

PROGRESSIVES RISING

2008: A SEA-CHANGE ELECTION



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The 2008 race for the Democratic presidential nomination—now moving from coronation to slow-motion train wreck—has riveted national attention. But it should not distract from the opportunity now before progressives. This year has the potential to be not simply a change election, as conventional wisdom suggests, but a sea-change election, one that marks the end of the conservative era that has dominated our politics over the past three decades and the beginning of a new era of progressive reform.

The last such defining election arguably came at the beginning of that era, with Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980. Current conditions suggest the potential of an even more significant realigning election in 2008. For that to happen, however, progressives will not only have to continue to drive the debate in the election season, they will have to define, expand and claim the mandate *after the election*.

1980: Conservative Triumph

In 1980, Reagan, a self-described “movement conservative,” took the White House from incumbent Jimmy Carter, winning all but six states. Republicans picked up 33 seats in the House and gained control of the Senate, winning 12 seats and sweeping out liberal stalwarts like McGovern of South Dakota, Church of Idaho, Nelson of Wisconsin, Culver of Iowa and Bayh of Indiana. Commentators hailed it as a striking triumph for the new conservatism.¹

The 1980 election transformed our politics. The Democratic majority in the House stood aside as Reagan slashed taxes and doubled the military budget in peacetime. Reagan fired the striking air controllers, essentially declaring open season on unions. He cut spending on the poor, pushed deregulation and privatization, and gelded consumer, environmental and worker protection agencies by staffing them with corporate lobbyists. Government, he announced, is the problem, not the solution.²

Repudiation, Not Embrace

Despite his subsequent deification by conservatives, Reagan was hardly a compelling candidate in 1980. A B-movie actor elected governor of California, he was widely scorned as an “amiable dunce,” in the words of Clark Clifford. He lost six primary contests to George H. W. Bush, who branded his supply-side ideas “voodoo economics.” Reagan's own camp was so concerned that they openly negotiated with former president Gerald Ford to join the ticket, considering a deal that would make Ford something of a co-president. Neither Carter nor Reagan were well-regarded by voters. Reagan trailed Carter in the polls until after the national debate that was held on October 28, 2000.³

Nor did voters experience a wholesale shift of attitudes towards conservatism. Pluralities of Americans opposed Reagan on civil rights, abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, defense

spending and our military involvement in Nicaragua. Polls showed no dramatic increase in self-identified conservatives. There was no mandate from voters for a conservative transformation. New York Times exit polling showed fully 38 percent of Reagan's voters gave their chief reason as "it is time for a change;" only 11 percent said because "he's a real conservative."⁴

The 1980 election was overwhelmingly a repudiation of Carter's failed presidency and a desire to throw the bums out of Washington, not an embrace of conservatism.

Key to that was a dismal economy—double-digit inflation, rising unemployment, soaring gas prices and lines at the gas station, rising interest rates, a sharp recession in the spring of 1980. The "misery index"—adding inflation and unemployment rates—hit new records. Voters considered the economy the overwhelming issue, but the sense of economic disarray was reinforced by events abroad—the wave of revolutions across the Southern Hemisphere, the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan, and most traumatically, Americans held hostage in Iran.

Ground Wars: The New Right Offensive

While voters hadn't turned right, the new right was on the march—and driving the national debate. The Moral Majority mobilized evangelicals. The Committee on the Present Danger trumpeted the mythic "window of vulnerability." Corporations were gearing up their offensive against external regulation and internal unions. The Heritage Foundation and other conservative think tanks were leading an attack on liberalism. Conservative strategist Richard Viguerie helped mobilize money and volunteers with aggressive use of mass mail, helping to fund a range of right-wing issue groups.⁵

Liberal movements were on the defensive. The backlash against civil rights and the woman's movement and the "stab-in-the-back" myth about Vietnam were building. Republicans were consolidating their hold on the South as the party of white sanctuary.

And liberal ideas seemed exhausted, unable to deal with the challenges the country faced. Stagflation, and the rising taxes that accompanied inflation, confounded Keynesian economics. Carter's focus on détente and human rights seemed mocked by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the revolution in Iran. Carter himself was already moving right, embracing deregulation, military buildup and covert war in Afghanistan. His retreats and failures split Democrats, leading Ted Kennedy to challenge him in a bitter primary battle.

The country was looking for change. Reagan ended up with over one-fourth of the votes of self-described liberals and 26 percent of registered Democrats.⁶

2008: Progressives Rising?

