

CHAPTER TWO



An Historic Opportunity for Political Realignment

EMERGING FROM OUR DEFENSIVE CROUCH

Since the mid-1970s, American Progressives have been on the ideological defensive. For 70% of the years since 1968, America has had a Republican president. Even during the Clinton years, conservatives controlled the broad value frame for the nation's political debate.

The Clinton presidency provided major pushback and achieved important successes—but only in the face of the dominant conservative values.

When Clinton was President, at least there were two teams on the ideological field. But even then, Progressives always played the role of the underdog. By completely consolidating power from 2000 to 2006, Republicans had virtual free rein to implement their neocon foreign policies and trickle-down economics.

As a result, most Americans know a lot more about what Progressives are against, than what we are for. The polling confirms that twice as many people say they know what conservatives stand for than what Progressives stand for.

It's no wonder. For the twelve years before the Midterm Elections, Progressives were forced to spend most of our time running campaigns to stop right-wing assaults. Republicans had the only team at bat. Progressives played nothing but defense.

Finally, in the 2006 Midterm Elections, Progressives began to emerge from our defensive crouch.

We won a major battle with the right.

Many American voters rejected the war in Iraq, trickle-down economics, the incompetence of the response to Hurricane Katrina and the culture of corruption.

They responded to the message: Had enough? *Vote Democratic.*

But most Americans voted *against* conservatives, not *for* Progressives. That was enough in the 2006 Midterms. To fundamentally realign politics over the long haul, Americans need to know—and come to believe in—what we are for, not just what we are against.

THE TWO COMPONENTS OF POLITICAL REALIGNMENT

Real long-term political realignment has two components:

- Democrats must forge a solid working majority in the electorate that can translate into repeated electoral victories—especially at the Federal level.
- Progressives need to change the fundamental frame for political and economic debate. We must re-establish the dominance of progressive values in mainstream political and economic dialogue and project a clear, compelling, progressive vision for the future of America and all of human society.

Our success at achieving either of these two goals will heavily influence our ability to achieve the other. The new Democratic control of Congress greatly enhances our ability to reframe political debate.

But it is equally true that by proudly reasserting our progressive values we greatly increase our chances of repeated electoral victory.

What's needed in this regard is not just a list of progressive policies and programs—what is needed is a reassertion of our *fundamental values*.

We have to provide a clear contrast to the right's belief in unbridled pursuit of individual interest with our commitment to the common good; selfishness versus commitment to others; division versus unity; fear versus hope; that we're all in this together, not "all in this alone."

In a period of realignment—when political allegiances are in flux—we need to give people something to *believe in*. We have to redefine "common sense." And we need to place the political dialogue in its historic frame. We have to give the voters a sense of important historical consequences, a sense that we are at a crossroads in history, and a sense of the challenges we face and the possibilities we might realize.

In fact today human society is passing through a gauntlet where we will determine if our values and our political structures can keep pace with our exploding technological power. We entered that gauntlet, about 60 years ago, when we first became capable of destroying the planet and changing our own climate. The next several generations will determine if we pass through and create a truly democratic, sustainable society of unparalleled possibility—or, like our cousins the Neanderthals, become evolutionary dead ends. Those are high stakes.

WHEN YOU HAVE THEM ON THE RUN— THAT'S THE TIME TO CHASE THEM

After his momentous defeat at Gettysburg on July 4, 1863, Confederate General Robert E. Lee retreated toward the Potomac River and the relative

safety of the South. President Lincoln desperately wanted the Union general, George Meade, to pursue Lee and deliver a mortal blow to the remains of his army.

It rained heavily for several days after the Battle of Gettysburg. That made movements difficult for both armies—but it also flooded the Potomac.

By July 7, Lee was stalled waiting for the Potomac's water to recede. But much to Lincoln's distress, Meade was still in Pennsylvania.

By July 14, the river's level had dropped, and all of Lee's remaining army had escaped into Virginia. That afternoon, Lincoln wrote to Meade:

"My dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war."

"As it is the war will be prolonged indefinitely," Lincoln wrote. "Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it."

The letter went on to compare Meade to the cautious General George McClellan, who had previously refused to pursue the enemy.

Lee had his back against a swollen, impassable river and Meade had not moved to crush the retreating army of Confederates. As it turned out, his failure to pursue Lee permitted the South to continue the war for almost two more years.

Lincoln never sent that letter to Meade, assuming it would have caused Meade to resign. Lincoln had not yet made his critical decision to make Ulysses S. Grant the senior Union commander—a general who would pursue the Confederates *relentlessly*—all the way to Appomattox Courthouse.

When you have them on the run—that's the time to chase them.

Much like Gettysburg, the Democratic victory in the mid-term elections represents a major turning point in our war for progressive values. But, like Gettysburg, its significance will be determined by *how we follow up*.

THE 2006 VICTORY— BUILDING THE ELECTORAL FOUNDATION FOR REALIGNMENT

In 2004, Karl Rove claimed that he was on the verge of making the Republican Party a "permanent majority." Wrong. When "The Architect" as he was called, resigned his position at the White House in August of 2007, the Bush Presidency was in shambles.

In 2006, Democrats, led by Democratic Congressional Campaign

Committee Chair Rahm Emanuel and Democratic Senate Campaign Committee Chair Charles Schumer, mounted a major, successful counter-attack. We gave Republicans what President Bush himself referred to as “a thumpin’.”

For the first time since 1922, Democrats made major inroads without losing a single Democratic incumbent. In the 2006 Midterms Democrats picked up 30 House seats and 6 Senate seats. Fifty-eight percent of the total national Congressional vote went to Democrats, as did 55% of the Senate vote.

