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Devolve This!

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In American politics, who controls the states controls the nation. The right understands this, and for a generation has waged an unrelenting war to take over state government in America. It has substantially succeeded, in large part because it hasn't faced any serious progressive countereffort. Despite the visibility of the right's advance, and the decades of devolution and economic decentralization that have made states hugely important sites of politics, progressives haven't made one.

To be sure, we progressives do all sorts of great organizing, service and advocacy work in the states. We regularly protest state government actions and try to move its members in one direction or another. We even help with a few campaigns for state office, albeit almost always after the candidates and their agendas have already been set by others. What we don't do is what the right has done--i.e., determinedly aim at taking over state government and running it ourselves. We haven't built an infrastructure for progressive state electoral politics and government. And so we can't, and don't, recruit and train thousands of progressives to run for state office, provide them with state-specific platforms to run on, help them in implementing those platforms once in office, and coordinate all this across states for mutual gain. So it should not surprise us that very few of the 7,382 state legislators in America even think of themselves as part of, and accountable to, a broad, ambitious, technically savvy and policy-smart progressive movement--since in the states, we're not one. As politics is conventionally understood--candidates, elections, identifiable policy agendas, the compulsory powers of public authority--progressives don't have a state political strategy.

Progressive reluctance to develop such a strategy is in some ways understandable. Variation and competition among states has historically been the single most resilient barrier to democratic politics in

America. The very idea of a progressive state strategy--as opposed to a determined focus on a more democratic national government able to surmount that barrier--has long seemed oxymoronic, or merely moronic. It's also true that state politics is less compelling than other politics, if not downright boring. This is especially so today, with the nation at war and facing from its national government the greatest internal threat to our democracy in our history, but the observation holds in safer times. Most progressives also mourn devolution, which has been coterminous with if not defined by the dismantling of the New Deal welfare state, twentieth-century American liberalism's greatest domestic achievement. Understandable, then, that we are in a sort of collective denial that "the era of big government is over."

But whatever the reasons for our neglecting the states, good and bad, we need to get over them. We need a progressive strategy in the states, because not having one is now doing us two sorts of grievous harm.

The first is that we're getting killed there politically, with results we are likely to feel for years to come. For the first time in a generation, a rightist GOP has recently gained the edge in total governors, legislative chambers, controlled legislatures and legislative seats. And in states no less than nationally, the right is clearer on its ends than are the Democrats, and infinitely more aggressive in casting even modest electoral victories in policy cement.

The second is that we're missing an enormous political opportunity in the states, which today are the most natural sites of progressive growth. States wield control over many ingredients of a well-run economy and polity--from human capital to transportation to campaign finance and election rules--and they have relatively porous political systems that we could in fact organize. In at least some states, we already have close to the organizational density (e.g., among unions, community groups, service and advocacy organizations of different kinds) and diffuse public support to do this relatively quickly--if we aimed at this goal in a deliberate and coordinated way. With real government power in the states, progressives could demonstrate that our ideas actually work--that a government run in our way is more efficient and accountable, that a "high road" economy of the sort we favor delivers higher living standards, that social service and insurance systems financed our way are cheaper, with deeper coverage. We could in effect take a page from the original Progressives of a century ago--the folks who worked out at the state level many of the ideas that later informed the New Deal and who, before it became a cliché, gave real meaning to the idea of states as "laboratories of democracy." We could try new things, test their effects, compare them across states and surface the best new ideas into national debate.

Some of this policy experiment, of course, is already happening. States are generating far more progressive legislation--in areas from campaign finance to consumer protection, predatory lending to land-use control, school finance reform to inclusionary zoning, worker training and economic development, and of course civil rights--than we've seen from recent national administrations, Democratic and Republican alike. This work should be honored as well as built upon in any more general progressive effort. But--and the most seasoned state activists and progressive elected officials are among the first to point this out--it still falls well short of the scale and scope that is possible, and probably required, for lasting effect. In no state are there functional majorities of self-consciously progressive elected officials, working together off a visible, coherent program of progressive economic, social and political reform, linked systematically to outside progressive forces. That is what the right is

building on its side, and what we need to build on ours.

