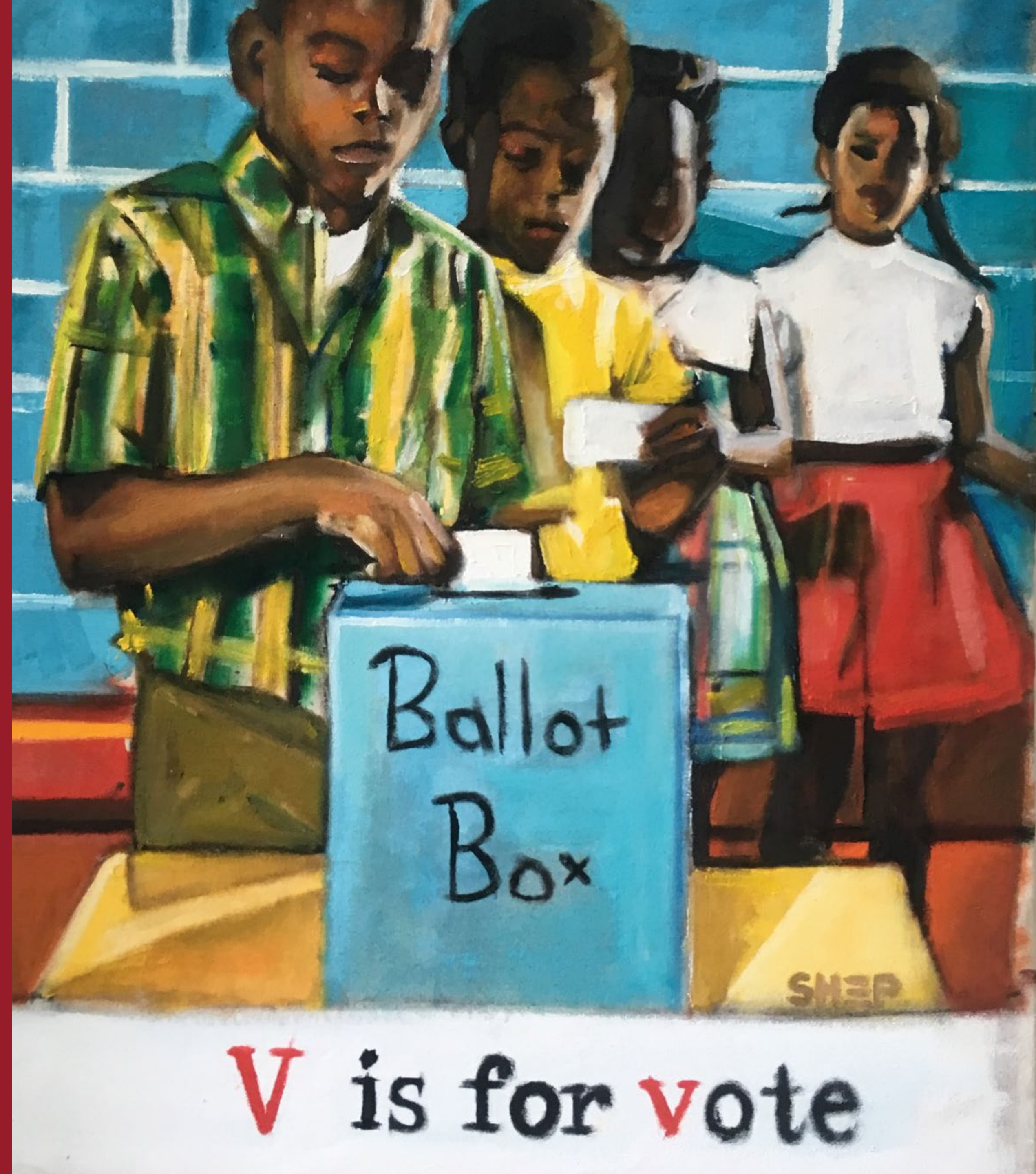




# The Electoral System & Progressive Electoral Strategy







## Why Elections Are Crucial

- Governmental power is the most concentrated form of power in the U.S. Who wields it is determined by the outcome of elections. If we want the power to win social justice policies, we must influence and win elections.
- Elections are the main way most people participate in politics. They are crucial organizing opportunities.
- Elections are the main time that the big issues facing the country are debated and discussed. If we want to be in the public conversation, we must participate in elections.