The Democratic House victory extended into the special election in Texas where former Congressman Ciro Rodriguez defeated Republican incumbent Henry Bonilla in a newly- drawn district that resulted from a court challenge to former Republican Leader Tom Delay’s redistricting of Texas.

The 2006 Democratic majority includes House seats that have been in Republican hands for decades. In the Northeast, voters that have increasingly supported Democrats in presidential races ousted a number of Republican “moderates.” In fact, New England now has only one Republican Member of the House. Republicans will have a hard time winning back those seats.

We took House seats in 11 districts where Kerry won less than 45% of the vote, 19 districts where Kerry won less than 50% and 4 seats where the Kerry margin was less than 3%.

WINNING EVERYWHERE

Democratic gains were spread throughout the country—five in the South and Border States, nine in the Midwest, as well as 11 in the East. Perhaps most significantly, we made gains in the West and Southwest—two in Arizona, one in Colorado and one in California. In the Senate, John Tester’s victory over Senator Conrad Burns in Montana was key.

The election also marked another first. This is the first time Democrats have held a majority in Congress without holding a majority in the South. In fact, the election isolated Republican strength increasingly in the South, rooted in its strong support by conservative Evangelicals.

But even in the South there were clear signs of a shift. The victory of challenger Jim Webb in the Virginia Senate race, Harold Ford’s narrow loss in Tennessee and newly elected Members of Congress John Yarmuth of Kentucky and Heath Schuler of North Carolina pointed the way to victory in Dixie.

Among suburbanites—who account for 47% of the electorate—Democratic candidates won 50% to 48%. That was a gain of 4% over 2004.

Among rural voters, Democrats ran almost even—48% to 52%. We won urban voters by a whopping 61%-37%. Democrats carried small towns 49% to 48%, small cities by 57% to 41% and large cities by 68% to 30%.

PROGRESS WITH EVERY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP

In the 2006 Midterms, self-identified Democrats voted for the Democratic candidate 93% of the time. We won 57% of Independents and 8% of Republicans. Our vote among Independents increased by 8% from 2004.

African-Americans continued to vote solidly for Democrats and support grew substantially among Hispanics (69%) and Asians (62%).

Republicans had made decent inroads with Hispanics in 2004 –Bush captured 40%. But the immigration battle brought Hispanics decisively back to the Democratic column in the Midterms. That was especially important in races like those in Phoenix, Tucson and Denver—all critical Democratic pickups.

In 2006 we made gains among white men and women and won all age groups—making 5% gains among the critical voters 18-29 and voters over 60.

OVERCOMING STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

The 2006 Democratic House victories were all the more impressive because of the structural barriers thrown up by Republicans through redistricting. Compared to other turning-point elections, 2006 featured far fewer open seats or evenly balanced districts. Democrats were successful because we won *so many* of the available open seats. Democrats won eight open seats—the best showing since 1974 when Democrats won 11. Six of the eight were in districts where Kerry won no more than 46.7% of the vote.¹

STATE RACES

The 2006 Midterm victories weren't limited to Congress. Democrats picked up 350 seats in state legislatures. Democrats now control 23 state legislatures to 17 for Republicans. Nine have split control.

In 15 states Democrats control both the Governor's mansion and both houses of the Legislature. That is a good starting point for the critical 2008 and 2010 elections that will control post-2010 redistricting.

Ohio is a particularly good example. The Democratic wave swept out the Republican Governor, a US Senator and a Republican Congressman. Potentially most importantly, Republicans in Ohio no longer control the state's electoral apparatus since the Republican Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, who helped manipulate the results of the decisive 2004

Ohio Presidential vote, was replaced by a Democrat. Blackwell was also trounced in his bid for the Governor's mansion.

THE POTENTIAL FOR REALIGNMENT

The stage is set.

The massively unpopular War in Iraq galvanizes broader and broader opposition to Bush and the Republicans in Congress who stubbornly continue to support his policies.

The period leading up to and immediately following the 2008 Presidential Election could very well trigger a major long-term progressive realignment in American politics. But we have to remember that in 2006 voters mainly voted for change—they voted *against* Republicans much more than they voted *for* Democrats.

Realignment is possible, but it is far from inevitable. Whether it happens will depend entirely on our ability to build on our electoral victory and reassert the dominance of progressive values at the center of American political debate.

Whether it happens is entirely up to us.

This book is about how we succeed in turning this historic opportunity into long-term progressive political realignment—how Progressives can win.

OUR PLAN OF ATTACK

In the following pages, we'll examine the complex question of voter self-interest—how to understand it, and how to address it in order to make realignment a reality. We'll talk about broad concepts—but we'll also explore practical applied politics.

- The last chapter of this section describes the successful battle to defeat the privatization of Social Security, which was the first turning point on the road that led from the 2004 electoral disaster to the 2006 Democratic victory.
- Section 2 addresses the concept of self-interest in politics and analyzes the six major categories of self-interest that motivate voters.
- Section 3 discusses the key audiences whose self-interests we must address—the groups whose attitudes and behavior we need to change in order to win.

- Section 4 presents the principles of political messaging that we need to use to successfully address these self-interests.
- In Section 5 we get down to the concrete task of how to plan and execute successful, progressive electoral and issue campaigns.
- Section 6 describes the culture of winning political organizations, and factors that allow us to effectively organize for victory.
- Section 7 describes what we mean by “progressive values” and how traditional progressive values contrast with the radical conservative values of the right.
- Section 8 explores the challenges and possibilities facing us in the 21st century, the progressive vision for the future—and how we can talk about it.
- Section 9 argues that to realize that vision, we need to focus on structural change—on changing the relations of power—to build a truly democratic society.
- The Conclusion summarizes some of the key lessons that I believe we need to incorporate into our strategy to make political realignment a reality.