



AP PHOTO/BELA SZANDLISZKI

# The European Paradox

---

Matt Browne, John Halpin, and Ruy Teixeira    October 2009



# The European Paradox

---

Matt Browne, John Halpin, and Ruy Teixeira    October 2009

*As we gather in Madrid at the Global Progress Conference to discuss the future of the trans-Atlantic progressive movement, it is worth assessing the current status of progressive governance in light of emerging electoral, demographic, and ideological trends. Progressives in both the United States and Europe are currently in a state of foreboding about their respective positions—those in the United States primarily over the current position of progressive policy ideas around health care, energy, and economic reform, and those in Europe, primarily over fractured electoral politics, an aging and shrinking working-class base, diminishing returns for social democratic and labor parties and the threat that such losses pose to future programmatic advance.*

*This paper aims to address the status anxiety on both sides of the Atlantic by examining the longer-term strengths and weaknesses of progressivism in Europe and America and by offering ideas about how we might solve our mutual challenges in terms of vision, coalition building, and organization.*

– Matt Browne, John Halpin, and Ruy Teixeira

# Introduction

Looking across Europe and the United States, progressives have two strengths going for them. The first is that modernizing demographic forces are shifting the political terrain in their favor. Consider these trends:

- The rise of a progressive younger generation
- The increase in immigrant/minority populations
- The continuing rise in educational levels
- The growth of the professional class
- The increasing social weight of single and alternative households and growing religious diversity and secularism.

All these factors favor policies embraced by the broad center-left of the political spectrum in America and in Europe. Put simply, progressives are the natural beneficiaries of modernity and that, combined with their still substantial base among the working class, puts them in a potentially dominating political position.

Progressives' second big advantage is the intellectual and policy bankruptcy of conservatism. Their approach to the problems afflicting today's complex global capitalism still relies heavily on *laissez-faire* and is completely devoid of creative ideas for taming the immense power of this economic system for the common good. The assumption that capitalism left to its own devices is both self-regulating and productive of the best economic outcomes would be laughable at this point if the actual outcomes had not been so tragic.

Conservatives' economic philosophy has now been tried and found grossly inadequate to the needs of modern societies. One might, then, have expected that last October's sudden financial crisis and the subsequent global recession it triggered would all herald a resurgence of progressive politics.

In the United States, this is how it has worked out in electoral terms. The 2008 presidential election of Democrat Barack Obama, who championed a largely progressive agenda, was not just notable for bringing America its first black president, but also for the rout of conservative candidates and the rejection of conservative ideology at every level of government and in many parts of the country where they had previously been strong. Overall,

Obama's 53 percent of the popular vote was the largest share received by any U.S. presidential candidate in 20 years.

Obama carried all 18 states that Democrat John Kerry won in 2004 (and by 10 percentage points or more), plus nine states that Kerry did not: Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia. Obama also carried seven of the eight most populous states: California, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. At the presidential level, progressives now solidly control the Northeast, the Midwest (with the exception of Missouri), the Southwest (with the exception of Arizona) and the West, while conservative strength has been reduced to rural and lightly populated states in the southern and central parts of the country.

Despite this electoral success, however, the first months of the Obama presidency have been fraught with problems. Conservatives have slowed Obama's agenda with a ferocious counterattack designed to raise public doubts and stampede wavering members of Congress in swing districts and states across the country. Obama's attempt to promote progressive policy making on a scale not seen in the United States since perhaps the 1960s has had a very rocky road.

The relative success of conservative opposition to Obama's policies is grounded in the long-standing suspicions of government action entrenched in certain segments of the U.S. population. Despite promising electoral and demographic trends for progressives, support for the state and public action has often been viewed with skepticism among conservative and independent voters.

The U.S. progressive movement has experienced this before. Every major era of progressive reform in U.S. history has encountered fierce and often irrational opposition fueled by these attitudes. Some of this antipathy is based purely on ideological concerns or parochial financial interests. Some of it is based on less tangible perceptions that the government is unable to deliver on its promises and frequently sides with undeserving segments of the population at the top and bottom of the economic order.

No matter how supportive Americans may be on the goals of progressive politics, there will always be difficulties convincing people that greater government involvement in society is desirable and effective. And unlike more mainstream conservative parties in Europe, conservatives dominate the Republican Party in the United States and have successfully sparked an angry and visible conservative movement rooted in an extreme stew of libertarian economic ideas and fundamentalist social values.

