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## Ballots for Equality: An Approach to the Radical Tradition in U.S. Electoral Politics

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# Ballots for Equality: An Approach to the Radical Tradition in U.S. Electoral Politics

## **Abstract**

Posing radical challenges to structural inequality is the defining quality of the Left. What role electoral politics might play in such processes is a dilemma of radical politics, the contours of which vary by historical and national contexts. For the U.S. Left there is a distinctive aspect of the dilemma directly related to the failure of a "Left" party of even the most moderate social democratic type to take root, creating a seemingly never ending debate over the value if any of "third party" progressive organizing. This debate is current, as illustrated by three divergent approaches; independent left electoral politics (Socialist Alternative), organizing within the less conservative of the dominant parties (Progressive Democrats of America), and a social movement focus outside the electoral process (Occupy Movement). The present day examples of alternative Left strategies noted here in passing are but three of many such specific organizational options for progressive politics. This article does not seek to advocate for any one of these options to the exclusion of the others but rather seeks to provide historical perspective.

## **Keywords**

Electoral Politics, American Politics, Radical Politics

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*“Thank God Lincoln is chosen. What a growth since 1840.” – Joshua Leavitt, abolitionist, 1860<sup>i</sup>*

## The Electoral Dilemmas of the U.S. Left

Posing radical challenges to structural inequality is the defining quality of the Left. What role electoral politics might play in such processes is a dilemma of radical politics, the contours of which vary by historical and national contexts. For the U.S. Left there is a distinctive aspect of the dilemma directly related to the failure of a "Left" party of even the most moderate social democratic type to take root, creating a seemingly never ending debate over the value if any of "third party" progressive organizing. This debate is current, as illustrated by three divergent approaches; independent left electoral politics (Socialist Alternative), organizing within the less conservative of the dominant parties (Progressive Democrats of America), and a social movement focus outside the electoral process (Occupy Movement). The present day examples of alternative Left strategies noted here in passing are but three of many such specific organizational options for progressive politics. This article does not seek to advocate for any one of these options to the exclusion of the others but rather seeks to provide historical perspective.

The history of the Left in the United State is often depicted and understood one-dimensionally as a tragedy of “agony.”<sup>ii</sup> The “inevitable” defeats are claimed to be products of deep, abiding, and “exceptional” features of U.S. history, culture, and social structure.<sup>iii</sup> The U.S. political psyche is purportedly so deeply liberal-individualist that radical-egalitarian ideas are fated to never play more than a minor part. Radical politics have served as a vehicle by which certain social strata, such as small farmers, have protested the oppressive effects of industrial capitalism, but presumably these were the necessary pains of economic development and modernization. Or radicalism served as a means by which some immigrant groups assimilated, “a path out of their European [socialist] past into American present.”<sup>iv</sup> In either case, radical movements may be seen as ephemeral moments, just so much steam blown off at historical points of tension in the system of liberal hegemony.

This article, by contrast, traces the historical persistence of the U.S. radical tradition in electoral politics. The Left in the U.S. has a long and complex history. Its historical and empirical pattern of political weakness is undeniable and its long-standing propensities towards fragmentation are notorious. Nonetheless, it endures, issues challenges to elite-capitalist domination, and has carried on and developed a tradition of egalitarian protest. It has demonstrated remarkable continuities and staying power and occasional, albeit underestimated and misunderstood, capacity to affect change.

There is a patronizing strand of liberal historiography and scholarship which suggests that small radical movements and parties provide an ongoing service to the liberal consensus through the contribution of ideas. Ideas such as woman’s suffrage, racial equality, or workers’ protections, that were initially perceived to be too radical, but are eventually taken up into the platforms of the dominant two party duopoly.<sup>v</sup> The claim of this article is quite different. It is not sufficient to see the role of radical parties as augmentation of the liberal agenda. To grant a

faux significance in this manner to radical thought and practice obscures the depth of the radical critiques of American society.

While it is the case that liberal-reformist parties often “borrow” from the platforms of the Left, the radical demands and calls for an egalitarian, just, and democratic order are unassimilable without a transformation of the political and social order. As will be discussed below, such transformations have been and are envisioned, and in some cases have been approached more closely than is perhaps well understood, in distinct phases of U.S. history. Radicalism has focused on the outrages of slavery and racial inequality, the exploitation of laborers, farmers, and consumers, somewhat more intermittently on the oppression of women, the destruction of environment, the ravages of militarism and imperialism, and more recently on the marginalization of the LGBTQ community among other concerns. Transformation of the underlying structural conditions that give rise to these social evils has been the forte of a luminous history of radical movements from antebellum abolition to contemporary “new social movements.”

