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A Winning Progressive Politics

Paul Wellstone

United States Senator Paul Wellstone's plane went down in a northern Minnesota bog in late October 2002. The Senator, who had one of the most liberal voting records in Congress, had written about his own, particular kind of politics in a book published in 2001: The Conscience of a Liberal, Reclaiming the Compassionate Agenda. The last chapter of this volume, "A Winning Progressive Politics" is reprinted here with permission.

A progressive politics is a winning politics, as long as it is not organized in a way that is top-down and elitist. It must respect the capacity of ordinary citizens and focus on workaday majority issues.

I have never understood arguments for the need for politicians to "move to the center" to get elected. What is the operational definition of "the center"? If what is meant is that you need to have more votes than your opponent, then I am all for being in the center. But this is too obvious.

If what is meant by the center is the dominant mood of the populace — the issues that are important to Americans and what they hope for then I would again argue for the need to occupy the center. A politics that is not sensitive to the concerns and circumstances of people's lives, a politics that does not speak to and include people, is an intellectually arrogant politics that deserves to fail.

So what is the center? The empirical evidence is irrefutable. Seventy-five percent of voters think business has too much influence in Washington. Seventy-one percent agree that companies that lobby and give political contributions while getting government contracts are taking part in "legalized bribery." About three quarters of voters believe that at least half the time members of Congress make decisions based on what their contributors want.

Fifty-four percent of voters agree that the "economic boom has not reached people like [them]." Sixty-one percent believe that the projected budget surplus should be invested either in education and public schools or in expanded health care coverage. Just 18 percent prefer an across-the-board tax cut. By a two-to-one margin, American voters believe that free trade costs more U.S. jobs than it creates. Fifty-three percent oppose permanent normalization of trade with China. A majority (52 percent) believes that there should be tougher regulations to "restrain corporations from moving jobs overseas, polluting the environment and treating workers badly."

Paul Wellstone (1944-2001) was a professor of political science at Carleton College and served as U.S. Senator from Minnesota until his death in 2001.

When I am in coffee shops with people (these are great focus groups), no one asks, “Are you left, right, or center?” No one cares. What people want is that our politics be about them. Tip O’Neill once declared, “All politics is local.” But I would go further; all politics is personal:

“Senator, I am seventy-five years old. My monthly income is six hundred dollars and my prescription drug costs are three hundred dollars. I can’t afford it. What can I do?”

“Senator, our daughter was anorexic. She was a beautiful girl. She was down to eighty pounds but the insurance plan would still not approve hospital costs.”

“Senator, I just lost my job. I worked for the company for thirty years. Now I am fifty-six and have no health care coverage.”

“Senator, I direct a battered women’s shelter. Every thirteen seconds, a woman is battered in her own home. But though she and her children must leave to be safe, we don’t have enough beds and shelters for them. We have twice as many animal shelters in our country.”

“Senator, my wife and I both work. Our combined income is thirty-five thousand. We have two small children, two and four, and child care costs us twelve thousand a year. Is there any help for us?”

“Senator, I am a child care worker. I love working with small children. But I make, with a college education, nine dollars an hour, and I don’t have any health care.”

“Senator, I am fifty years old. Should I hold on to our farm and burn up all my equity, or get out now? Will we get decent prices again? Do I have any future?”

“Senator, my wife and I both work long hours. We have no choice if we are to make a living. But we hardly ever have time for our kids. It is rare that we even get to have dinner as a family together.”

“Senator, my parents are in their mid-seventies and declining health. I try to help them. But is there more help so they can continue to stay at home and not be put in a nursing home? They will lose everything if they are put in a home.”

“Senator, I love teaching these kids. We are a good inner-city elementary school. We really are committed to the children. But these children come to school hungry. How can they learn?”

“Senator, we don’t have the counseling or mental health services to help kids who are struggling in our rural community.”

“Senator, please get some substance-abuse treatment for this Vietnam veteran. Without help, he will stay homeless and in bad shape.”

“Senator, both political parties are controlled by the same big interests. They don’t care about us.”

If you ask people at the Town Talk Cafe in Willmar, Minnesota, how many of them consider themselves liberals and how many conservatives, the response is about 25 percent to 75 percent. But if you get beyond the labels and probe a little further, you’ll find that the overwhelming majority can’t stand the pharmaceutical companies, oil companies, insurance companies, grain companies, and packers. They don’t like big anything — big government or big corporations. But they want the government to be on their side and would agree with Teddy Roosevelt that “government must make sure that the power of wealth is used for and not against the interests of

the people as a whole.” They believe that government today too often serves the interests of the already powerful and wealthy.