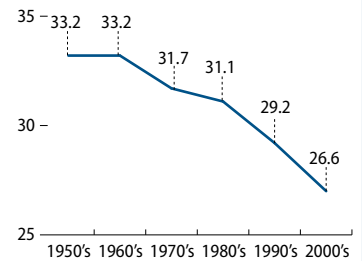
What we are seeing now is the convergence of these ideological concerns—focused on government spending, taxation, bailouts, and (to a lesser extent) federal budget deficits—into a solidified antigovernment backlash that is influencing key independent segments of the U.S. electorate who were positively predisposed toward progressives and Obama in 2008. This

antigovernment narrative is growing in strength by successfully tapping into a range of negative perceptions about Obama himself, economic failure, government overreach, excessive coziness with certain industries and interests, fear of second-class national and group status, elite arrogance, and values antithetical to free enterprise and market capitalism.

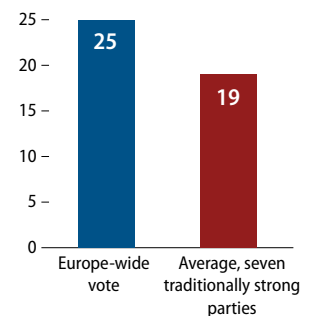
Europe is a different story. Over the last decade voter support for the European parties most often promoting progressive policies, the social democrats, has fallen to its lowest level in the post World War II era, averaging under 27 percent in national elections.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, 13 out of 15 member states of the European Union were ruled by social democratic parties or progressive coalitions. Today, social democrats hold office in only 5 of the 27 member states. And in the 2009 European parliamentary elections this June, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (to which all the social democratic parties belong) captured only 25 percent of the vote—the worst performance by the social democratic grouping since the European elections began in 1979. Among seven traditionally strong parties, Germany, France, the U.K., Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark, the average tally was only 19 percent<sup>2</sup>—far below these parties’ worst performance in national elections.

So social democracy’s electoral appeal appears to be declining in Europe despite favorable modernizing demographic trends. In spite of social democracy’s electoral woes, however, many progressive policies remain deeply engrained in European societies and are accepted by parties of both the left and the right. Cases in point include universal health care, carbon emissions targets, support for social protections and benefits, and a more balanced and restrained foreign policy. Indeed, in many important ways, progressive policies are more clearly entrenched or institutionalized at the center of democratic debate in Europe than in America. We call this set of contradictory trends *the European paradox*.

### Average Vote, 13 Traditional European Social Democratic Parties, 1950’s to Today



### Social Democratic Performance, 2009 European Parliamentary Elections



# Explaining the European paradox

What explains the European paradox? Start with the modernizing demographics part of the paradox. Why have European social democratic parties not had more success appealing to emerging demographic groups? Part of the answer lies in the nature of European party systems. Unlike in the United States, where there are essentially only two parties and the parties do not compete much on each other's ideological turf, European social democrats typically do face such competition. Indeed, in many countries, they have competitors in three different parts of the political spectrum: greens; far leftists; and liberal centrists.

In Germany, for example, the Social Democrats must compete with Alliance 90/The Greens, the Left Party and the Free Democratic Party; in the Netherlands, the Labour Party must compete with the Green Left (and the Party for Animals!), the Socialist Party, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, and the Democrats 66; and so on across European countries. This array of possibilities has much to tempt left-leaning members of emerging groups—from more forthright social liberalism to economic and environmental approaches that many in these groups find more congenial and/or exciting than what the social democratic parties have on offer. As a result, social democracy's center-left competitors typically do quite well among emerging demographics in most European countries.

These realities of European party systems, combined with the sluggish response of European social democrats to demographic shifts—which has only enhanced the appeal of their center-left electoral competitors—provide a basic explanation for social democrats' failure to benefit much from modernizing demographic trends. But it is important to differentiate this failure of social democratic politics from a broader failure of progressive politics. This is not so clear, given the growing vote share of greens, the far left and liberal centrists in most countries. Indeed, a reasonable case can be made there is an “emerging progressive majority” across Europe, but because that majority is fragmented across social democracy and its various center-left competitors it is difficult to discern and to mobilize. Therefore, we should pay special attention to how European progressives can organize within and between parties to strengthen the progressive movement and policy agenda.