The radicals themselves have been typically ambivalent about electoral politics and often for good reasons. The reasons for their ambivalence are various. For the Garrisonian abolitionists the electoral process was a snare and a path to the corrupting influence of the spoils system.<sup>vi</sup> For the Greenback-Labor-Populists the electoral system was experienced as at first a place where they were “counted out” through corrupt and even violent manipulation and subsequently captured by the hope of electoral success, obliterated by the single issue focus on “free silver,” and absorbed into the Democratic Party.<sup>vii</sup> Underlying this ambivalence is a problem that goes to the very heart of what it means to be “radical” or “left,” that there are fundamental structural inequalities that give the lie to prevailing and deeply embedded assumptions about “democracy” in the United States. The “ballots for equality” of the Left electoral tradition are those that challenge these structural inequities. Yet to do so within the realm of electoral politics seemingly requires an assumption that “the system works” or at least that liberal democracy can be made to work as a means of popular protest and even transformation of the very same society that falsely proclaims its democratic equality.

An intriguing example of this ambivalence is found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century debates among divergent strands of American socialism and anarcho-syndicalism. While the IWW (International Workers of the World) “Wobblies” eschewed the ballot box approach in favor of direct action at the point of production, the Socialist Party was riven by division between those who favored a full embrace of a legal-reformist electoral approach that would exclude Wobbly participation from the Party (e.g. Victor Berger) and those who preferred to maintain a working relationship with the IWW and advocated revolutionary politics and industrial unionism, even while maintaining a focus on electoral campaigns (most notably, Eugene Debs). Maintaining the most consistent and unified commitment to electoral politics in this period and beyond was the oldest of all these groups, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) under the disciplined leadership of Daniel De Leon. As one historian remarks, “De Leon stands out as a defender of the genuineness of American democracy” in contrast to the IWW’s rejection of what it saw as a sham process and where the faction-ridden Socialist Party was

unclear, the SLP was and remained clearly committed to a vision of worker control similar to the goals of the IWW to be achieved by the means pursued somewhat more successfully by the Socialist Party.<sup>viii</sup> In this case the SLP's commitment flowed from the leader's understanding of late nineteenth century "orthodox Marxism" and its commitment to independent political action.

The history of the Socialist Labor Party is a remarkable case of marginalized continuity on the American Left. From De Leon's death in 1914 until 1969, the party followed the iron discipline of its Danish-born National Secretary Arnold Petersen, author of five books under the title "De Leon." Or perhaps "followed" is not the correct metaphor in that the party stayed in place ideologically and its vote remained miniscule. From its first presidential nomination in 1892 until 1972 the party's candidates continually received a five-digit popular vote total, peaking at 53,831 in 1972.<sup>ix</sup> Of course by the 1970s such totals represented an even smaller micro share of the vote than had been the case eighty years earlier. Yet the party membership was deeply affected when its candidate's total fell to 9,616 just four years later in 1976 and it has not run a candidate since. The collapse could be attributed to several factors, including tougher ballot access laws and rules in most states, but the primary cause seems to have revolved around the efforts of Petersen's successor, Nathan Karp, to modernize the party, its image, and some of its theoretical analyses. Breaking the frozen continuity of the Petersen era appears to have set off a process of dissolution of the party.

The ultimate futility of the SLP's campaigns is perhaps a bitter example of an approach best avoided. It has been argued that a tightly focused, and in the instance of the SLP probably overly rigid, ideological platform cannot succeed within the exceptional American political context. For institutional and constitutional reasons, the two dominant parties in "the American mold" are not programmatic at all but rather "catch-all" vote catching machines, ready, willing, and quite able to form the most wildly contradictory coalitions in their almost always successful pursuit of electoral victory.<sup>x</sup>

The image of the American polity as a desert without ideology is most assuredly overstated. There have been enduring and divisive conflicts within and between elites from the Federalist era through the Civil War and subsequent periods of industrial and corporate capitalism.<sup>xi</sup> The Federalists, Jeffersonian Republicans, Jacksonian Democrats, National Republicans, Whigs, and then antislavery Republicans each proposed distinct and typically clashing images of the American future and each was rooted in a specific political economy and relied on the financial support of elite fractions, contending for hegemony. That the electoral system has been nominally stabilized, intermittent enthusiasm for third party candidates notwithstanding, is indeed remarkable but should not be permitted to obscure the pattern of conflict and ideological contention to be found within the nation's ruling class(es). Clashes between finance and industrial capital, between energy and agricultural versus high technology sectors have real implications for working people, but within such frameworks the non-elite classes will remain of subordinate concern and in perpetually subaltern condition.