I think the 1994 elections were all about this populism, as was the election of Jesse Ventura as governor of Minnesota in 1998.

I should have been able to predict the Gingrich victory in 1994. It was staring me in the face one night in Wabasha, Minnesota, in mid-February. About one hundred people crammed into the bowling alley for a town meeting. The overwhelming sentiment expressed to me in no uncertain terms was, “Senator Wellstone, give us access to some capital, and get the government out of our way. We are self-sufficient, self-reliant people.” Small-business owners emphasized that for them the government was far more a problem than a help. There was too much unreasonable regulation and not enough reasonable help.

I was in agreement with what I heard — a powerful critique of overly centralized and overly bureaucratic government policy. As a former community organizer who spent most of my time trying to empower poor people to make decisions for themselves, I believed in their model of economics. It is far better that the men and women who own businesses live in the community, that the business be locally owned rather than buffeted by crucial decisions made over martinis halfway across the country or around the world. The people in Wabasha didn’t say it this way, but they understood this. They wanted a homegrown economy. They believed in local entrepreneurship, in self-reliance and self-sufficient communities.

This sentiment, in a different way, was expressed across the country in November 1994. This was a downright anti-establishment, anti-status quo, “throw the rascals out” election. Democrats were then in the majority, so it was a logical conclusion to throw them out. Indeed, Newt Gingrich, in a stroke of genius, nationalized the elections by spreading a message of empowerment to citizens. The election, however, begged the question of what kind of change people voted for. Speaker Gingrich was mistaken that Americans supported his harsh agenda.

In 1998, Jesse Ventura, a former professional wrestler, ran for governor of Minnesota as a third-party candidate and, in his words, “shocked the world” by defeating Democrat Skip Humphrey, the son of Hubert H. Humphrey, and Republican Norm Coleman, the mayor of St. Paul. These two experienced and very capable politicians didn’t see it coming. I didn’t either, until the last two weeks. He was figuratively giving the finger to politics as usual. His campaign was populist and brilliant. He was Minnesotans’ revenge against a politics that they perceived as fake and phony and dominated by money interests. Minnesotans felt like both parties had it coming to them, and Ventura, with 37 percent of the vote, won the election.

The people of Minnesota clearly expressed their anger toward politics, an anger that many Americans share. That does not mean that people do not care what happens. They care deeply, sometimes desperately. But they also feel that their own struggles, the cares of their daily lives, are of little concern in the chambers of power, that whomever they choose will make little difference to them, their loved ones, and their communities.

This is not a conservative America. These are people who more than anything else yearn for a politics they can believe in. They want politicians whom they can trust and who are at least most of the time on their side.

Their voices are not statistics, their fears and hopes are not measured by a consumer price index or gross national product. According to the averages and indicators, this is a prosperous time for our country. It is a time of substantial growth and low inflation, of a booming stock market and low unemployment. But averages are

misleading. They tell nothing of the ends of the curve — the height at the top or the depth at the bottom.

The averages say nothing about the people I have met in my travels and described in this book. They say nothing about the children in Tunica, Mississippi, or the students in Louisiana studying desperately to pass a high-stakes test. The statistics tell nothing of the millions of Americans who don't have health insurance and live in terror of getting sick.

If I had to use labels, I would say that public opinion is populist and “center-left” on the issues. Yet politics, especially national politics is “center-right.” Why the contradiction? The highly respected pollster Celinda Lake has data that are very instructive. Voters and donors (the top Democratic and Republican contributors) have widely divergent views on crucial reform and economic issues when given a specific example. Lockheed spent eight million on lobbying and contributions this past year and received thirteen billion dollars from the federal government. Donors are evenly split over whether this amounts to a bribe or is the normal way of doing business; voters, however, by a 71 percent majority, look at this as legalized bribery. Even more important are the starkly different economic views held by donors and voters. The greatest number of donors (40 percent) think everyone has benefited from the economy, while 64 percent of voters think the wealthy or big corporations have benefited the most. The donors' top policy choice is tax cuts; the majority are against tougher environmental and workplace regulations; and by a two-to-one margin they believe freetrade policy creates more jobs in the United States than it costs. The voters have, by the same margins, the exact opposite view. This same divide exists over normalizing trade relations with China.

This polling data on the disconnect between big givers and voters tells an important story about American politics. The financial imperative severely weakens the policy performance of both parties. The investors dominate the rank-and-file party voters.