# Developing an Electoral Strategy

Clearly, elections are important. But they are also extremely complex, involving hundreds of millions of people, big political forces and billions of dollars.



What strategy would enable social justice movements to get a foothold and become a real force in elections?



Successful strategies cannot derive from wishful thinking or pure theory. Instead, strategy must be rooted in an analysis of, and interaction with, the dynamics of the system it is trying to change.



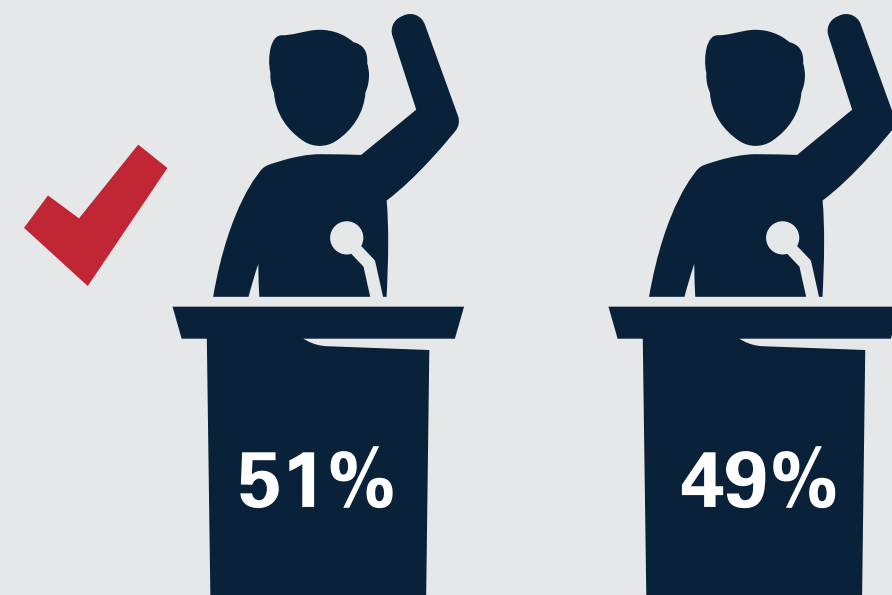
# The US Left and Electoral Strategy



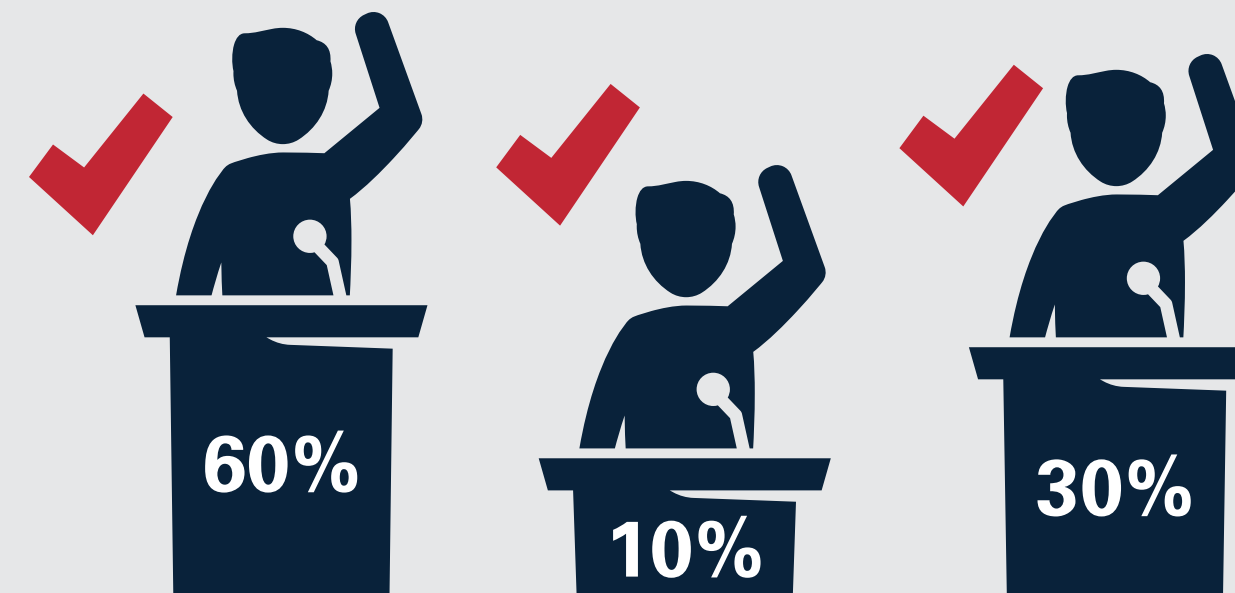


# Winner-Take-All!

Internationally, there are three basic families of voting systems:



**Winner-take-all** systems elect the candidates who receive the most votes; 50.1% of voters win 100% of representation. Even if political minorities win a large percentage of the vote, they get nothing.



**In proportional representation** systems, candidates are elected in proportion to their parties' share of the vote, as long as they clear a minimum of 5% (varies by country).




**One party** states in which the range of legitimated political views is structurally limited and voting may be pro forma.

The vast majority of democracies in the world have proportional representation. The United States is a winner-take-all system, including the direct election of the head of state (president). Changing this would require a constitutional amendment approved by 3/4 of the states.

# The U.S. Two-Party System

- The US version of winner-take-all results in overwhelming two party dominance. Losing parties receive no representation at all and only two-parties can meaningfully challenge to win.
- Worse, alternative parties actually end up as “spoilers.” Alternative parties on the left take votes from the Democrats and alternative parties on the right draw votes from Republicans. The vast majority of voters don’t believe alternative parties have a chance to win, so they get little media coverage and don’t gain traction.
