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EDITORIAL:

The next campaign

Being of the Irish persuasion, I naturally am attracted to lost causes, like the idea of democracy. Still my response to the recent election was: What were we thinking?

The only reasonable answer that I could come up with was that the American voter opted for entertainment value in pitting the Republican 105th Congress against repentant Democrat Bill Clinton.

Either that, or they're hoping to advance the career of Vice President Al Gore after Clinton's impeachment.

Progressives can be pleased with the re-election of senators Tom Harkin, Paul Wellstone, Max Baucus, Carl Levin, John Kerry and Jay Rockefeller and the promotion to the Senate of Tim Johnson in South Dakota, Dick Durbin in Illinois, Jack Reed in Rhode Island, Bob Torricelli in New Jersey, Mary Landrieu in Louisiana and Max Cleland in Georgia, but with Republicans posting a net gain of two the Senate likely will be even more hostile to progressive causes.

Progressive forces, led by the AFL-CIO, managed to sidetrack Newt Gingrich's revolution and forced Republicans to back off plans to cut Medicare and Social Security to pay for tax breaks for the rich. Congress even approved a modest increase in the minimum wage.

While battered-but-unbowed Republicans are now considering ways to further restrict labor unions from engaging in political activity, the \$35 million the AFL-CIO spent was a small fraction of the contributions by corporate executives and their PACs that went overwhelmingly to Republicans and conservative Democrats. "There's no way that corporate America can be outspent by any other entity. That will never be overcome," said Ira Arlook, national director of Citizen Action.

He sees the answer as public financing. An initiative approved by voters in Maine could become a model: It limits campaign contributions from individuals, corporations and PACs to \$500 for gubernatorial candidates and \$250 for state House and Senate candidates. It also provides public funding for candidates who agree to limit their spending, refuse private contributions and shorten their campaign seasons.

The money is expected to come from cutting the operating budgets of the legislative and executive branches and doubling lobbyists' registration fees (to \$400).

"We're never going to be in a position where the individual and the corporations are not in a position to express their position," Arlook said. "But public funding would make sure that good candidates who are not wealthy can be viable candidates."

For all the talk about two-thirds of the American people wanting an alternative party, they must have been among the 51% of eligible voters who stayed home. Ross Perot got 7.8 million votes, or 8.5% of the total, to earn the Reform Party a place on the ballot and public funding in the next election. Ralph Nader got 580,627, 0.6% of the total, followed by Libertarian Harry Browne's 470,818, Taxpayer Party's Howard Phillips' 178,779, Natural Law Party's John Hagelin's 110,194 and more than a dozen other declared candidates.

After the election, Nader said, "The Greens have much to be proud of this fall. They themselves have broadened the deepened their roots in communities throughout this country. ... The Green Party numbers, while much smaller than those received by the Democratic, Republican and Reform Party, are good first national steps by the emerging young party toward strengthening our democracy and will form a substantial foundation for future Green campaigns."

The Greens had some successes in local races, gaining the majority on the City Council of Arcata, in northern California. Michael Feinstein won a City Council seat in Santa Monica, and two Greens won City Council seats in Berkeley. Overall, Greens won 6 out of 7 local races in California. Nationwide, Green Party members hold local office in 12 states, including school board, city council, and county commission seats.

New Party members and supported candidates won 16 of 23 races, including an at-large race for the Little Rock, Ark., City Council, a seat on the county board for Little Rock and the school board for Prince George's County, Md. Chicago is sending the first New Party member to Congress, as Danny Davis, who ran as a Democrat, won an overwhelming 85% victory. **New Party member Barack Obama was uncontested for a State Senate seat from Chicago.**

The New Party also helped Carolyn McCarthy knock off freshman Republican Dan Frisa in a closely watched U.S. House seat in Long Island. Tom DiNapoli, the most progressive State Assemblyman on Long Island, handily won re-election as a Democratic Party/New Party fusion candidate. Progressive Milwaukee members affiliated with the New Party won a seat in the state Assembly and two seats in the state Senate.

San Francisco voters by 56-44 percent rejected a preference voting initiative as a competing initiative to resume single-member, winner-take-all district elections for the Board of Supervisors was approved by 57%. But advocates of proportional representation were heartened by the re-election of Democratic Rep. Cynthia McKinney, a black congresswoman who was targeted for defeat by Republicans in a redrawn suburban Atlanta district. She won a second term with 58% of the vote. She views proportional representation as a way to allow minorities to be represented and maintain the spirit of the Voting Rights Act without gerrymandering districts.