The gap is even greater, I believe, between the donors' political viewpoint and that of the American populace at large, not just voters'. There is, of course, a 50 percent hole in the electorate in presidential elections, and this hole is stratified by class. Nonvoters are disproportionately low-income, blue-collar, people of color, and young. They come from a different world than the donors and put a much higher priority on bread-and-butter economic issues. Their viewpoint matters even less than the ordinary voters' because they don't produce votes and are not threats to office-holders.

Clearly, there is a forgotten American majority. It is precisely this America that our politics today fails to serve fully and fairly. This America faces major challenges: low wages, insufficient health care, nonexistent pension coverage (the majority of private sector workers have no pension coverage), daunting child care expenses, rising college expenses, and exorbitant housing costs. These Americans can't hire lobbyists. They can't fly senators and congressmen to resorts. They don't fill the campaign coffers of political candidates. Only when these Americans are given a proportional voice in politics can we claim to live in a truly representative democracy.

The challenge is to make a place for all Americans at the decision-making table, to force our political leaders to listen to their concerns, and for them then to take action. Renewing democracy will not happen overnight or without a very difficult fight. But it is a dream that can be realized. There are three critical ingredients to democratic renewal and progressive change in American public policy, grassroots

organizing, and electoral politics. Policy provides direction and an agenda for action; grassroots organizing builds a constituency to fight for change; and electoral politics is the main way we contest for power and hold decision makers accountable.

Public policy is not just an academic exercise or a philosophical exercise about hypothetical problems. Public policy affects all of us, where we live and where we work.

Policy is not about techniques of communication. Over and over again I hear my Democratic colleagues talk about how to better deliver our “message.” But the question is not how to communicate our agenda, but whether we have an agenda worth communicating. Throughout this book, I have discussed a variety of policy initiatives that I believe speak to the real concerns and circumstances of people’s lives.

People yearn for a politics that speaks to and includes them. They are not getting that today. Instead, we have what the eminent political scientist Walter Dean Burnham calls “the politics of excluded alternatives.” Jim Hightower calls it a “downsized politics.” Despite record economic performance, both political parties still tell us that the federal government cannot afford to help working families in our country. This kind of politics leaves out a majority of the people.

At least Republicans are consistent. They argue that when it comes to these pressing issues of people’s lives, there is very little the government can or should do. But most people don’t accept this. Most people know that this is a great philosophy only if you are wealthy.

One student at the University of Michigan said to me, “Senator, I want to be able to dream again — about a better country and a better world. And politics today doesn’t give me a chance to dream.”

There is a huge leadership void in this country that the Democratic Party, emboldened by political courage and a commitment to the issues that made our party great, can fill. Self-interest is more than economic self-interest; it is also how you feel about yourself. Are you living a life consistent with the words you speak, are you helping others, are you helping your community or your country or your world? A winning politics is a politics of values that appeals to the best in people, that enables citizens to dream again to make a better America. Bobby Kennedy was right: We can do better.

Too many progressives make the mistake of believing people are galvanized around ten-point programs. They are not! People respond according to their sense of right and wrong. They respond to a leadership of values.

Not only do Democrats have too timid and downsized an agenda, we also have failed to confront conservatives on core value questions. I call the Republicans’ philosophy the “New Isolationism.” Not as in foreign affairs, but in human affairs. It is a “Buddy, you’re on your own” philosophy. If you are losing your family farm, if you can’t afford prescription drugs, if you have no health insurance, if you are working forty hours a week but are still poor and unable to support your children, if you are a homeless Vietnam veteran struggling with mental problems, you’re on your own.

Whatever happened to “There but for the grace of God go I” or, “Love thy neighbor as thyself”? We need to replace isolationism with fellowship. We need to talk about community, about justice, about the goodness of America. People are ready for a politics that inspires them to be their best. Stephen Carter, in his book *Civility*, describes how, in the early days of the railroad, people who were crowded together on an arduous journey cooperated and were good to one another, out of common necessity. We as a country need to realize that we are on a common journey and that

we all need to give a little and help one another so we can all get to where we want to go.

But it is not enough to inspire people with vision and good public policy. We need the power to make the change. Effective grassroots organizing is the way to get there. Grassroots organizing involves listening to and lobbying and advocating for people by going directly to where they live and work. It is the antithesis of big-money politics. Organizing at the grassroots requires hard and mostly unglamorous work, easily identifiable goals, and political sophistication. But it can be enormously effective and successful.

The good news is that there is some great organizing taking place in the country. Under John Sweeney's able leadership, the AFL-CIO is committed to "organizing the unorganized." It is a different labor organization — no longer just middle-aged white men lobbying in Washington. They are reaching out to women and people of color, building coalitions in neighborhoods and communities.

