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Framing for Electability

Feeling like a cultural contrarian is exhausting. Online and among friends I discuss leftist philosophy and debate approaches to the crises we face as a nation. These are the issues that I mull over and analyze. Then, I take that mindset with me into mainstream political discourse, where it collides with reality. Reality is that an 80-year-old moderate conservative is the face of the ostensibly left-wing party in the United States; reality is that he’s probably the best-case-scenario president for progressives until at least 2028.

How is it possible that leftist movements are widely popular in many parts of the world, yet they have next to no influence on governance in the United States? Why is it that being a leftist in the United States feels like being a subversive guerilla? These are the questions that haunt my conscience, but this isn’t an American history Ph.D., and rehashing the past won’t change the political landscape that we face today. So, how do progressive leaders move forward from here?

**The Problem**

Leftists are nothing if not ideological purists. We bitterly squabble and hate each other over the exact details of the utopias we envision, all the while losing sight of America’s real Overton window. The Overton window is the range of viewpoints that are considered reasonable in mainstream discourse without being labeled extreme, and in this country that range is quite conservative, with “ideologies to the left of mainstream Democrats [tending] to get lumped together… and the right [casting] all of it as socialism or communism” (Astor). Progressives need to accept that we have very little political influence in this country and that progressive strategy has to be made with that fact in mind. In this political environment, progressive candidates have a very limited voice in mainstream discourse, so fighting over labels will always be a waste of a valuable moment in the spotlight. According to Nadeem of Pew Research, 60% of U.S. adults say they have a negative impression of socialism, and 36% say they have a positive impression of socialism. This polling shows that the word socialist evokes a negative gut reaction from most Americans. Being smeared with that label already creates an uphill battle for centrist democrats, so any self-proclaimed democratic socialist is dead on arrival in a national election.

While the public discourse over socialism and its definition is dominated by bad-faith arguments from right-wing pundits, the state of America’s economy and policy slips further and further from progressive goals. “The fraction of children earning more than their parents fell from approximately 90% for children born in 1940 to around 50% for children entering the labor market today” (Chetty 405). Furthermore, “most of the decline in absolute mobility is driven by the more unequal distribution of economic growth in recent decades” (Chetty 405). All progressives, from social democrats to Trotskyites, can agree that these trends toward increased wealth inequality and reduced economic mobility are bad for the well-being of most Americans, so progressives need to put aside ideological perfectionism and unify in support of realistic policy changes. Chetty goes as far as to say that “if one wants to revive the ‘American dream’ of high rates of absolute mobility, then one must have an interest in growth that is spread more broadly across the income distribution” (405). When ‘the American dream is dead’ goes from an edgy take, typical of a chronically-online Twitter user, to a claim supported by a peer-reviewed economics study, it has to be a wake-up call for progressives to focus on actionable reforms. There are realistic progressive policies that have the potential to address this problem of drastic and growing inequality between the ultra-wealthy and everyone else, but infighting won’t help achieve any of them.

**Obama**

The prospects of progressivism as I’ve described them thus far seem pretty dire, but progressive candidates have been successful in the past. We just take their achievements for granted because once they’re integrated into the status quo we forget that they were once progressive relative to their contemporary political environments. It’s easy to forget how revolutionary it was to elect a black president in 2008, but with 8 years of the Obama administration in the rear-view mirror, it’s worthwhile to see how he managed to pull it off. If Obama had gone on live TV, praised the Black Panther Party, and explicitly called out systemic racism, he would have lost in a landslide. It doesn’t matter whether or not he would have liked to say those things, doing so would have killed his campaign and sabotaged the progress that he achieved.