As the 2008 election approaches, the parallels to 1980 are striking. The economy is in a recession. Gas is headed to \$4 a gallon. Incomes aren't keeping up with the costs of basics. Housing prices—the leading investment of most Americans—are cratering. Once more the economy is the number one issue on voters' minds, and opinions on it are increasingly bleak—*already more pessimistic than in 1980*. In February this year, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll, 63 percent thought the economy was getting worse; 58 percent thought that in November 1980.⁷

American concerns with the economy are growing, but have not yet reached the levels of 1980. In 1980, Gallup research found that 70 percent of Americans thought the economy was the most important problem facing the country. In February, 2008, New York Times/CBS News polls show that 29 percent picked the economy as the most important problem, up from 8 percent in September 2007. Today, 15 percent picked war, down from 20 percent in September. The continuing foul economic news will surely drive that upward.⁸

Just as Carter's failures abroad were mirrored by frustrations at home, today the failure at home is mirrored by the costly Iraq debacle abroad, consuming \$10 billion a month, while alienating us from allies and eroding our security. The clear and present danger of catastrophic climate changes has been scorned; our weakening global economic position denied. Gallup's poll on March 5 registered 68 percent dissatisfied with the "position of the U.S. in the world today," *the worst measure ever* including during the Vietnam years. That is all the more astounding given the deep partisan divide, with 60 percent of Republicans still saying they are satisfied while 85 percent of Democrats are dissatisfied.⁹

Not surprisingly, the public has turned against the current administration. Gallup polls show only 27 percent satisfied with how things are going (in 1979, 19 percent were satisfied.)¹⁰ Nearly three of four think we are on the wrong track. Voters are more negative about President George W. Bush, and have been for far longer, than they were about Carter in 1980.

Ground Wars: Progressives on the Move

On the ground, the parallels to 1980 are clear. Today, progressives are on the march, driving the Democratic presidential candidates to bolder positions against the war in Iraq, for universal health care, for investment in new energy, against corporate trade and tax strategies. Moveon.org and the blogosphere have brought new energy, resources and volunteers into the political process. An embattled and divided labor movement has revitalized its political program. An array of liberal think tanks and campaign organizations has driven the debate against Bush's debacles. New voters—including youth and Latinos—are mobilizing through the Democratic primaries.

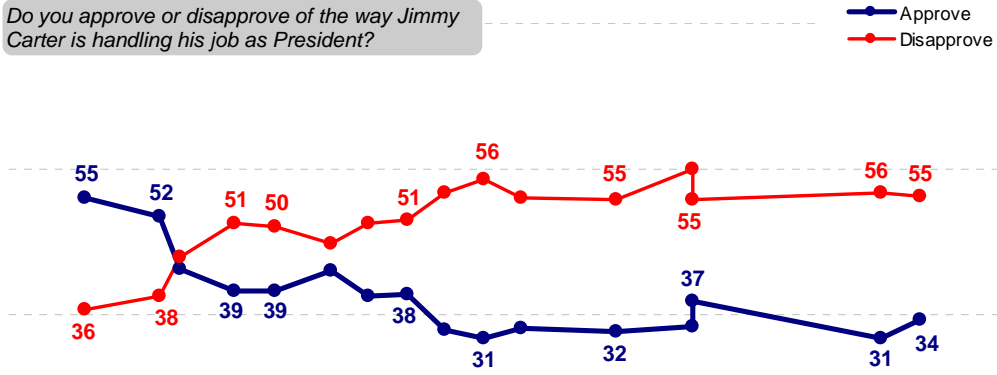
Conservative movements are divided and in some disarray. The neocons are discredited. The country-clubbers disdain the fundamentalists. Main Street conservatives are appalled by the corruption, hypocrisies, incompetence and profligacy of the Bush administration and the Republican Congress.

Most dramatically, conservative ideas seem bankrupt. Declining wages, the flight of good jobs abroad, the speculative financial casino that helped trigger the housing bust confound conservative economics. In the wake of toxic toys and liars' loans, even the Bush administration is proposing new regulations. Similarly the failed occupation of Iraq—surely the worst foreign policy debacle in memory—mocks the bellicose unilateralism of the right.

Polls suggest that there is no great groundswell of liberal attitudes, although most Americans have held progressive views on social issues for a long time. Also notable is the increasing isolation of self-described conservatives, as independents and moderates look more and more like Democrats and liberals in their concerns. The Republican image is the most negative in a half century. People once more are looking for change.

Carter job approval (1980)

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Jimmy Carter is handling his job as President?