Do States Really Matter?

But are states really so important, and so ripe with possibility for progressive invention? Yes, almost self-evidently so, if we just open our eyes. Our national constitutional design enumerates limited powers for national government and assumes plenary powers of states. That means states--consistent with respect for individual rights, and respecting the supremacy of any contrary federal law--can pretty much do whatever they please. Around this design two centuries of accumulated political custom have grown up, giving states a privileged role in implementing and enforcing much federal law.

The result is that states do by far the largest share of governing in America. They write most law and give content to even more through interpretation and administration. Most government that affects us in our everyday social roles--as workers, consumers, taxpayers, owners and citizens--tends first or finally to run through states. Economic development, healthcare and abortion access, privacy rights, marriage and the family, wage standards, public safety, criminal justice, prisons, air and water quality, education and training, consumer protection, transportation, libraries and other community public goods--these are just a few examples. In many of these critical areas, in fact, states shoulder primary responsibility.

Devolution has given states additional powers and responsibilities. Over the past two decades, successive waves of "new federalism" have "block-granted" money for states with few if any federal restrictions on its use. New national programs in education and training, housing, transportation and economic development have been federalized from the start. And older ones, as in the environment, have become increasingly state-led. All this has increased their standing relative to national government.

Government spending numbers tell this story. In the 1950s the federal and state/local government shares of GDP were roughly equivalent. Now states are far bigger in most ordinary government operations. Entering the new millennium, the federal government was basically a gigantic military operation, a couple of large insurance programs for old people, and a privileged manager of money, credit and debt. By 2000--outside military spending, transfer payments and debt service--its operation claimed only 2 percent of GDP. States, in contrast, claimed 10 percent. And this was before Bush & Co. took a further wrecking ball to what was left of the nonmilitary nation-state, and Grover Norquist declared his dream of shrinking it to bathtub size.

States are also arbiters of the most fundamental transaction in democratic politics: the electoral transfer of power. States control elections, all elections, more or less from top to bottom. It is state legislatures, not the Constitution, that give us our "winner takes all" election system and its resulting two-party duopoly. It is states that determine the boundaries of all election districts, including Congressional ones, which largely determine which party's representative will occupy them. It is states that, through their regulation of poll access, voter eligibility, election schedules, voting times, methods of vote counting and much else, make the final determination of the active and counted electorate. And it is state electorates, never some elusive national one, that decide all US elections. This of course includes the

election of the President, who is (usually) chosen by an Electoral College, composed of delegations of state electors. But even here state legislatures have a further role, since they determine whether or not those delegations will be proportional to the popular vote. Control of state government thus allows control of the size and shape of the electorate, the parties competing for its vote and the accuracy of that vote's representation in both national government and at home.

So far as democratic fundamentals go, it's hard to get more basic than this. And even for those who care only about national politics, this gives a clear reason to care about state ones, for these decisions matter in the construction of national government. As Texas's Tom DeLay has recently shown us (joined by less publicized Republican colleagues in Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania), legislative redistricting gives states effective power over the Congress. As we learned in Florida in 2000, and may learn again in a few weeks' time, state-controlled voting procedures can even choose the President.

The Tipping Point

About thirty years ago, the Republican right decided to take over the states. In a state version of the story that is now familiar nationally, corporations and the cultural right made peace in order to wage this holy war, which was understood as a natural "cut the tree and catch the fruit" complement to national devolution. They invested heavily in GOP state organization, made more explicit and operational a variety of ties between national corporate interests and state parties, and built a slew of supporting institutions to funnel money to emerging state Republican leaders and spoonfeed them reactionary policy suggestions to promote.

They have substantially succeeded. In the 1970s, when this determined effort began, Democrats were in nearly full command of state government. Along with thirty-two governors, they held almost 70 percent of all state legislative seats and controlled thirty-seven legislatures in 1974.

Thirty years later, the results are in. Republicans now have more governors (R28-D22), more legislative chambers (R53-D44), more controlled legislatures (R21-D17) and more partisan legislative seats (R3,684-D3,626). All bets are for this advantage to grow in coming years, as the South turns steadily more Republican and the national GOP continues to target vulnerable Democratic governors (next up are those in Missouri, Washington and West Virginia).