The distinction of radical electoral politics then is that it challenges these conditions in the name of democracy and equality through difficult means where the institutional deck is stacked: electoral politics. Such efforts have not only led to futility, as the SLP example perhaps

best illustrates, but also to debacles of unforeseen consequences when the very effort to draw votes to a radical platform have apparently contributed directly to the electoral success of the more reactionary political faction of the ruling elite.

The most recent and well know debacle of the electoral Left is the outcome of the 2000 presidential election in which the Green Party candidate Ralph Nader's 3% of the popular vote supposedly denied an electoral vote majority to the plurality vote leader and Democratic candidate Al Gore. Nader's vote was greater than the official margin of victory for Bush over Gore in three states,<sup>xii</sup> any one of which could have provided Gore with the necessary electoral vote. Still the well-known and publicized chicaneries of the vote count in Florida, the largest and most electorally significant of the three states should give pause to any definitive conclusions about the electoral math and what the outcome might have been had there not been a notable Left electoral campaign that year. That the 2000 Nader campaign drew disaffected and alienated voters to the polls who would not otherwise have turned out may be the only reasonable empirical certainty in this case.

In the light of such history perhaps it is remarkable that some voters continue to choose to "come out" (as the biblically inspired abolitionists used to say) from the electoral duopoly. They come out not only to reject electoral action entirely however, in the tradition of the Garrisonians and the Wobblies, but also to "come out" to the polls and cast ballots for equality rather than for a "lesser evil." Obscured by the outcome is the fact that in 2000 the combined vote of Gore and Nader was 52% of the popular vote, a clear majority left of the center of the American spectrum. For the first time since 1976 when the combined vote of Jimmy Carter and Independent (and then still progressive) Eugene McCarthy registered a similar proportion of the vote, the conservative vote was clearly in the minority. The Bush victory in the Electoral College as such served to obscure the rising strength of liberal and progressive votes.

A rather interesting historical parallel case to 2000 is found in the election of 1844. In that year the abolitionist Liberty Party ran its second national campaign with repentant former slave owner James Birney as its presidential standard bearer. Birney received but 2.3% of the national popular vote.<sup>xiii</sup> Not only the Liberty party's ticket, but also its literature was proscribed in the southern half of the country. However in New York state, Birney's 3.3% share of the popular vote seemingly swung the state away from the Whig candidate Henry Clay, a slave owner who ostensibly favored the gradual elimination of slavery through the emigration of African-Americans and their colonization of Africa or other tropical locales. Instead, victory went to yet another slave owner James K. Polk, a full throttle supporter of the expansion of slavery through the admission of Texas into the Union, who subsequently pursued an imperialist war against Mexico, leading in turn to the prospect of the further spread of slavery to the West Coast. Yet as with the 2000 election, the notion that the radical electoral campaign assisted the "greater evil" requires us to assume that Birney supporters would indeed have voted for Clay and also to overlook the long term ramifications of the Liberty Party's emergence as an electoral force and its relationship to the broader abolitionist movement.

In the short run the Liberty vote in 1844 arguably helped to create even worse conditions as embodied in the successful implementation of the Polk administration's policies. Yet, the war

and expansion of slavery that accompanied it were in fact unpopular, as indeed the combined Clay-Birney majority in 1844 already indicated. The subsequent rise of the antislavery Free Soil and the Republican party will be sketched further, but the point here is that in a remarkably brief twenty year span the antislavery popular vote rose from the 0.3% Birney received in 1840 to Lincoln's 40% and electoral majority in 1860, in turn touching off the sanguinary conflict that ended slavery, undoubtedly the most fundamental of all American socio-economic transformations. From margin to center in a short time span, the Lincoln administration achieved precisely what was the singular goal of the Liberty campaign in 1840, despite the absence of abolition from the Republican Party's platforms.

The historic lesson of the Liberty Party is indeterminate. It is simply the case that the future is unknown, when radicals venture forth into the electoral arena they cannot know if their efforts will be futile, lead to a debacle, or contribute in unforeseen ways to larger processes of historical change and transformation. It would be a Petersen-like rigidity to expect that a singular lesson may be derived from the electoral history of the U.S. Left. Perhaps the truest thing that can be said is that the subject merits deeper study so that one might better understand the actual interplay between political action and the conditions under which radical transformation may occur. To that end a historical sketch of the phases of radical electoral history follows.