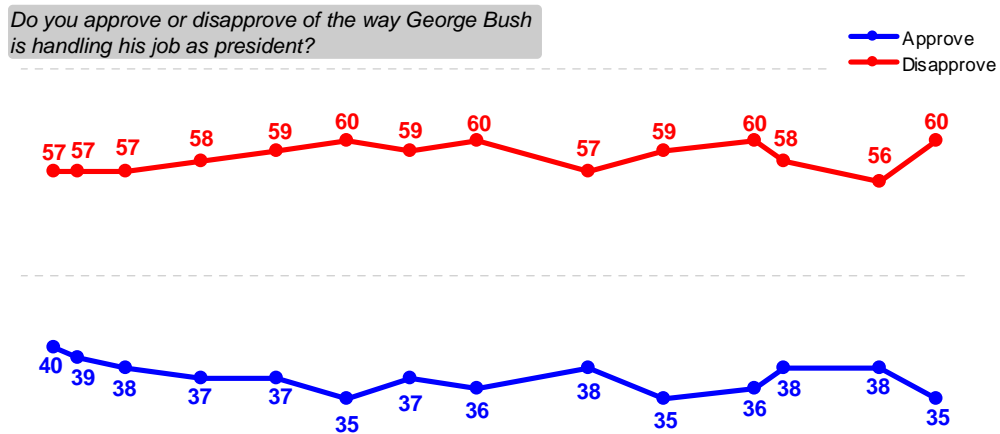


Net Difference	+19	+14	-12	-11	-13	-25	-23	-18	-25	-21
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*Note: Data from Gallup research conducted throughout 1980.

Bush job approval: Huge majority disapproves

Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling his job as president?



Net Difference	-17	-18	-19	-21	-22	-25	-22	-24	-19	-24	-24	-20	-18	-25
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*Note: From Democracy Corps surveys conducted over the last several months.

Differences: No Bush

One major difference between 1980 and 2008 is that the incumbent is not on the ballot. On the other hand, Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain does seem intent on carrying President Bush's core policies and the basic conservative mantra into the general election. He has staked his candidacy on continuing the war in Iraq until "victory" and on arguing that we are well on the way to that goal. Although admitting he knows little about the economy, he has pledged to make Bush's tax cuts permanent, while adding what the Wall Street Journal estimates at \$400 billion a year in new tax breaks (calling for slashing corporate taxes and eliminating the alternative minimum tax, which largely hits the affluent). With the U.S. forced to sell off assets or borrow \$2 billion a day to cover unsustainable trade deficits, he proclaims his commitment to sustaining our corporate trade policies. With the country literally falling apart, with a growing public investment deficit rendering our economy less competitive and our bridges, sewers, water and electricity less secure, he pledges to continue to cut domestic spending to pay for top-end tax cuts, war abroad and a new military buildup. Bush may not be on the ballot, but voters will have to decide whether they want more of the same.

Differences: Corporate Mobilization

Conservatives may be in disarray, but the increasingly entrenched corporate lobby is not. In 1980, corporations were mobilizing against labor, consumers and environmentalists who were viewed as a threat to profits. Reagan, once he reassured them that he wasn't a protectionist on the right, was preaching to their choir—lower taxes, smaller government, deregulation, a strong dollar, and a strong military to protect investments abroad.

In contrast, both contenders for the Democratic nomination have taken on more populist rhetoric and stances as the race has evolved. Both pledge to take on the insurance and drug companies to reform health care and limit costs. Both pledge to roll back subsidies to Big Oil to invest in alternative energy. Both now issue dissents to the trade policy that suits "Wall Street and not Main Street." Both pledge new regulation on housing finance, on toxic toys, on labor rights and environmental protections.

Both contenders come from the center of the party. Fortune Magazine hailed New York Sen. Hillary Clinton as the favorite of Wall Street. Illinois Sen. Barack Obama has largely framed his economic reform ideas as more cautious than hers. Neither is a particularly convincing advocate of a dramatic change in strategy for the global economy. Both have raised substantial sums from the financial community. More sophisticated portions of the business community will not find either particularly threatening.

But their current commitments will unleash significant resources from corporate interests who feel threatened, particularly the insurance companies, the drug companies and small business. We're likely to see a flood of hundreds of millions in ads and "independent campaigns" not witnessed on behalf of Carter.

Sea-Change: A Realigned Electoral Coalition?

Walter Dean Burnham and other experts question whether 1980 represented a true realignment. There's no question that Reagan won a stunning victory. Republicans consolidated their hold on white voters in the South, with Reagan sweeping the South outside of Carter's Georgia, although by notably close margins. He consolidated the Republican hold on the Plains and Mountain states. And he fared well among non-college-educated, blue-collar voters—the so-called Reagan Democrats.

