

MOURN, BUT ORGANIZE

We cannot say the Supreme Court stole this election, although there are still many ballots to be counted and recounted, and questions about electoral procedures to be answered.

We cannot say that a third party candidate distracted us, or that there was not party unity.

We cannot even say, except for those of us in DSA, that there were not enough resources to get a message out.

And we cannot argue that fundamentalists should be denied the right to mobilize their voters.

I titled my 2002 post-election analysis "*Heads Should Roll.*" My lead was "The big winners in Tuesday's election were the insurance, defense, drug, and finance industries. And, of course, the big losers were poor and working Americans." Sadly, two years and one national election later I don't have to change a word.

In the face of the 2004 results we find among Democratic Party leaders the same impulse to "move to the center" that permeated official reactions to the results in 2002. Many mainstream Democrats will use these misguided post-mortems as a handy tool to push Democrats even further into the grasp of corporate America.

Yes, the Democrats lost this election, but they did not lose it because they ran too far to the left. They lost because they miscalculated the nature of the election. Kerry won the primaries by convincing Democratic voters that he was more "electable" than Howard Dean. Given Bush's negative numbers, Kerry thought he could win the presidency simply by avoiding a major mistake. With the notable exceptions of failing to attack Bush's domestic record at the Democratic convention (as if Kerry could win by solely portraying himself as a "tougher commander-in-chief) and by failing to respond faster to the Swift Boat attacks, Kerry ran a mostly mistake-free, but also tepid campaign. Kerry's analysis, shared by most party leaders, was fundamentally flawed. Bush proved capable of appealing to both his base and swing voters while the Democratic campaign focused mostly on swing voters whom they believed had to be assured about Kerry's foreign policy credentials. By counting on anti-Bush sentiment to propel him to the White House, Kerry opened himself up to Republican redefinition.

As a sitting President and wartime Commander-in-Chief, Bush stood a good chance to pick up votes in solid Democratic states. Under those circumstances it was incumbent on Kerry or the party apparatus to make an effort to turn out the Democratic base. There were real consequences to this failure. Record turnouts were noted in the battleground states and in Bush's safe states, but not in Democratic safe states such as California or New York—turnout in these states, at best, increased marginally. Even limited efforts in these two states, let alone the other safe states, would have significantly reduced Bush's overall percentage margin and this would have made much more evident the fact that Bush's victory is the lowest margin by any incumbent ever to win a second term.

In California progressives lost a health care referendum by two points, as well as several other measures that we should have won. In New York we could easily have captured two more seats in the State Senate and moved decisively toward resting legislative control from the Republicans.

Now this is not a knock on the campaign strategy to move thousands of volunteers from safe states into the battleground states or the efforts of those volunteers. It is a hard knock on the failure of the Democratic campaign, the party apparatus, and office holders to wage serious get-out-the vote campaigns in the “safe states,” even with limited resources. The progressive community has a large enough volunteer pool to wage get-out-the vote campaigns in safe states - - as well as battleground states -- but somebody has to be willing and able to lead such efforts.

There are troubling issues progressives do have to face. One is geography. We have to make real efforts, not just during the election campaign, to improve our vote outside the coastal states and the upper Midwest. The South, small cities and rural communities don't have to be so red. They are assaulted by corporate greed and the absence of affordable health care and housing just as much as any urban resident. But the Democrats must put forth a message that speaks to people's needs, instead of a message that is so concerned with being “responsible” that it is incapable of getting voter attention, let alone voter loyalty.

Our campaigns and our organizations have to do more than identify and turnout already favorable voters. We have to have a program to educate those not already on our side – and not just during election periods. Progressives have to think long and hard about what results in Florida and Nevada can tell us about the power of a strong anti-corporate, pro-economic democracy message. While Bush carried those states with small margins, referendums to increase the minimum wage triumphed by landslide margins, despite massive corporate opposition.

This election shatters the myth that American political parties are not ideological. Candidates have to be practical, deliver the bacon, and get things done, the common wisdom says. Well, 59 million Americans just re-elected a president and a party that provided four years of economic failure; missed the boat on 9/11; and waged an unjust, unnecessary war so ineptly that there is little chance of a decent outcome for the people of Iraq. And everybody knows it. Those 59 million people—many of them—voted for this administration out of an ideological commitment, a sense that they were on the same team as the administration, even if the administration had botched some major plays.