### The Historical Phases of U.S. Left Electoral History

Arguably the history of the electoral Left begins with Jacksonian Democracy, in so far as the Jacksonian era and the successes of the Democratic Party were the result of the expansion of the franchise and the emergence of a truly mass electoral politics, expanding access to the political arena beyond the bounds comfortable to the Colonial or Federalist era elites. Jacksonian Democracy not only received the bulk of the votes of newly enfranchised male wage earners but it also contained a distinctively radical strand of working class radicalism within the broader coalition.<sup>xiv</sup> At the local level the Workingmen's Party emerged as a force in the 1830s in a number of northeastern cities, but the "Workies" as they were known stayed within the bounds of Jacksonian Democracy at the national level.<sup>xv</sup>

The history of "third party" radical electoral efforts at the national level begins with the aforementioned Liberty Party campaign in 1840 and may be divided into four distinct historical phases as follows:

1. Anti-Slavery Politics: 1840-1872
2. Greenback-Populist Politics: 1876-1900
3. Socialists and Social Progressivism: 1900-1952
4. The Emergence of a New Electoral Left: 1968-

In the Anti-Slavery Politics phase, the following party formations may be identified as significant for present purposes and the years of their national campaigns are noted.

Liberty Party (1840-1844)

National Liberty Party (1848)

Free Soil Party (1848-1852)

Republican Party (1856-1872)<sup>xvi</sup>

The Liberty Party entered the fray in 1840 as a single-issue party without a platform. Its call was quite direct: for the abolition of slavery in the U.S. Yet the launching of the party was in fact the product of a deep division and struggle within the abolitionist movement, with the political abolitionists endorsing electoral action and the followers of William Lloyd Garrison opting for a strategy of “moral suasion.”<sup>xvii</sup> The salient question for present-day progressives is to evaluate the historical role played by the Liberty Party and the broader abolitionist movement in bringing about the abolition of slavery. A distinctive feature of the Anti-Slavery politics was that these were politics in which the movement was seeking the emancipation of another group rather than themselves.<sup>xviii</sup> Quite obviously, the slave was not party to the political process and was without civil rights by definition, whereas subsequent radical movements have been at least ostensibly represented by parties of farmers, workers, and include women, African-Americans, the LBGQTQ community and others seeking political voice and social justice for themselves.

If there ever was a “vanguard” party in American history, a party which led the way for those who were not in a structural position to emancipate themselves it was the Liberty Party, or was it? In electoral terms, the party was “only the most advanced portion to date of the broad constituency” opposed to slavery.<sup>xix</sup> In social movement terms, the “vanguard” role was played by the American Anti-Slavery Society, which did not engage in electoral politics but, in contrast to the Liberty Party, did include disenfranchised African-Americans and women while serving as a center for agitation and broader organization and efforts not limited to conventional politics. The subsequent history of the Liberty Party gives some credence to this view. The singular focus on abolition gave way in 1844 to a Liberty party platform that may best be described as “classical liberal” in content supporting free trade and constitutionalism, albeit with some radical elements such as land redistribution and protective labor reforms.<sup>xx</sup>

In 1848, the bulk of the Liberty Party’s membership and supporters joined the Free Soil Party. Popular opposition to the expansion of slavery subsequent to the Mexican War paved the way for the formation of a new anti-slavery party. But the Free Soil Party was not in any way committed to abolition, indeed it could well be said that the politics of representing the racial “other” ended with Free Soil’s emergence as it represented a free labor constituency concerned with keeping slavery out of the West precisely so that they might colonize it for themselves. The Free Soil Party nominated former president and longtime ally of the Slave Power, Martin Van Buren. Narrating Van Buren’s opportunistic political shift lies beyond the present scope, but his campaign did doubtless bring antislavery politics more into the mainstream. Van Buren received over 10% of the national popular vote, while the Free Soil Party successfully gained representation in Congress as well as at the state level, most notably in New York and New England. In New York State the National Liberty Party ran political abolitionist Gerrit Smith as



its candidate, his vote share suggesting that he retained the core vote of the Liberty Party in the most populous state and centered in its upstate “Burned Over District” bastion.<sup>xxi</sup>

After a dip in the Free Soil vote in 1852, popular revulsion against first the Fugitive Slave Law and then the results of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act facilitated the formation of a broader based, Republican Party. The antislavery vote rose rapidly, to a third of the national popular vote in 1856 and then culminated in the successful election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 followed by Civil War, Emancipation, and the successful efforts of Radical Republicans to amend the Constitution to establish the first civil rights (14<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1868) and voting rights (15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1870) for freedmen.<sup>xxii</sup> However, the Radical Republican movement appears exhausted by the 1870s, eclipsed by Liberal Republicans who opposed cronyism within the Grant Administration (1869-1877), supported civil service and tariff reform, and were eager to end federal interventions in the former Confederate states that gave at least some minimal protections to the new formal rights of the freedmen and freedwomen. The Radicals, as part of their free labor ideology, had also given some support to labor reforms in the free states, focused mainly on limiting the working day to ten or even eight hours. But the contradiction between rising labor militancy of this period and the Republican alignment with industrial capital, likely helped bring this unique period of Radical ascendancy to an end. This along with a lack of political will to carry through a social revolution in the South in the face of popular white reaction and the continued ability of the old Southern landed elite to reassert its interests marked the end of the Radical Republican era. By 1876, radical electoral politics were focused on labor and agrarian protest, a shift that included some notable former Republicans, including James Weaver and Benjamin Butler who reappear as Greenback-Populist candidates in the next phase.