Yet, a classic realignment election features a dramatic increase in voter turnout, as well as a shifting in electoral coalition. In 1980, voter turnout was down, continuing the trend in recent years. Reagan was elected with 28 percent of the total potential electorate. His new coalition hadn't roused an increased turnout.¹¹

In 2008, by contrast, Democrats have witnessed record turnout in the primary election. On a state-by-state basis, Democrats had higher turnouts than Republicans in 19 out of 23 states. The four outliers that tilted Republican were Arizona (Sen. John McCain's home turf), Utah (a pro-Romney Mormon stronghold), Alabama, and Alaska. (Michigan and Florida are not counted since Democrats did not campaign there.)¹²

The change is dramatic. In Texas, more voters turned out for the Democratic caucuses at night than voted in the Democratic primary in 2004. Nearly as many Democrats cast a vote in this year's primary as voted for John Kerry in the 2004 presidential general election. In Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada, Democratic registration leapfrogged that of Republicans.¹³

The increased turnout reflects the "history" made by an African American and a woman competing for the nomination. But that history is consolidating—and benefiting—from significant gains to the Democratic coalition.

Young people 18 to 29, from a generation larger in number than the boomer generation—are voting in large numbers in the Democratic primaries. Their share of the primary vote has increased to 14 percent of an increased Democratic electorate. This reinforces and consolidates their voting patterns in the last two elections—as young voters voted 55-44 Democrats over Republicans in the 2004 election and 60-38 Democrats over Republicans in 2006.¹⁴

Hispanics have dramatically increased their share of the larger Democratic vote since 2004. Pew Hispanic Center polling shows 57 percent now call themselves Democrats or say they lean towards Democrats, as opposed to 23 percent Republican. The increased turnout on the Democratic side surely reflects some of the fallout from the immigration debate, which the Republican right turned ugly. It could make a dramatic difference in states that Bush won by 5 percent or less—Florida, New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado.¹⁵

Women in general, and single women in particular, have voted in larger numbers in the Democratic primaries—nearly 60 percent of all Democratic voters have been women. Clearly this reflects the excitement generated by the first serious female candidate for the presidency.

Similarly, independents have been voting in large numbers in the Democratic primaries, backing Democrats by a two-to-one margin. And again, this reflects polls showing independents increasingly voting far closer to Democrats on position after position, isolating self-identified conservatives.

Assuming a Democratic nominee emerges with a unified party—an assumption increasingly at risk—the chances of 2008 proving not simply a change in party, but a transformed coalition for reform.

The Progressive Challenge: Defining the Mandate

A large challenge facing progressives is that neither Obama nor Clinton considers himself or herself a movement progressive in the same sense that Reagan was a devoted movement conservative. If voters once more move to “throw the bums out,” as seems increasingly likely, neither may be as bold as Reagan was in claiming an ideological mandate and defining a fundamentally new course.

Neither Clinton nor Obama have the relationship to the progressive movement that Reagan had to the right. On foreign policy and on economics, their principal advisers come from rather cautious mainstream circles. The reform agenda for various departments was put together by the ideological Heritage Foundation for Reagan; it is being put together by the Center for American Progress, anchored by former advisers from the Bill Clinton administration.

Moreover, while progressives have driven the debate in the Democratic Party on a range of issues, there are distinct limits on how much has actually appeared on the agenda. Where the right in 1980 had developed a systematic assault on détente; a menu for rearmament; a turn from human rights to “Soviet-sponsored terrorism” as an ideological theme; and a broad-brush critique of the United Nations, arms control and multilateralism; progressive foreign policy has focused largely on getting out of Iraq and on returning to multilateralism. There’s been little discussion of curbing the U.S. role as globocop, which it can no longer afford, nor of a dramatic change of global economic strategy. Both Democratic candidates are pledged to increasing spending on a military that already spends more than the rest of the world’s militaries combined. Both are pledged to expanding our expeditionary forces and committed to sustaining a range of global commitments.

Similarly, on economics, the right had developed an indictment of Keynesianism and the mixed economy, and of regulation and welfare. Progressive economic ideas are only beginning to crystallize in wake of the busts of the bubble economy of the past decades. Little thought or consensus has been forged on how to get financial speculation and global financial flows regulated, how to redress unsustainable trade deficits, or on what to do about an economy in which the very few capture the vast bulk of the rewards.

