, and the winning of the many progressive ballot measures, were greatly influenced by these voter engagement efforts which are the result of years of relationship-building and strategic collaborations.

- ◆ Democrats are likely to have super majorities in both houses of the state legislature.
- ◆ Clinton winning the popular vote, and by a large margin, is significantly due to the California vote.

A more detailed analysis of why these were the results in California given what happened in the national elections is needed, but I would point to a few that I believe are noteworthy:

- ◆ There has been a concerted effort to build progressive infrastructure in California over the last 20 years. This has included efforts by organized labor, multiple community-based efforts, efforts by progressive academics/research and analysis institutions, and progressive funders. This infrastructure has been built at both local and state levels.
- ◆ These efforts in turn have given rise to an increasing number of progressive elected officials at local, state, and federal levels, particularly people of color and women.
- ◆ There has also been a self-conscious, long-term effort to change the composition of the California electorate beyond any natural demographic trends.

There are notes of caution for California progressives:

- Major corporate and right-wing forces have adapted their strategies and are now developing and supporting candidates not based on the Democrat vs Republican labels but instead based on promoting a "business friendly" agenda which challenges the progress on economic, social, and environmental/climate justice issues.
- While significant, the ballot propositions victories have been too incremental when compare to the scale of needed change on issues of poverty, income inequality, health care, criminal justice, education, and the environment. The number of people living in poverty is still the highest in the nation, income inequality continues to grow, and we have still built more prisons than colleges.
- California is not an island. The national policies we know are coming will have severe impacts in California on immigration, health care, tax policies, safety net programs, the environment, education, criminal justice reform.

Imperatives for California progressives include developing strategies to: 1) protect the gains that have been won, 2) stay on the offensive to win what's really needed, and 3) join with others across the country to reverse the reactionary consolidation of power over the next several years.

THOUGHTS ON STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATIONAL ELECTION RESULTS

I, like most of us, am still digesting the implications of the election results, so the following thoughts on strategic implications are tentative and incomplete.

1. Given that the battles around federal policies (in at least eight critical areas: immigration, healthcare, environment / climate change, tax policies, safety net programs, education, criminal justice, economic policies and workers' rights) will be very defensive (and hard to win in the short term), **the role of local and state work has become much more strategically important** for several reasons:
 - It is where, in many places, we can **stay on the offensive with local and state policies being a counterweight to the reactionary policies coming down at the national level.** For California this means defending the progress

that has been made, and continuing to push the envelope on winning a progressive agenda in these eight critical areas. In less blue states the battlefronts may offensively be at the local and county levels, with defensive fights at the state level.

- **Local and State governments can exercise formal political and legal power against reactionary federal policies.** Already many local and state elected representatives are saying the right things in terms of fighting back, but when the threats come to cut off federal funding they will need support, and sometimes pressure, to hold firm. We need renewed research on what powers local and state governments can exercise to challenge and counter reactionary federal policies.
 - **The building of the kind of identifiable, organized progressive political force capable of countering the ultra-right, and ultimately defeating it, can only happen from the bottom up, not from the top down.** In my view this means building from local efforts to state-based networks and strategic collaborations that can shift the national terrain. More on this in point below.
2. **We should resist the temptation to fall back into single issue silos.** There is no one single issue that can build the kind of movement and amass the level of power we need to regain the initiative. And we know there are organic intersections between the major issues: immigration reform and criminal justice – healthcare, safety net programs, and tax policies – tax policies, education, and jobs – jobs, the environment, and climate change. We have a pretty clear idea of the sequencing of the policy assaults to come, and there will be a need for specific fights on each assault. But what seems **equally needed (and it could be argued more needed) is broad, multi-issue, united fronts (which I term “strategic collaborations”)** focused on organizing the power of key social forces at the scale needed to repel the assaults, regain the initiative, and ultimately prevail in winning a progressive agenda.
3. **We need plans for resistance but they need to be made in conjunction with serious power-building strategies.** Our impulse will be to go into opposition and campaign mode. Opposition and campaigns are needed. But, again in my view, a series of campaigns will not get us where we need to go. While campaigns are being planned and launched we need to also create the space to develop multi-year power-building strategies based on the last sentence of point 2 above. A few thoughts on what serious power-building strategies should include:
- ◆ For many of us the first assaults on immigration is not just political but personal. We have staff, family members, grassroots leaders, and significant segments of our base who are directly threatened. We need to develop specific, concrete plans for protecting our own. **This seems tactical, but if significant numbers of our most vital staff, leaders, and base are lost our movement will be significantly weakened.**
 - ◆ Developing strategies that **resolve the false counter posing of protest and mass actions to electoral organizing and building political power.** This is particularly true as we should be supporting the emerging activism of new young activists and leaders. And practically speaking to prevail in the upcoming battles we will need to build and utilize multiple forms of power. If significant sectors of our movement spend their time arguing over protest vs voting our power will be greatly diminished. As an example we should think about how we use the voter engagement base that has been built over several years and the civic engagement infrastructure to exercise power in multiple forms (i.e. not just voting).
 - ◆ **Systematic, bottom/up organizing, base-building, and mobilization** of our natural base (as defined on page 3) and segments of the white working/middle class around a clearly articulated worldview and policy agenda. As indicated above this organizing and mobilization should include the multiple forms of exercising power.
 - ◆ **Building strategic collaborations around power-building, greater configurations of power, and a strategic agenda – not just campaigns.** The community organizing world has made great progress over the past 20 years or so in getting past the empire-building theory of change driven by campaigns (the idea that one organization or network could become powerful enough to win whatever is needed thru a series of tactical campaigns, and all other efforts were seen as competitors). In its place a movement-building approach has emerged which centered on