In the Greenback-Populist Politics phase, the following party formations may be identified as significant for present purposes and the years of their national campaigns are noted.

Greenback Party (1876-1884)<sup>xxiii</sup>

Union Labor Party (1888)

People's Party (1892)

Fusion of Populist and Democratic Parties (1896)

Again in this period there emerged a dialectic between single-issue politics and a broader reform agenda. However, in the Greenback-Populist phase the narrow issue was currency reform, intended to ease the burden of debtor-farmers. The insistence of financial elites on the resumption of specie payments for federal notes that had been issued to finance the Union effort during the Civil War did in fact facilitate devastating monetary contraction in the post-war period, most sharply in the Panic of 1873. Subsequent recession and unemployment brought with it harsh efforts by manufacturers and railroads to slash wages, rollback earlier gains, and repress labor organizations.

The Greenback-Populist phase witnessed repeated efforts to form a farmer-labor alliance. After an unsuccessful effort to create a Labor Reform Party in 1872, the Greenback Party put forth a reform platform in 1876 that addressed the needs of both farmers and workers, its candidate was an elder industrialist turned philanthropist Peter Cooper, who received just under 1% of the popular vote. Similar platforms were put forth in every subsequent nineteenth century

presidential election as listed above until they fused with the Democratic Party in favor of currency reform and in support of the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan in 1896.

The most successful independent Greenback-Populist candidate during this phase was former Union general and Kansas congressman James B. Weaver who received over 3% of the popular vote in 1880 as Greenback-Labor candidate and close to 9% along with 22 electoral votes as the People's Party candidate in 1892. Weaver has been depicted as a relatively conservative figure who focused on reconciliation between North and South and limited the geographic and class scope of his 1880 campaign.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Regardless of Weaver's ostensible limitations, there were radical currents of Greenback-Labor-Populism that put forth serious proposals for economic redistribution (sometimes inspired by the Single Tax theories of Henry George), popular control of financial investment and labor rights, envisioning an economic democracy of farmers and laborers.<sup>xxv</sup> Some notable populists who made the progression to social democracy include Eugene V. Debs and Henry D. Lloyd.

The Greenback-Populist vote however did, with limited exceptions, remain concentrated in the West and to a lesser extent the South, with little support in the industrial Midwest and even less in the Northeast. Throughout this period, as well as the subsequent Socialist-Progressive phase, the bulk of urban-industrial working class votes remained attached to one or the other of the two major parties, "the organizations to which the largest number of them belong[ed] were the local machines affiliated with the two major parties." Machine politics played the role of an informal, although corrupt, welfare net, acted as an agency of political socialization for immigrant labor, and as Martin Shefter points out acted as a mode of disorganization of the working class, in so far as machine politics was focused on residential groups, cutting across class to some extent and often focusing on ethnic loyalties.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the Socialist-Social Progressive phase, the following party formations may be identified as significant for present purposes and the years of their national campaigns are noted.

#### Socialist:

Socialist Labor Party (1892-1976)

Social Democratic Party (1900), subsequently Socialist Party (1904-1920; 1928-1956; revived in 1980)

Workers'/Communist Party (1924-1940; 1968-1984)

Socialist Workers' Party (1948-present)<sup>xxvii</sup>

#### Social Progressive:

Progressive Party (1924)

Farmer-Labor (1920-1932)

Progressive Party (1948-1952)

The literature on these movements is voluminous, but several points bear noting here. Above all there is the continued failure of the various socialist groupings to make an electoral breakthrough. Early in the period there appeared to be promise as the Socialist Party gained national prominence and multi-regional strength, electing local officials in such diverse areas as rural Oklahoma and lower Manhattan, not to mention Wisconsin, Kansas, and California. The party did send two members to Congress (although never two at the same time) and peaked in its popular vote support level in 1912 when Eugene Debs received 6% of the national total, just under a million votes.