The Service Employees International Union is also leading the way. President Andy Stein insists that 50 percent of the union's budget goes to organizing. The results are dramatic: SEIU successfully organized seventy thousand home health care workers in Los Angeles. I spent some time visiting these workers during the organizing drive. They were mainly Latinas who earned little more than six dollars an hour, with no health care benefits. In very personal terms, they told me (in Spanish) about their elderly and disabled patients. They were very proud of helping people. I had to probe to get them to focus on the working conditions, which were deplorable. Now, a year later, they belong to a union and they make more than ten dollars an hour, with full health care benefits. Now their work will be valued. This is what the organizing of the unorganized is all about.

Throughout the labor movement, energy has replaced the old complacency. When Democrats controlled the Congress for so many years, labor relied on interest-group politics. If there was a problem, you called the committee or subcommittee, where you had a long-standing relationship. The grassroots base withered away while the "Christian right" learned how to mobilize support. They became good at our forgotten game: voter registration, door knocking, phoning, electing people to school boards, writing letters to the editor, calling in to talk radio, turning out voters. Now labor and other progressive organizations must learn from their example.

Right after I was first elected to the Senate, the AFL-CIO organized a "labor solidarity" march in Washington. Only a few members of Congress joined in because we weren't in session at the date chosen. I remember thinking, "Why bring workers to Washington when Congress is in recess? They need to feel the heat." But this huge march wasn't connected to any fight. Representatives and senators, out of town, felt no pressure.

At the end of the march, I suggested a follow-up to the AFL-CIO leaders. What about a "labor solidarity" day in individual states. After all, Washington, D.C., was too long or expensive a trip for many members, and we could organize some tough face-to-face accountability sessions with representatives and senators in their home districts. We could do it all across the country. I might as well have been talking to a man on the moon.

Contrast this attitude with labor's march in the other Washington, what became known as the "battle in Seattle." It was only eight years later, but these were light-years for organized labor. Unions focused on organizing and on rank-and-file member education. They had learned another lesson. Mailings sent out to members

with a list of union-endorsed candidates didn't cut it. It was time to focus on issues and education and empower members, armed with information, to make choices.

It was organized labor and the organized environmental community that brought forty thousand people to Seattle to challenge the World Trade Organization. They were joined by family farmers, representatives of allied nongovernmental organizations, members of the human rights community, and students. It was amazing to hear steelworkers and Teamsters emphasize the environment at their rallies, and to hear environmental leaders speak at these labor rallies! Steelworkers and environmentalists are a potent coalition. The gathering in Seattle should be viewed with a sense of history. Good organizing recognizes how institutional changes affect people and create organizing possibilities, and this work at the end of November 1999 may prove to be a milestone in this regard.

One hundred years earlier, as the U.S. economy began to shift from local units to national interests, the country saw wrenching economic times. Labor conditions were exploitative. Family farmers were driven off their lands. These conditions gave rise to the populist and progressive movements, with a daring set of what at that time seemed like impossible demands: the right to organize, a forty-hour workweek, the right of women to vote, direct election of U.S. senators, action against trusts. The political system was even more dominated by big money than it is now. Labor organizers were murdered. The media were hostile. Yet these demands, an effort to civilize an emerging national economy, eventually became the basis of new laws.

The demands in Seattle, made by a populist, progressive coalition led by labor and environmentalists, are aimed at civilizing an emerging global economy — to make a global economy work not just for multinational corporations but also for working people, family farmers, the environment, and human rights. Whether this coalition will hold is the question. But one thing is certain: Trade policy can never be discussed again without questions concerning child labor, the right to organize, the environment, and human rights. The potential exists for new and exciting progressive coalitions. The adage “Think globally and act locally” is being replaced with a new wisdom: Act locally and act globally.

It is also heartening to see the success of “living wage” campaigns across our country, which demand that governments require businesses with whom they do business to pay a decent wage to their employees. It is an important, new definition of employment: not just a job but a job paying a reasonable wage with reasonable benefits as well.

The progressive religious community is also finally finding its voice. People are building inner city/inner suburb coalitions again, around economic issues: jobs, housing, transportation to get to the jobs, health care, and education for children. What is so exciting about this organizing is the emergence of new coalitions. Never before have these citizens seen their common interests and organized together to fight for their children and communities.

Public Campaign is also embracing a grassroots approach to reform. This is completely different from interest-group lobbying in Washington. The premise (with which I agree) is that comprehensive campaign finance reform cannot be won in Washington, especially when the system is wired for incumbents who are not that anxious to change the laws. Rather, a citizen politics has a much better chance of defeating a money politics at the state level, where progressives can form grassroots organizations.