developing powerful base-building organizations but in the context of building broader strategic collaborations which in turn build greater configurations of power around a strategic agenda. There is a danger that under the pressure of this moment there is a reversion back to the old theory of change as various organizations and/or networks compete for resources, organizing space, credit.

- ◆ **Strategic collaborations grounded in a power analysis that include:** the driving economic and social factors shaping the landscape, the major contending forces, the key battles that will be fulcrums or turning points, and a clear strategic agenda and multi-year power building plan with essential milestones.

4. Finally a few thoughts on the national scene. There are a lot of people smarter than me and more knowledgeable about the national scene in reaction to the elections. But let me share what I see (for the purposes of this thoughts piece I am not including an analysis/critique of the U.S. democratic system or the Democratic Party):

- In the progressive landscape (using the term loosely to include organizations that more or less share a set of broad values including justice, equality, inclusion, tolerance, and freedom as modified by the first four values.) there are:
 1. Many, mainly DC-based, national advocacy organizations primarily (though not exclusively) focused on a single issue, national think tanks/research institutes, national communications and social media groups.
 2. At least 5 to 6 national networks composed of community organizing and/or electoral organizing affiliates.
 3. Serious state-based long-term electoral/power-building organizing efforts in 8 to 10 states that I know of. Some affiliate with national networks, some not.
 4. There are of course national unions with affiliates across the country that have millions of members.
 5. There are a number of large & small progressive funders and funder associations (this includes major liberal donors).
 6. There are many issue/constituency-specific movement organizations and networks that have a national presence (immigrant, criminal justice, the environment, youth organizing, etc.).
 7. There are numerous progressive newspapers, magazines, television and radio shows, blogs
 8. There are thousands of progressive elected officials at every level across the country.
- This is a significant collection of organized progressive social and economic forces, and are part of the progressive history of this country that has move it in the direction of those broad progressive values. All feel they are doing important work, some feel their approach or model is THE answer to what we need as a progressive movement.
- There has been an ebb and flow in the epic battle between the forces pursuing these progressive values and the forces that embrace the reactionary worldview and set of values listed on page 1. For many the election of President Obama in 2008, and the coalition of social forces that drove that election, seemed to indicate that the tide had permanently turned in favor of progressive values. A Clinton victory this year would not have been another major step in the progressive march, but more a consolidation or affirmation of the turning of the tide, with much work still to be done.
- However the sweeping capture of national power (all three branches of government) by reactionary forces could be more than just a temporary setback in the epic battle (imagine if Lincoln had lose the 1860 election).
 - There will be a concerted effort to rollback or eliminate progressive gains over the last 50 to 75 years on civil rights, labor rights, the environment, the safety net, tax policies, the overall role of government, etc.
 - The Supreme Court could have a reactionary majority for at least a generation.
 - The undemocratic redistricting of 2010 could be repeated in 2020 making it virtually impossible to win a progressive majority in the House of Representatives.
 - Racial division and conflict could escalate to levels not seen since the 60's.

- This requires progressive forces (the 8 listed above and those not listed) do something dramatically different. I am not idealistic enough to think that all progressive forces can come together in a united kumbaya moment. However I do think that there needs to be a critical mass of progressives forces that create a new center of gravity in responding to this moment based on several key strategic implications summarized above:
 - Progressive forces must mount a fierce resistance. But just being reactive, with a sole focus on resistance and immediate campaigns (particularly in single-issue silos) will not be a sufficient response. There needs to be systematic development of a multi-year power-building strategy, with local and state formations as the critical building blocks. In another thought piece I will lay out the arguments why local/state efforts must be the building blocks.
 - The ultra-right operates based on a conjoined (not unified) worldview, policy agenda, and narrative – not a series of campaigns. They learned the power of this sort of ideological coherence from progressive movements of the past. A critical mass of progressive forces need to develop our coherent alternative.
 - There needs to be new, more powerful strategic collaborations. But these collaborations cannot be restricted to, or in my view, driven from the top down by meetings of leaders of national groups and formations. They must include a critical mass of leadership from people of color, women, and young people. And they should have at their center the leaders of the substantive electoral/power-building state-based efforts around the country.