The subsequent combined effects of repression and factionalism took their toll. Surely even a voter inclined to be sympathetic to socialism could well be perplexed when confronted with a ballot that contained a "Socialist Labor" plus a "Socialist Worker" line, even during the leanest years of the electoral Left in the 1950s-early 1960s.<sup>xxviii</sup> The historical problem of sectarianism can already be glimpsed at the beginning of this era in the confrontation between dogmatic Marxism-De Leonism of Socialist Labor versus the more eclectic approach of the Socialist Party. Yet even in the case of the more successful Socialists, an unhelpful narrowness is present. Foner points out that in the wake of the Spanish-American War (1898), an Anti-Imperialist League formed with militant labor support but it could not garner support for its cause from either the SLP or the new Social Democracy, both parties asserting that capitalism rather than imperialism was the "real issue."<sup>xxix</sup> It took years, even decades, before American socialism was broad-minded enough to fully embrace the causes of African-American and women's liberation, by which time the historical moment for the successful development of a broad-based and popular socialist tradition had likely passed.

The peak point of the electoral history of the Left is found in this period in the 1924 campaign of Wisconsin progressive Robert LaFollette. LaFollette's campaign was a protest against the increasing conservatism of both major parties at the time. The candidate had a long-standing record of support for labor and farmers and of opposition to monopolistic corporate capitalism and militarism, having fairly courageously opposed U.S. entry into World War I while in the Senate. His campaign was endorsed by the Socialists as well as progressive labor leaders and he received better than 16% of the popular vote and the electoral votes of his home state of Wisconsin. In the upper Midwest as a whole, the Progressives appeared to be supplanting the Democrats as a major party. Yet LaFollette's death in the year after his presidential campaign and the subsequent dissolution of efforts at national party formation revealed the movement to be too much the creature of a single leader as well as a coalition of disparate factions. A subsequent effort to revive the Progressive Party label at the national level was made in 1948, in support of the independent candidacy of Iowa native son and former Vice President Henry A. Wallace. Wallace's platform focused on opposition to the Truman's administration increasingly confrontational policy towards the Soviet Union. It included support for a reforming capitalism, extending the policies of the New Deal, repealing anti-union legislation, and clearly following the earlier LaFollette legacy. So the name was appropriate given Wallace's combination of labor and farmer-friendly policy combined with anti-militarism, but his vote was far less, a mere 2% of the national popular vote, a level of support clearly depressed by the candidate's support from the Communist Party.

From 1952 and 1968, the most intense and repressive years of the Cold War and down to the present day the Old Left continued to exist and run electoral campaigns. However, the combined pressures and repression of the Cold War and McCarthyism caused a collapse of what

little vote the Left received. In the 1950s, the last few local redoubts of electoral socialism dissipated (most notably Milwaukee, WI and Reading, PA) and the popular presidential vote of the Left fell from its previous low but legible levels to a microscopic range (.08%-.13% of the popular vote in the 1956-1964 elections), while the SLP and the then-Trotskyist Socialist Workers party continued their electoral efforts after the Socialist party suspended its efforts to run national campaigns and the Communist party was effectively illegalized

But it was also the conditions of the Cold War that sparked the revival of the electoral Left from 1968 onwards. Widespread opposition to the Vietnam War led to increased disaffection from the two major parties, which combined with new social movements, the vanguard of which was clearly the “Civil Rights” movement, including a modern women’s movement, along with liberation movements representing Latino/a Americans, Native Americans, and beginning with the Stonewall uprising (1969) the Gay Rights movement which broadened to address LGBTQ identities. The New Left(s) also include a rise of environmental politics, frequently middle class in its base, but also at times radical when it has raised issues such as the industrial pollution of poor and minority residential areas and dangerous working conditions faced by workers in agriculture, manufacturing, as well as service industries.

In the New Left phase, the following party formations may be identified as significant for present purposes and the years of their national campaigns are noted.

Peace and Freedom Party (1968, 1980, 1988-1996, 2004)

People’s Party (1972-1976)

Citizen’s Party (1980-1984)

Green Party (1996-present)

Independent campaigns of note:

Eugene McCarthy (1976)

Nader-Camejo (2004)

Mainstream thinkers along with the so-called Old Left have often depicted the concerns of the New Left, with its focus on personal identity and autonomy, as a cultural manifestation of consumer capitalism, as one such writer claims, the new social movements “would merely mitigate one or another existing evil of capitalism.”<sup>xxx</sup> Alternatively, New Leftists have been depicted as romantic yet ersatz revolutionaries caught up in the cult of Mao, Che, or other Third World national liberation movements, prone to a dead-end politics that degenerates into terrorism and often disdain for the actual American working class. Although the electoral record should make clear enough that the Weather Underground and the Maoist Progressive Labor Party that battled for control of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were far from the “entirety of the New Left. There was another major New Left tendency, the Electoral New Left.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

The Electoral New Left's four notable party formations listed above are in fact an interacting set of groups with a similar group of activists and platforms, representing a degree of ideological fluctuation. The People’s Party platform proclaims itself a coalition “working

together to build socialism,<sup>xxxii</sup> while the Nader campaigns are perhaps best understood as reform-capitalism in the old Progressive mode. Yet the recurring themes are the emphases on opposition to sexism, racism, environmental degradation, and militarism.

The Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) represent a degree of organizational continuity generally lacking in the New Left, maintaining its ballot access in California with some local electoral successes. PFP in fact has frequently collaborated with other groupings in the efforts to build national parties and provided its ballot lines for coalition candidates. The most notable electoral successes in the New Left phase have often been in locales where New and Old Left constituencies have coalesced in such places as Madison, WI; Santa Barbara, CA; Burlington, VT to cite some notable examples and recently, Seattle.

Looking back over the history summarized in this article it may be noted that in periods of crisis the American party system has been somewhat responsive to the concerns of the Left (the New Deal most notably). While at other times, such as the in the later nineteenth century, the dominant parties have been remarkably cool to rising tides of protest.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In this present-day neoliberal era of growing inequality it seems unlikely that the dominant two-party system will do better than a limited and selective response to the voices of radical egalitarianism. Money-driven media and legal-institutional barriers, such as ballot access laws and campaign finance will continue to block the Electoral Left, yet the conditions that give rise to it remain, assuring that it will not depart from the scene.

Building an independent Left electoral party must never be seen as an end in itself in so far as radical parties are means to the ends of structural change and reflections of larger social forces and movements. As noted above, the abolitionist movement extended well beyond the electoral vehicles described in this article and it remains indeterminate to what extent various components of the movement contributed to the ultimate success of abolitionism. The political abolitionists' electoral strategy contributed mightily to the breakup of the Second Party System. Despite the "debacle" of 1844, they helped facilitate a regional electoral polarization that led to the electoral triumph of the anti-slavery Republican Party and the crisis that ultimately ended chattel slavery. Yet the broader abolitionist movement, which often eschewed electoral politics, transformed hearts and mind, cast an intensifying odium upon the institution of slavery that extended well beyond the ranks of those who identified as abolitionists. So too, anti-slavery Whigs and Democrats who remained within the two major parties did contribute to the election of anti-slavery candidates where possible and sought to change platforms.

The stunning growth of anti-slavery electoral politics in the 1840-1860 period was neither the cause nor the effect of a profound transformation. It was both an expression of rising radicalization and frustration with the existing party system and then in turn, a contributing cause of systemic crisis that ultimately resulted in war and the nearest thing to social revolution in U.S. history. In less transformative, perhaps more subtle, ways a similar kind of over determination is at work in the other periods described here as well as in the present. The mainstream parties do not "borrow" from the platforms of populists, socialists, and new left parties in some idealistic sense. To the contrary, they are pressured, perhaps even "forced" to adopt reforms advocated by the electoral Left and radical social movements precisely because of their need to find votes in pursuit of their narrow interest in winning elections.

What is most profoundly unlikely, in the foreseeable future, is that a major party will articulate a radical vision of the emancipation of the working class and other oppressed and

marginalized groups. Yet under the pressure of social movements, pressure groups working within the major parties, or even out of a desire to win independent left voters, platforms and policies that emphasize social protection as well as the civil rights of the marginalized and oppressed can and have been won. The biggest mistake that could be made would be to mistake alternative political strategies as either/or. The U.S. Left is too weak and fragmented to afford the luxury of unnecessary division or specious recrimination of advocates of "failed" electoral strategy or for that matter to make a specious "choice" between identity and social protection politics. That the two major parties will, most certainly, represent elite interests and at best provide limited advocacy of the most basic interests of the subordinate and marginalized members of society is the predominant likelihood, against which ballots for equality must be cast.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Green, Donald J. 2010. *Third Party Matters*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, p. 5.

<sup>ii</sup> Lasch, Christopher. 1969. *The Agony of the American Left*. New York, NY: Knopf.

<sup>iii</sup> The literature of American exceptionalism is extensive. Two classic statements that continue to condition contemporary understandings of the subject are Sombart, Werner. 1979. *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe; Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and more recently Lipset, Seymour Martin and Gary Marks. 2000. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

<sup>iv</sup> Salvatore, Nick. 1982. *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, p. 290.