“Clean money, clean elections” victories in Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Arizona point the way — those states now have voluntary public financing of state

elections. I saw with my own eyes the fascinating energy and coalition of citizens behind these successful initiatives. In many living rooms, people who had never known one another, and indeed in the past may have opposed each other, came together to fight successfully for authentic democracy.

These victories will provide models for and provoke the hopes and aspirations of citizens in other states. The only cautionary note I would sound about this organizing concerns the danger of a “deadend localism.” Victories should be won by people where they live, but if the victories never affect national or international centers of decision-making power, then we are still not seriously contesting for power. This is the central challenge for progressive politics: how to build the local victories into a strong national and international presence that can crucially define the quality of life. Right now the whole does not equal the sum of the parts. Amazing people have done so much to make their communities better, but progressives hold little power on the national level.

Electoral politics is one crucial way we contest for power in America, and progressives need to get better at it. We tend to be attracted to politics because of the issues and far less excited by the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of political campaigns, much less the compromises that are inevitable in those campaigns.

I’ve met hundreds of great young organizers but very few young people who are campaign managers on any level. Electoral politics seems unsavory — and indeed it can be, depending on who is involved. The problem is that progressives fail to build leadership and gain power when we eschew electoral politics. You can be certain that the “Christian right” develops local leadership and runs candidates for school boards. Progressives too often don’t. In every state, we need to get serious about developing leaders — starting with school board, city council, county commissioner, mayoral, and state legislative races. Money is much less a factor in these races than it is nationally, and well-organized citizen campaigns can win over and over again.

I am shocked at how little of this work is being done, at how few progressives there are who have the interest and the skills to manage political campaigns. We have to figure out a way to engage many more people in electoral politics. If we build our progressive political leadership, state by state, then we will also be in a much stronger position to thrust forward candidates for governor and for seats in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Right now, it is the same-old same-old approach in the Democratic Party. I thought it was bad in 1990 when I first ran for Senate, but it has gotten even worse. The DSCC is focused almost totally on whether a candidate is wealthy, already has power and status, or has access to big bucks. These criteria are not likely to produce many progressives focused on populist and economic-justice issues. A few might slip through, but they will be exceptions.

It can be an alienating experience to attend a Democratic Party luncheon focused on upcoming Senate races. Too much of the time is spent on fund-raising, and when I hear the DSCC report on candidates, it is the usual conventional wisdom about who can win and why, and who can’t.

Bernard “B” Rappaport, a very wealthy contributor to the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates, was recently honored at a DSCC dinner. Different senators spoke in glowing terms about B, and then it was his turn. He started out by saying, “I am scared to death. I’m wondering what all this is going to cost me.” There was a good-humored, not cynical, laugh by all in the room. He then spoke for one more minute (usually B is quite a talker). He said, “I know all of you, and you are all

good people. But I know that often you don't vote what you really believe in. I am eighty years old, and my wish is for the Democratic Party to get back to principles and to really stand for something."

This is my wish as well. But it is not going to happen on present course. We need to build not a third party but an independent political force that does a lot of organizing within the Democratic Party — especially candidate recruitment and elections. This new political force must introduce fresh perspectives into the political dialogue of our country; recruit candidates; provide the training, skills, and resources for winning campaigns; build an infrastructure of field directors and campaign managers; have a savvy media presence; apply effective grassroots organizing to electoral politics; and build political leadership at the local, state, and federal levels of government.

There is a wave of social activism on our campuses today, more than I've seen in the past fifteen years. But most of these students are not joining the Young Democrats. I went to a very poignant neighborhood meeting in Minneapolis, with more than one hundred people crammed into a home. Almost all of the people there were under thirty. Most were professionals. Their exclusive focus was on issues: education, health care, housing, the environment, and community service. They had little interest in politics as usually defined — candidates, political parties, and elections. They were incredibly bright and thoughtful, but as it stands they will not be future political leaders. Which is why politics as usual shouldn't work any longer. An independent progressive politics, combining intellectual integrity, grassroots organizing, and electoral politics, is a force whose time has come.

I intend to work with progressives around the country to make this happen. Always, with a twinkle in my eye, I will represent the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party.

But regardless of what I decide to do in the future, I will remain actively engaged and committed to the issues and causes outlined here. I have dedicated my life to the cause of economic justice and equality of opportunity for all Americans.

The famous abolitionist Wendell Phillips was once asked, "Wendell, why are you so on fire?"

He responded, "I'm on fire because I have mountains of ice before me to melt."
So do we. ❁