What Republicans are doing with these small majorities is broadly familiar. Along with the redistricting scams already mentioned, they are constitutionalizing restrictions on state spending, cutting social services of all kinds, acting hostile to labor, privatizing an ever wider range of state functions, pushing punitive criminal justice, rolling back privacy rights to the benefit of banks and insurance companies, avoiding the health insurance crisis, limiting medical and product liability, freezing state minimum wages, limiting consumer protections, cutting funding to public schools, dolloping out ever more expansive tax breaks to business and playing the red meat game (gay marriage, concealed weapons, etc.). No surprises here. And so, if Republican leadership continues to gain in the states, we can expect more of the same. States will become more perfect pictures of inequality, market governance and

business cronyism. We'll all look a little more like Texas, and a little less like the America we remember, or hope someday to live in. This is the threat in the states. It is real, and growing.

But now let's complicate this picture.

First, and again, progressives are winning many policy victories in the states. This work is too extensive and varied to be easily summarized. It includes "clean money" campaign finance reform, disclosure and clawback rules on corporate subsidies, smart-growth development policies, myriad healthcare reforms, expanded transportation options, renewable-energy initiatives, living-wage and minimum-wage hikes, inclusionary housing, expansions in civil rights, alternatives to incarceration, and a nearly endless stream of air- and water-quality initiatives, including many directed against our current government in Washington. If nothing else, this shows public openness to progressive alternatives, if they are put before it.

Second, there are contrary trends to Republican electoral dominance, or at least, in its spreading darkness, some points of light. While in 2002 Republicans edged past Democrats in partisan legislative seats for the first time in fifty years, moderate to progressive Democrats won governorships in a number of states (Blagojevich in Illinois, Doyle in Wisconsin, Granholm in Michigan, Napolitano in Arizona, Rendell in Pennsylvania, Richardson in New Mexico), many of which had been long occupied by Republicans. While in 2003 the overall Republican seat lead widened slightly, in New Jersey Democrats retook control of the state legislature, in a highly visible voter validation of Democratic Governor Jim McGreevey's strong environmental policies. Several governors have backed tax increases and survived. No great surprises here either, but grounds for rational hope at the voting booth.

Third, what most impresses about state politics right now is its competitiveness. The split in governors, chambers and legislative control are all close enough that a single election or two could easily swing the parties back to parity. If Kerry wins and has more than T-shirt-length coattails, that might happen very soon. The difference in partisan share of legislative seats, for example, is really razor thin: 0.9 percent--a number that might suggest competitiveness to anyone. In twenty-five (out of ninety-nine) legislative chambers, a shift of three or fewer states would change party control or result in a tie. Even a small improvement in progressive electoral organization could make a very large difference.

What It Takes

What would it take to take better advantage of progressive opportunities in the states, to build on present organizing while bringing it to greater coherence and scale, to stop the right and then build some lasting governing power of our own?

Essentially what's needed is a partial equivalent of what is already provided on the other side by the right, a shared capacity to win elections and govern. We need the capacity to continually map the election terrain within states, identify open and challengeable seats in local as well as state office, and develop credible long-range plans for targeting them to the point of gaining core legislative and

executive power. We need a massively scaled-up capacity to recruit, train and place reliable progressives, ideally recruited from our own ranks, as candidates for those races. We need a clearinghouse on model legislation and administrative practice, and supports to elected officials prepared to move them (talking points, examples of success elsewhere, expert support, etc.). We need the capacity to regularly convene progressive elected officials, both regionally and nationally, for discussion of common problems, and training in the program content, organizing skills and strategic collaborations that might help solve them.

At those gatherings we should leave lots of room for networking by elected officials from different parts of the country, and interaction with non-electoral advocacy groups. We want them to begin to think of themselves as not alone, and to act more confidently and reliably as part of a broader progressive movement. We need to maintain that network through regular communication and explicit coordination of efforts across different sites. We need a well-equipped "war room" to provide targeted assistance to progressive electeds in legislative or electoral fights--onsite expert help, campaign coordination, polling, opposition research, whatever it takes to win. Finally, we would need some sort of "table," seated by interested and committed parties, to get coordination among these efforts, and connect them to progressive work aimed more directly at national politics.