<sup>v</sup> Gillespie, J. David. 2012. *Challengers to Duopoly: Why Third Parties Matter in American Two-Party Politics*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press., pp. 224-5

<sup>vi</sup> Mayer, Henry. 2008. *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

<sup>vii</sup> Lause, Mark. 2001. *The Civil War's Last Campaign: James B. Weaver, the Greenback Labor Party and the Politics of Race and Section*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America; Goodwyn, Lawrence. 1976. *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

<sup>viii</sup> Kraditor, Aileen. 1981. *The Radical Persuasion, 1890-1917*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, p. 263.

<sup>ix</sup> Girard, Frank and Ben Perry. 1991. *The Socialist Labor Party, 1876-1991*. Philadelphia, PA: Livra Books.

<sup>x</sup> Epstein, Leon. 1986. *Political Parties in the American Mold*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press; Kirchheimer, Otto. 1969. *Politics, Law, and Social Change: Selected Essay of Otto Kirchheimer*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

<sup>xi</sup> Gerring, John. 1998. *Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Ferguson, Thomas. 1995. *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>xii</sup> Florida, New Hampshire, and New Mexico.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Congressional Quarterly. 2005. Guide to U.S. Elections, volume 1. CQ Washington, DC: CQ Press, p. 679.

<sup>xiv</sup> Pessen, Edward. 1967. Most Uncommon Jacksonians. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

<sup>xv</sup> A less arguable case could also be made for the Anti-Masonic Party which ran the first national third party campaign in 1832 and pioneered the mass politics technique of the national convention. Gillespie portrays the Anti-Masons as anti-elitists ostensibly fighting for a more open political process. Further, the Anti-Masons were the party in which a number of later notable antislavery figures first cut their political teeth, a group that includes William Seward as well as the Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens. These exemplars notwithstanding, the nativist and conspiracy-minded aspects of Anti-Masonry make it better seen as a prelude to the Know Nothings of the 1850s and subsequent cases of popular reactionary politics not explored herein.

<sup>xvi</sup> The Republican Party holds a distinctive place in this history as the only major party included, precisely because of the radicalism of its anti-slavery achievements and the XIIIth-XVth amendments to the US Constitution. That it contained a strong and appropriately named Radical faction into the 1870s is significant as well, although it was certainly never and radical party per se, its dependence on industrial capital remaining a constant throughout and after this period. The socialist contribution to the Republican Party is badly overplayed by Nichols, John. 2011. *The S Word: A Short History of an American Tradition ... Socialism*. London, UK: Verso. More realistically the contradiction between its industrial capitalist agenda and the demands of the post-Civil War labor movement was the rock on which Radical Republicanism foundered as described by Montgomery in his classic work on the subject, Montgomery, David. 1981. *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. The point here being that by 1876 the Republican Party had given up all but the ghost of its past Radicalism and the pursuit of racial justice and political inclusion for African-Americans.

<sup>xvii</sup> Kraditor, Aileen. 1969. *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

<sup>xviii</sup> Although an intriguing and well documented case has been by Hahn, Steven. 2005. *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, to the effect that there was in fact a widespread slave insurrection occurring, stimulated yet also obscured by the Civil War.

<sup>xix</sup> Kraditor, 1969, p. 185.

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid.* 150-4.

<sup>xxi</sup> Congressional Quarterly, p. 721.

<sup>xxii</sup> The gender neutral language of these amendments is notable and the possibility should not be dismissed as at least some Radical Republicans may well have intended an unspoken support for women's enfranchisement.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Under the name "Greenback Labor Party in 1880."

<sup>xxiv</sup> Foner, Philip. 1972. *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, volume 1. New York, NY: International Publishers, p. 488; A contrasting view is offered by Lause.

<sup>xxv</sup> Pollack, Norman. 1976. *The Populist Response to Industrial America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Shefter, Martin. 1994. *Political Parties and the State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 130.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Other formations splitting off from the SWP that have run national electoral campaigns: Workers' World Party (1980-present), the Workers' League (1984-1992), and Socialist Equality (1996; 2004)

<sup>xxviii</sup> This author can clearly recall finding the array of socialist, labor, and worker's party to be utterly confusing as he was coming of political age.

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<sup>xxix</sup> Foner, Philip. 1955. *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, volume 2. New York, NY: International Publishers, p. 435.

<sup>xxx</sup> Cantor, Milton. 1978. *The Divided Left: American Radicalism, 1900-1975*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, p. 226.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Davin, Eric Leif. 2012. *Radicals in Power: The New Left Experience in Office*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, p. xi.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Johnson, Donald Bruce (compiler). 1978. *National Party Platforms*, volume II. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, p. 953.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Rosenstone, Steven J., Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus. 1981. *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 66-7.