That said, either Clinton or Obama, if elected, will carry an ambitious set of commitments into office, largely due to the success of progressives to date.

Both are committed to ending the war in Iraq, and bringing the troops out quickly and responsibly. Both are committed to launching a concerted drive for energy independence, using investment in conservation and renewable energy as a centerpiece for a jobs and growth agenda—and for an industrial policy for the U.S. in a global economy. Both are committed to universal health care for all, and raising taxes on the top end to pay for it. Both have suggested significant investment in

infrastructure, schools, pre-kindergarten and affordable college. Both have pledged to push for the Employee Free Choice Act, to empower workers to organize, and to rebuild our consumer, worker and environmental protection agencies. Both have called for a change of course in our global trade policy.

These initiatives alone—plus the rollback of right-wing social policy in everything from affirmative action to gag orders—will spark big-time Washington struggles. In each case, progressives will have to mobilize—both to hold the administration and Democrats in the Congress accountable to their promises and to counter the entrenched lobbies resistant to change.

The triumphant right in 1980 soon learned that defining and defending a mandate wasn't a question of a large election victory. Reagan didn't spend much political capital on the right's social agenda. He quickly abandoned the notion of privatizing Social Security. When his tax cuts generated massive deficits, he joined with Democrats in a series of tax increases, much to the right's dismay. When his military buildup and bellicose posturing generated a massive nuclear freeze movement at home and growing disruption in Europe, he chose to respond to Mikhail Gorbachev's initiatives, not spurn them—again much to the dismay of neoconservatives.

Conservatives learned that they had to organize independently to hold the administration and Republicans in the Congress accountable. They fought hard to “let Reagan be Reagan,” often against Reagan himself. They found it necessary to sustain an independent movement capacity, to push ideas, to drive issues into the public debate and to hold politicians, and to mobilize resources and voters to challenge both Democrats and wayward Republicans.

For progressives, this imperative will be even greater. The mandate will have to be defined in action after the election. On the war, on health care, on energy and on economic strategy, the administration will face significant resistance. Advisers will argue for caution. Corporate interests will pour resources into trying to shape and limit the change. Millions will be spent to influence public opinion.

Progressives will have to work hard to drive these issues through the election campaign—and then organize independently, expanding their reach and their resources—to hold accountable the new administration and the increased Democratic majorities.

2008 Sea Change

Like 1980, 2008 is likely to be a close, bitterly contested presidential election. The objective conditions are present for a sea-change election, one that launches a new era of progressive reform. Conservatism is bankrupt. The economy is a mess; our security has been eroding abroad. Americans are looking for change in large numbers. A new majority coalition for reform is emerging. If the election were held today, Democrats would pick up new majorities in both houses of Congress and take the White House.

But a change in control doesn't usher in a new era. That sea change won't take place naturally, like the weather. Whether the opportunity is grasped, how the mandate for change is defined, whether the new coalition is forged will be a question of continued political struggle.

Footnotes

¹ For overview, see Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._presidential_election,_1980

² Johnson, Haynes, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years*, 1990

³ Burnham, Walter Dean, “The 1980 Earthquake: Realignment, Reaction or What?”, from Rogers and Ferguson, eds, *The Hidden Election: Politics and Economics in the 1980 Presidential Campaign*, 1981

⁴ Ibid

⁵ See Blumenthal, Sidney, “The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power, 1986

⁶ For New York Times exit poll figures, see Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._presidential_election,_1980

⁷ New York Times/CBS Poll. February 20-24. <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/politics/20090226poll.pdf>

⁸ Gallup research, compiled by Greenberg Research; New York Times/CBS from February poll, above

⁹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/104782/Discontent-US-Global-Position-Hits-Record-High.aspx>

¹⁰ http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2007/05/gallup_just_25_percent_of_us_1.html

¹¹ Burnham, Walter Dean, op cit

¹² U.S. News and World Report. February 28, 2008. “High Democratic Turnout Sends a Mixed Signal for November.” <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/campaign-2008/2008/02/28/high-democratic-turnout-sends-a-mixed-signal-for-november.html>

¹³ Democratic Underground.com. March 7, 2008. “Why Texas Democrats Are Smiling.” http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=show_mesg&forum=180&topic_id=50307&mesg_id=50307

¹⁴ Center for American Values. “The Youth Vote: 2006.” <http://media.pfaw.org/pdf/cav/YouthVote.pdf>

¹⁵ Minushkin, et al, *The Hispanic Vote in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primaries*, Pew Hispanic Center, Updated March 7, 2008