Bruce Colburn, secretary-treasurer of the Milwaukee Labor Council, member of the New Party-affiliated Progressive Milwaukee and president of Wisconsin Citizen Action, and Joel Rogers, chairman of the New Party, wrote of the possibility of building a new progressive populist coalition in "What's Next: Beyond the Election" in the Nov. 18 issue of *The Nation*. The core Democratic idea of using public power to build a genuinely democratic society has all but vanished as a practical political ideal, in their analysis. In addition to the deep changes in the structure of the economy, organizational rivalries within progressive ranks, tactical mistakes and failures of leadership, they write, "the most important reason is also the most obvious: As a movement, we are not serious players in the electoral game."

Progressives have allowed themselves to be defined at the left wing of the liberal/conservative axis, they write. But "the liberal/conservative axis itself misses the real conflict in politics today -- which is not so much a battle between left and right as between bottom and top -- between those favoring stronger democracy and corporate accountability (the majority) and those opposed to both (the tiny rich minority and their apologists). This fight is the one we should declare as our own. Taking sides with the majority, we should wage the 'democrat versus anti-democrat' and 'worker-consumer-citizen versus irresponsible corporate power' struggle. It will be an exceptionally nasty fight, but this is one we can win."

Colburn and Rogers propose this progressive program:

-- Reform tax and industrial policy to close off the 'low road' on industrial restructuring and promote high-wage/low-waste domestic investment and business organization.

-- Revitalize metropolitan economies as model regions of advanced production.

-- Build high-speed trains -- "capital and labor intensive, they're good for the earth and people like them."

-- Make equal opportunity real by declaring a "Bill of Rights for America's Children," providing everybody with a "starting even" package of day care, health insurance, parental income allowances, recreation and advanced, high-quality education.

-- Declare America a "lifelong learning society," fundamentally reforming public education, replacing local property taxes with more general revenues, imposing high standards on teachers and students and provide links to work for those who don't go on to college. Also ensure lifelong learning opportunities for adults.

-- Restore government accountability, beginning with public funding of campaigns.

-- Strengthen the organizing rights of workers, consumers and communities, while explicitly assigning them a greater role in devising and administering "public" programs for economic upgrading and community renewal.

-- Provide single-payer health insurance.

-- Simplify and integrate our tax system to tax both private and social income on a progressive basis.

-- Declare the budgetary "peace dividend."

-- Declare an "environmental dividend" in energy and other savings that application of current technologies would permit.

-- Forge a new internationalism centered on "leveling up" international worker rights and wages, rather than the leveling down associated with GATT.

We like most of that program but would also strengthen anti-trust legislation to help small businesses compete with corporate chain stores. We also would gear agricultural policy to promote small, family-based farms and sustainable economic development in rural areas. And we would require accountability from the media conglomerates that use public airwaves.

A progressive electoral alliance could include the AFL-CIO and its member unions, citizen advocacy groups such as ACORN, Citizen Action, Public Citizen and the Public Interest Research Groups, political parties such as the Green Party, Labor Party and New Party, civil rights organizations such as the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the NAACP and NOW and environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters.

If progressives want to build a populist movement for the 1998 election, when 16 GOP and 18 Democratic seats will be up for grabs in the Senate, they had better start working now to build a national network that can recruit progressive candidates and raise funds and organize people to elect them.

The populist Alliance, holding its organizational convention the weekend of November 21 near

Kerrville, Texas, hopes to develop into a forum for progressive populist movement. For information on the Alliance, call 617-491-4221. For the New Party call 1-800-200-1294. For the Labor Party call 202-234-5190. For the Green Party call 607-756-4211. For Democrats 2000, which promotes progressive populists in the Democratic Party, call 202-626-5620.

Progressives should consider whether to take back the Democratic Party or take over the Reform Party. Since the Reformers are on the ballot in every state and have a guarantee of public funding in the next presidential race, somebody is bound to take it over. And if you can't take the Reform Party away from Ross Perot, you surely can't take the Democratic Party away from the Fortune 500.

-- **Jim Cullen**

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