- Consequently no alternative party in the U.S. has ever gained a significant percentage of the presidential vote. They very rarely win congressional or senatorial seats, or representation at the state level. In the early 1900s the Socialist Party had 600 mayors, but alternative party political power is very rare today.



## Parties as Broad Coalitions

- In normal times each of the dominant parties is led by the political representatives of major sections of big capitalists in coalition with the popular sectors that they can rally to their program. For the last century or so the Democrats have, in general, been more liberal and the Republicans more conservative.
- The crux of each of the two parties today is not the party apparatuses, but a coalition of funders, electeds, and campaign/communication strategists, together with leaders of powerful independent but allied economic, social and political organizations (the NRA, the Chamber of Commerce, the Tea Party, the trade unions, Planned Parenthood, etc.)

## But....Insurgencies Are Possible

- However, the two dominant parties are also broad, chaotic and loose enough to be subject to insurgencies. To mount a challenge insurgents must have enough money to fund their own ventures (e.g. Perot, Trump) or be popular enough to be funded and supported by millions of regular voters (e.g. Jesse Jackson, Bernie Sanders). Such insurgencies are most successful during times of political and/or social change.
- In 2016, for the first time in U.S. history, the far right has replaced the corporate elite to take control of one of the two major parties.
- Simultaneously the left, via Sanders, has powerfully challenged the Democrats and gained greater influence in that party



# The Dynamics of Party Conflict and the Potential for Inside/Outside Strategies Today

TRUMP  
MAKE AMERICA HATE AGAIN

CLEVELAND  
IS  
GREATER





## The 2000s: Polarization and Change

The elite's program of financialization, corporate globalization, rollback of the welfare state and civil rights, mass incarceration, anti-immigrant attacks and military aggression has led to:

- the Great Recession and massive economic inequality
- increased racism and renewed resistance from people of color
- foreign policy disasters, including the rise of terrorism
- rapid climate change





# The Great Polarization of 2016

- The failures of the status quo are now so evident that it is being challenged from the left and right, and in both political parties.
- Political centrists, who formerly tilted elections to one side or the other, have shrunk in size and political importance.
- For the first time in history, almost all forces left of center vote for the Democrats and almost all forces right of center vote for the Republicans, heightening polarization.
- The massive increase in voters of color and their strong tilt to the Democrats, consolidated by the Obama campaigns, has changed the balance of forces after thirty years of Republican rule.
- The 2016 election is a concentrated expression of this polarization. Which way will the country move?



# The Far Right Wing's Inside/Outside Strategy and the Republican Party



Since Richard Nixon brought conservative southern whites into the Republican Party in the late 1960s, the far right has worked an independent inside/outside strategy relative to the Republican Party. They have been working this strategy and building power ever since with increasing success, especially since they played a major role in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.



# The Far Right Takes Over the Republican Party in 2016

Despite a two-term Democratic presidency, the Republicans are by far the more powerful political force in the country. Currently the Republican Party coalition controls both houses of Congress, 31 governorships, and both houses of 30 state legislatures. Their coalition is made up of the most reactionary sectors of Big Capital (oil, Wall Street, low end retail, Big Pharma, military industries, big real estate etc.) and the populist far rightwing (Christian right, Tea Party, NRA etc.)

- The far right went berserk over the election of the first Black President, Barack Obama. Tea Party populism and an obstructionist Congress tried to ensure that Obama could get nothing done. Donald Trump moved the party and the populists even further right. Trumpism is characterized by open and extreme racism, xenophobia and misogyny and support for physical attacks on his opponents. Childish egotism and unpredictability together with authoritarian tendencies add up to a proto-fascist bent on centralizing power to implement his agenda.
- Under Trump's influence, the far right of 2012— e.g., Marco Rubio, Paul Ryan—are now touted as the “moderate” and “responsible” part of the Republican Party.
- This year the populist far right not only went into open rebellion against the corporate Republicans, the dominant political and economic force in the country since the election of Reagan, but they crushed all the superfunded candidates of the elite in the primaries. For the first time in U.S. history the populist far right has hijacked one of the two main parties.



## The Left and the Democrats


- Unlike the far right in the Republican Party, the left has rarely mounted a sustained inside/outside strategy relative to the Democratic Party.
- The left's greatest electoral power was probably in the 1930s/40s, when it led numerous trade unions, unemployed, cultural and anti-racist organizations, supported and fielded candidates and participated in Democratic organizations. This inside/outside strategy got isolated by the right turn to the Cold War and McCarthyism.
- Another big moment for the left was the Jesse Jackson campaigns of the 1980s, but these were not sustained in the face of Reaganism.



# The Time is Ripe

- Since about 2000, new inside/outside efforts have emerged, but this motion is still fragmented and in its initial stages. Groups like Move On, Daily Kos, Wellstone Action, Progressive Democrats of America, Color of Change, Working Families Party, some unions like the National Nurses and Communications Workers of America, numerous state-based groups like California Calls, Take Action Minnesota, New Florida Majority, New Virginia Majority and numerous social justice local groups with partisan c4 organizations all position themselves to the left of the party while actively engaging it, either in the battle of ideas or in electoral strategies or both.
- The mass base and organizational coherence to power an “outside” strategy has also been building. The tremendous increase in the political participation and unity of voters of color is an especially positive development. So too are the Fight for \$15 campaigns, Black Lives Matter, the anti-war in Iraq movement, the immigrant rights movement, the fight for LGBTQ rights, the environmental movement, the progressive direction of many unions and, most clearly, the tremendous success of the Bernie Sanders campaign.
- The majority of the base of the Democrats is now clearly to the left of the Democratic elite (Clinton etc.) However, the progressives split between Hillary and Bernie, with the overwhelming majority of Blacks, Latinos and unions supporting Clinton and progressive whites splitting between the two candidates, especially along generational lines. Bridging this division is crucial for the future of progressives, and for defeating the far right.