Electoral plans, recruitment and training of candidates fitted to them, program, convenings, campaign and legislative support, a table to coordinate these efforts and connect them to other parts of the progressive movement--that's what we need. It's not rocket science. It's just work. And it need not even cost a huge amount of money. Billions of dollars will be spent this electoral cycle, a billion at least on the presidential race alone. Building the capacities just described would cost very little in comparison. Just \$10 million a year would be enough to get it started in earnest.

What We Have

The reason progressives could start a serious state effort so cheaply is that we already have many of the needed pieces. We've got scores of campaign operatives and political consultants. We've got community organizing and issue advocacy organizations in all states, with most of the significant ones tied into national organizations with real resources. We've got major international unions with longstanding interests in state politics. We've got progressive state federations of labor, and progressive central labor councils. We've got state policy shops nationally, and in most states themselves. We've got expert advocacy groups on virtually every issue you can imagine, and they are networked nationally. We've even got at least some networks of progressive elected officials, at both the national and regional levels.

What we haven't done yet is put these different parts of the puzzle together.

Of course, it's not unusual for progressives not to unite around common projects, for altogether too familiar reasons. One attractive aspect of the project proposed here, however, is that many of those don't seem to apply, or apply with much less force than is normal. Nobody's doing this, so the field is not occupied. Most foundations won't touch it, so it wouldn't immediately steal resources from other

progressive activities. Nobody really disputes its importance (they just don't like to think about it). And there's not even much disagreement about the content of the state policies at which it would aim.

We want states to get on the "high road" of high-wage, low-waste, democratically accountable economic development, with firms competing on product quality, innovation and distinctness, and drawing on a wide range of productive public goods. We want to close off the "low road" alternative, in which firms compete chiefly on price, and wind up in an endless race-to-the-bottom on labor and environmental standards and the evasion of social responsibility. And we want to reinvent government our way--with a clean and more democratic process, and greater input from popular organizations outside the states--to make it more efficient and capable. Based on years of work, we even know what this "high road" looks like in its different parts--education and training, transportation and infrastructure, land use and energy, democratic reform and administration. We just need to connect the dots into a picture, and display that more hopeful future to the public.

We know this program would be popular. We know this not only because it is in the interests of a vast majority of voters--labor, most people of color, most women, high-roading business and the many residents of inner-ring suburbs, depressed rural communities and central cities who are getting killed by present low-roading policy--but because our own organizing experience over the past decade has shown repeatedly that, given a choice, this is the one the majority makes.

So if progressives have the talent to do this, and can find their way to agreement on what needs to get done, what's the problem?

The problem is that building capacity in the states is a long-term project, requiring substantial if not humongous amounts of money spent over several electoral cycles, to improve the fortunes of a large number of largely unknown down-ballot candidates and officeholders. Until very recently, most progressive people and organizations putting serious money into electoral work never considered spending on these terms. They spent on individual candidates, usually at much higher levels of office, in a single cycle, or in presidential years on the Democratic Party itself, with the party and lead candidate overseeing the "coordinated campaign" that glued the field organization together. After the election this field operation would be folded, only to be rebuilt in the next presidential campaign.

But now George W. Bush, combined with the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform, has changed that. The first has mobilized people, the second has barred the national coordinated campaign. So now we have unprecedented massive progressive electoral coordination, and money, operating outside the Democratic Party. Many of those doing this, moreover, want to continue playing together after the November election, maintaining and redeploying at least some good share of the capacity built up in the past several months--in staff, political intelligence, routines of cooperation, committed donors. Some even want to start the conversation about building a national political infrastructure to compete with the right. That means scaled, patient, performance-based investments, growing out of a shared and credible knowledge base of what's working, what's not and what's needed.

In that conversation, a progressive state strategy is a natural topic, and an easy argument to make for all the reasons summarized here: great opportunity, great threat, pretty clear on how to improve what we've got now. After retiring Bush, we progressives should be making that argument together.