Already the Bush Administration is recasting it self as more hawkish and even more conservative. (I know that it sounds impossible, but it's true!) We can expect very serious attempts to privatize social security; increase military spending; weaken a women's right to choose an abortion; and undermine civil rights and civil liberties. We can expect even more tax cuts, and a serious attempt to replace the income tax with either a flat tax, sales tax or value-added tax. We can expect further unilateral action in foreign policy and the undermining of international institutions and cooperation. And we can expect official Democratic leaders to mute their criticism, at least for a while.

We have already witnessed new instances of political repression. The IRS, responding to administration pressure, is systematically reviewing the tax-exempt status of organizations that exercised their legal right to engage in voter education and vote registration. Only an accidental discovery by Senator Conrad prevented the Republicans from legally overriding existing laws protecting the privacy of tax returns with a clause hidden within a thousand page budget bill.

The progressive community is not going to just sit back and take these reactionary measures. We have to fight back—against the Republicans and those like the Democratic Leadership Council

who would remove any vestige of truly democratic values and program from the Democratic Party.

Our fight has to be strategic, principled and victorious. I am not going to pretend that I have all the answers. But I do have some directions to suggest.

First, we must strengthen the labor movement and other social movements, even as the right continues to attack them. This practical step, as difficult as it may be, must be part of everybody's agenda. Progressives have to understand that strong institutions must play a leading role if our ideas and values are to prevail. Or to put it in more utilitarian terms: Democratic electoral prospects increase or decrease with the size and strength of the labor movement.

Second, we should be as ideological as our opponents. Now that's easy for a socialist to say, but there is a set of moral values associated with social justice that Democratic candidates must articulate if they are to connect with voters. It's unjust that 45 million go without health care; it's unjust that the minimum wage has lost 60% of its purchasing power since 1972. What Wal-Mart does to workers and communities is unjust. What Enron and Halliburton claim is just a little corruption among friends represents an injustice to shareholders, pensioners, and the workers at those corporations.

We have to insist that our candidates articulate core values rather than mouth sound-bites that have been carefully screened in focus groups to suggest bland values without offering real substantive policy proposals. We have to insist that more of "our people" -- movement people infused with a democratic sense of moral outrage -- become candidates, and not just in conservative districts where they are sacrificial lambs!

Third, we must persuade voters, not just turn them out. We have to persuade people that do not yet agree with us. Who else can stand up to the enormous power of big corporations but strong unions and community organizations backed up by a government that is on the people's side? That message is not so hard or so scary to get out. We have to be willing to engage people's daily concerns -- both economic and moral -- so that minds can be changed.

After all the facts are on our side.

Economic inequality is increasing. Seven of the ten growing sectors of the economy offer mostly low-wage jobs.

The health care crisis cannot be solved by private market mechanisms.

The United States lacks the capacity, despite its military might, to create an American empire -- nor should it try to do so.

Progressives must weave our facts into powerful moral arguments for public provision, progressive taxation, a sane defense budget, and substantive policy change if we want to close the so-called values gap.

Progressive organizations like ACT, Move ON, Progressive Majority and Progressive Democrats of America are beginning to shape plans for a fight back. The first priority will and must be to defend unions, progressives, and ordinary citizens against the tremendous right wing attack that

is coming. Equally important is reinvigorating state party organizations and the DNC by adopting progressive values and programs that take on the neo-liberal “me-tooism” of the DLC.

Progressives should aim to affect the 2006 state and national elections; we cannot assume that the usual gains for the party out of power is there for the asking. We should use this time to develop truly democratic candidates, positions, and institutions that can serve us well into the future.

“Don’t mourn, organize!” has been the slogan of the left for over one hundred years. But in reality we all needed to take a little time to mourn, not just for ourselves and for those candidates who lost the election, but also for the millions who will be hurt by four more years of a reactionary administration. But now that we’ve mourned, we must organize!

Frank Llewellyn
National Director
Democratic Socialists of America
198 Broadway, Suite 700
New York, NY 10038
www.dsausa.org