# What Electoral Strategy Now?



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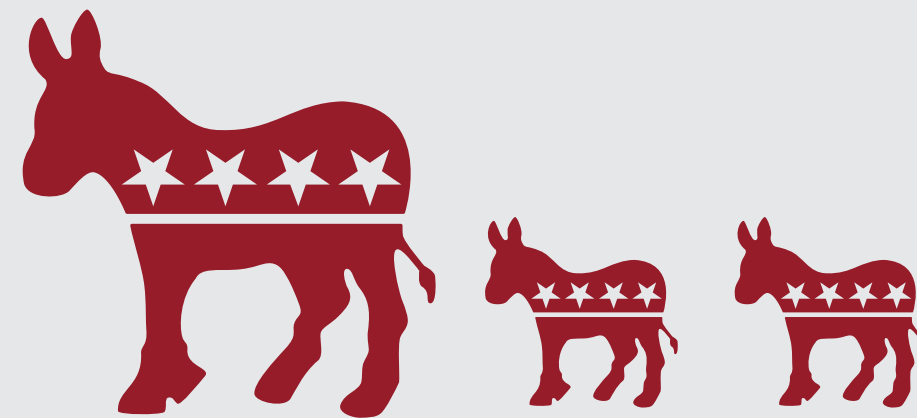
U.S. progressives  
and leftists have  
interacted with the  
electoral realm in  
four main ways:



Abstentionism



3rd party efforts



Passive Democrats  
(aka follow the leaders)



Independent inside/outside  
strategy



# Abstentionism


- Abstentionism means staying out of electoral politics entirely.
- Abstentionists usually see electoral politics as a game between different corporate forces, with regular folk having no real say or stake in the outcome.
- They believe that participating in electoral politics is a concession to a process controlled by capital, and they refuse to vote for the “lesser of two evils. ”
- They believe in building power by building mass movements not connected to elections. Such powerful movements are very, very rare (the 1930s, the 1960s). Even when they rise they must eventually connect to the electoral system to consolidate victories.
- Abstentionists range from those advocating abandonment of the two-party system to those who simply refuse to vote themselves.





## 3rd Party Efforts

- Some on the left have built alternative, left-wing parties rather than back either of the dominant parties. Main examples: the Populist Party in the late 1800s, the Socialist Party in the early 1900s, the Progressive Party after WWII, the Peace and Freedom Party in the 1960s/70s and more recently, the Green Party.
- Third partyists believe that both dominant parties are irrevocably pro-corporate and that therefore a clear left alternative is needed.
- They point to occasional victories at the local level and to the powerful tradition of third parties in Europe and Latin America.
- They decline to address the uniqueness of the U.S. winner-take-all system and disagree that 3rd parties often play the role of spoiler.



## Passive Democrats (aka follow the leaders)

- The most common position of progressives is to vote for and occasionally work for Democrats, without having a strategy to build the political independence and strength of progressive Democratic candidates or political institutions to the left of the Democratic Party.
- Some do this because they are invested in elections as a key arena of political struggle, or because they feel it is critical to defeat the Republican agenda, even absent a left strategy. Many non-profits participate in voter registration efforts because they are barred from partisan politics.
- This is less a strategy than a fallback position. Support for centrist corporate Democrats doesn't challenge their leadership, or build the independent power of progressives.



# An Independent Inside/Outside Strategy, “A Tea Party of the Left”

Given the structural constraints of U.S. elections, we believe the most viable strategy for leftists is to develop an inside/outside approach. This includes a combination elements:

- Build a mass political base independent of the Democratic Party.
- Build the machinery and expertise of leftists to engage with electoral politics (e.g. issue advocacy, communications, organizing groups).
- Build the power of progressives inside the party by building formidable independent electoral organizations and alliances, including recruiting and preparing progressive Democratic candidates to run against centrists.
- Build and unite the Democratic coalition as a whole to defeat the Republicans and the right.