Instead, he managed to sway moderates by presenting progressivism in an approachable way. For instance, conservative presidential candidates have emphasized American exceptionalism, the idea that America’s strength makes it uniquely great, for decades. Rather than reject this popular idea, Obama used it to his advantage by “[reinterpreting] American exceptionalism… as a continual struggle for greater inclusion” (*Obama Effect* 16). An example of this is his 2007 candidacy announcement, in which he proclaimed “The genius of our founders is that they designed a system that can be changed” (qtd. in *Obama Effect* 25). Framing American exceptionalism in terms of civil rights “rather than emphasizing military might or frontier mythology” (*Obama Effect* 25) was a lasting paradigm shift in American political rhetoric. While it’s true that rhetoric does not directly achieve reform, good rhetoric is how elections are won, and it’s hard to implement any kind of policy if you can’t get elected. Convincing socially conservative voters that electing the nation’s first black president was consistent with traditionally conservative ideals was an incredible feat by Obama’s campaign, and it played a huge role in the decline of overtly racial and racist rhetoric in America. While many progressives, including myself, disagree with Obama on issues such as foreign and economic policy, it is undeniable that he provides a successful framework for popularizing progressive stances.

Obama’s campaign strategy may be an interesting and useful anecdote, but one election does not a reliable phenomenon make, especially when the stakes are so high. Luckily, there is data to support this strategy too. In a study at Stanford, researchers:

found that a presidential candidate who framed his progressive economic platform to be consistent with more conservative value concerns like patriotism, family, and respect for tradition – as opposed to more liberal value concerns like equality and social justice – was supported significantly more by conservatives and, unexpectedly, by moderates as well (Voelkel 2).

In conjunction with Obama’s story, this study provides strong support for the idea that the way a candidate frames their vision matters more than their actual policies. Obama’s campaign demonstrates practical precedent and relevance to social policy, while Voelkel provides theoretical data that suggest relevance to economic policy. While there’s room for skepticism of each of these sources and their support for my conclusion, it’s very difficult to imagine that both cases imply the same phenomenon by a fluke of chance. Furthermore, I believe that these similar findings in distinct policy areas suggest that the effectiveness of framing an issue through voters’ preconceived values is inherent to how we perceive candidates and thus applicable across all policy areas.

**Trump**

It may seem odd to turn to a man despised by progressives to formulate progressive platforms, but, like Obama, Trump accomplished an exceptional feat of electoral politics in 2016, and it would be negligent not to analyze his campaign for its strategic insights. Trump created a populist movement, positioning himself as an honest man of the people, in contrast to the image of a sly political insider with no regard for the actual interests of the people. This persona and message resonated with many Americans, especially white voters without college degrees, which explains how he overperformed electoral expectations in disproportionately white regions like the Midwest. Every politically-engaged American has heard that story countless times in recent years, but it has a huge hole that is rarely addressed. Namely, how did a billionaire convince countless working-class voters that he was just like them, and thus that he was the only candidate that genuinely had their interests in mind?

Surprise! The answer is framing. Trump “[presented] himself as ‘a man who builds things,’ who got his start building housing in and around New York—hiring real Americans to build those houses and hotels, affecting people and their communities in tangible ways” (Karakaya 895). One of the most important values in the culture of white working-class Americans is hard work, especially in the context of supporting one’s family and community. Knowing this, Trump framed his business background through the ideal of hard work to equate his real-estate career with blue-collar construction work, thereby convincing many working-class Americans that he was ‘one of them’. This narrative was appealing to so many voters, not only because it aligned with their values, but also because they were desperate.

It’s common knowledge that life has gotten harder for working-class Americans in recent decades. America has deindustrialized, with many blue-collar jobs being offshored to developing countries. Furthermore, as Chetty concluded, economic mobility has declined significantly, meaning that despite these workers toiling long hours at demanding jobs, very few of them have been able to build wealth or achieve any increase in their standard of living in recent years. They believe that hard work should guarantee a decent life, and yet no matter how hard they work, they continue to struggle and their communities continue to deteriorate. In this way, blue-collar workers have reason to feel aggrieved and left behind. Thus, it shouldn’t be surprising that “many workers appreciated Trump’s enthusiasm for ‘speaking truth to power’ and believed that through him, they could be heard at last” (Lamont S165). After all, it makes sense that they would be excited about a candidate who, for the first time in decades, gave them genuine hope that they would have a representative in the White House. So, “this group came to see Trump as uniquely capable of channelling their world-view, despite the giant social and economic gap separating them from the candidate” (Lamont S165). By positioning himself as their one true representative, Trump managed to dominate the white blue-collar vote - a demographic that is overrepresented in the Midwestern swing states that often decide US presidential elections.

This story illustrates a huge missed opportunity for progressives. Trump has harnessed the anger of these working-class voters for his political aims, but he did very little in his time as president to address the issues they face or help them in any other way. In contrast, progressive policy is definitionally aimed at improving conditions for the marginalized, especially working-class voters who are exploited by our economic system, yet progressive candidates enjoy very little support among white working-class voters because they tend to have conservative social values. These voters would be the primary beneficiaries of the populist pro-union labor policies that progressives tout, so they are a huge untapped source of support for progressive candidates.

**The Template**

The current figurehead of progressivism in the United States, Bernie Sanders, is a good place to start building a template for progressive candidates. Sanders has made a name for himself by picking up significant momentum in both the 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential primaries with a populist movement not unlike Trump’s. Sanders kicked off an important speech during the 2019 Iowa caucuses by saying “Thank you all very much for being here tonight and thank you for being part of a political revolution which will transform America” to “finally create an economy and a government which works for all Americans, and not just the one percent” (qtd. in Macaulay 156). In the opening few lines of this speech, Sanders reveals both his best and worst attributes as a candidate. Promises to wield the power of the presidency in the interests of average people and criticism of “the one percent” are staples of the populist rhetoric that has earned him an enthusiastic base of supporters. However, he also has a major flaw; Sanders has a bad habit of using overtly socialist and revolutionary rhetoric. On a personal level, I respect the principled approach of sticking to what he authentically believes, but strategy is what wins elections, not authenticity, and there is nothing strategic about giving ammunition to the opponents who portray him as radical. As Macaulay details, Sanders made appealing to blue-collar workers a significant priority in his campaign. His populist approach was quite successful in many heavily blue-collar states during the 2020 primaries, which suggests he might have been able to reestablish Democratic dominance in blue-collar areas in the general election. However, he never got that chance because he was perceived as radical by many Democrats and lost the nomination.

The lesson that progressives should learn from Sander’s story is that any argument over who is and isn’t a socialist or a progressive should be dismissed as a distraction from the issues and an attempt to brand a candidate with an unpopular label rather than discuss the merits of their policies. Katie Porter, a progressive House Representative and Senate candidate from California, provides an excellent example of this approach. When asked by an interviewer if she was running “‘in the mold of Bernie Sanders, or Elizabeth Warren’”, or as a centrist, she replied that “‘it’s not about a label, it’s about being able to talk to people about who you fight for… I think the label’s actually part of the problem’” (Siders). As Porter says, the way for a progressive to achieve popular support is to concentrate fully on the issues that average people are facing and what she would do to alleviate them, that is, to lean fully into populist messaging. So, the template progressive candidate should be an enthusiastic populist of Sanders’ style that can avoid being put into a box like Porter and frame their message in an approachable manner like Obama.

Now with the broad strokes of style out of the way, we can finally get into a policy example. Economic policy tends to be progressives’ strong suit, and it is very conducive to populism because difficult financial decisions are nearly universal. For instance, according to Oliphant of Pew Research, 61% of U.S. adults believe that taxes on households earning over $400,000 per year should be raised, and 65% believe that taxes on corporations should be raised. As these data show, this progressive stance is quite popular and can thus be used as a core campaign policy. In order to put a populist spin on this proposal, the additional revenue should be spent on making life easier for working people in one of many ways. The case could be made to spend the money on universal healthcare, affordable housing, a child tax credit, lower taxes on the working class, or any number of social programs - which you choose doesn’t matter nearly as much as showing a willingness to fight for working people. Last and most important, is the question of framing. For instance, patriotism is one of the conservative values mentioned by Voelkel, so framing this tax reform through patriotism would make it more palatable to moderate and conservative voters. That might sound something like: “Loving your countrymen and ensuring that their basic needs are met is a fundamental part of loving your country, so the ultra-wealthy have a patriotic duty to pay their fair share of taxes to support the wellbeing of the American people at large.” There’s nothing special about the example that I’ve given, in fact, this approach is quite formulaic and works for numerous combinations of progressive policies, populist appeals, and conservative values; the precedent and the data agree that this is the path toward electoral success for progressives, and with the various hardships impacting the American people today, there’s no time to waste.

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