Compare the success of the Jesse Jackson or Bernie Sanders campaigns versus the tiny vote and impact of the Green Party.

The varied forces of the far right are the greatest practitioners of this strategy.


An inside/outside strategy is the left-wing analog to what the far right has been doing for many years — building a “tea party of the left.”

# Key Elements of Inside/Outside

**First**, it is a comprehensive, tactically flexible yet coordinated strategy. It means building large-scale issue and values based organizations, campaigns and communications capacity outside the electoral process while systematically connecting them to progressive organizations, funders, electeds and candidates that focus on fighting for progressive power inside the Democratic Party and in government. It means working simultaneously at local, regional and national levels.

**Second**, it is a strategy that is politically, socially and culturally connected to its core social bases whose purpose is to fight for control of, not just influence within, the Democratic Party. This means wresting control of the party from the corporate moderates who have traditionally dominated it. The premise and goal of the strategy is to win governing power at all levels of government.





# Risks and Opportunities

## **Risks:**

Trump's presidential bid, and the forces it has unleashed, represents extreme danger to a progressive agenda and to the core constituencies supportive of that agenda.

## **Opportunities:**

- Defeat Trump and swing Senate and House elections; prevent the right from dominating the Supreme Court.
- Fight to hold Clinton to a progressive agenda.
- Build durable and stronger progressive organizations and alliances that pursue an inside/outside strategy at all levels of government.
- Move progressive politics, candidates and policies in down-ballot races.
- Build an independent force to push the party from inside and outside – a “Tea Party of the Left.”
- Build a public profile as determined and effective anti-right, anti-racist, anti-inequality fighters.



# 2016 Action Possibilities

1. Pick a battleground state with a strong racial justice or social justice electoral group and throw in behind them with people, phone calls, money: New Florida Majority, New Virginia Majority, Ohio Organizing Collaborative, Moral Monday/Forward Together in North Carolina. Or do the same with national progressive voter groups: Wellstone Action or Progressive Democrats of America
2. Use Trump as an opportunity to bring millions of Latinos and Asians to citizenship and/or the vote, to decrease Republican support among Latino and Asian voters, and to organize them into independent progressive organizations. This could bury Republican presidential hopes for decades.
3. Mobilize and organize Black voters to build on the historic turnout of 2008 and 2012 and organize them into independent progressive organizations.
4. Begin the very long-term and critical work of prying white working class voters away from the Republican Party.
5. Move issue campaigns like immigrant rights, Black Lives Matter, economic inequality, peace and many others that are central to the election.
6. Identify and throw in to defeat vulnerable Republican electeds at all levels, especially the U.S. Senate.
7. Participate in the broad Stop Hate, Stop Trump national protest movement.
8. Join with other progressives to hold Hillary accountable, especially on foreign policy.
9. Organize actions targeting Trump's corporate supporters.
10. Regroup nationally, statewide and locally after the November election to assess, summarize and strategize for the future. THIS IS A LONG TERM FIGHT.



This presentation is one module of a three-part elections curriculum consisting of:

- Organizing on Shifting Terrain: A Changing Electorate and Rising Economic Inequality
- The Right, the Far Right, and the Rise of Donald Trump
- The U.S. Electoral System and Progressive Electoral Strategy

The curriculum was developed by Linda Burnham, Max Elbaum, Harmony Goldberg, Jason Negron-Gonzales, Tarso Ramos and Bob Wing.

The three presentations, the accompanying Facilitators' Guides and a Supplementary Resource Guide can be downloaded at [www.organizingupgrade.com](http://www.organizingupgrade.com). To contact us, email [electioncurriculum@earthlink.net](mailto:electioncurriculum@earthlink.net).