Another part of the European paradox is the failure of social democrats to capitalize on the strong association between conservative reverence for the unfettered market and the current economic crisis. Why aren't voters turning to the parties that warned them of the possible dysfunctions of capitalism and that wish to protect them from these dysfunctions? While historically Europeans have often turned to the right and conservatives in times of economic

crisis, there are other reasons for social democratic failure rooted in the shortcomings of the so called Third Way, which sought explicitly to reconcile progressive thinking with the positive aspects of a market economy, possessive individualism, and globalization.

First, European social democrats have done a poor job of defining what exactly they stand for in the current era and how that is different from the conservatives precisely because the Third Way dominated social democratic debates during much of the last decade. Tony Blair's New Labour and Gerd Schroder's Social Democratic Party (and Bill Clinton's new Democrats) all established political hegemonies for progressives in an era that marked the sunset of a long arc of conservative dominance embodied by the alliance between Reagan, Thatcher, and Kohl. While all three political projects contained redistributive programs aimed at expanding opportunity and improving public services and labor markets through a reformed welfare state, the rejection of many signature policies of traditional (social) democratic thinking and an embrace of free-market economics allowed conservative parties in Europe to blur the differences between themselves and social democrats.

In particular, the Third Way's failure to define its own robust economic paradigm, most notably with regards to industrial renewal, has blunted voter anger at conservative economics making it easier for conservatives to pose as responsible guardians of the public welfare.

Second, Third Way social democrats have done a poor job connecting to the values of voters and thus struggle to respond to the populist anger that is typically rooted in these values. What once appeared as a core strength of the Third Way, namely its rejection of ideology, now presents itself as an inherent weakness. The mantra was "what matters is what works," with the focus on evidence-based policies. While these policies were clearly values-driven in terms of their objectives—extending opportunity, ending child poverty, modernizing public services—values were often absent from their presentation.

Third Way politicians now suffer from what might be termed "seminaritis," or treating the political process as if it were a matter of compiling data and evidence of best practices, presenting statistics and honed policy positions to illustrate why they were (or are) right and (often) the electorate wrong. This has made it more difficult to mobilize voters, who need more than a list of policy positions, however thoughtful, to generate enthusiasm for a political party.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1990s, this pragmatic approach was no doubt necessary to engender confidence in an electorate that never doubted the social democrats' passion, but often questioned their competency. By focusing so heavily on responsibility and technocratic reform through established channels, however, social democrats today appear uninterested in the values and emotions of either the traditional working class or of progressive emerging constituencies. Nowhere is this more acute than with regards to immigration and the environment.

Third, social democrats now find themselves confronted by a raft of new policy challenges that the Third Way in its initial formulation had not foreseen, and a more menacing context within which they must respond to them. The Third Way, it must be admitted, emerged at a time of profound optimism. The collapse of the Berlin Wall heralded not only the end of the Cold War but of ideology itself. The dot.com boom and exponential expansion of the service sector led many to believe that in the post-modern economy, the developed world could live on thin air while consuming goods produced from the four corners of the developing world.<sup>4</sup>

But, as historian Eric Hobsbawm warned, the entrance of a billion new workers into the global economy has not been without its consequences. And while the economic benefits of globalization have been broadly distributed across society, the costs have been born by specific sectors and communities—more often than not, those working-class communities that had traditionally constituted the core support base of social democratic parties.

These economic upheavals have only been exacerbated by the current global economic and financial crisis. The failure of social democratic parties to offer any convincing response, when combined with growing concerns about mass immigration, profound climate change, and new security threats (be they organized crime or Islamic terrorism) leaves European electorates vulnerable to a politics of fear and populism. In this new context, social democrats often have to choose between appearing tone deaf—singing the virtues of globalization or multiculturalism without admitting their difficulties—or alienating part of their coalition.

On the economy and immigration, for example, their heartland vote is tempted by the clear, emotional (albeit misguided) messages of right- and left-wing competitors. But when social democrats move to use the same language, they lose support among the “ethical voters” in their coalition who are already tempted by other newer or fresher progressive movements.

Finally, social democrats have not modernized their parties to take advantage of progressive demographic change. Part of the appeal of many of the new ethical or progressive movements is that they are more open and less hierarchical than social democratic parties. Third Way political movements were organized around a very tight command-and-control structure. Attempting to manage the 24-hour news cycle, policy and message development were tightly controlled and dissemination centralized. Intra-party debate was often frowned upon, as it drove the party “off-message” and allowed opponents to give the appearance of division within the movement. Profound links between the social democrats and labor unions were also often severed or weakened.

Today, the advent of new social media and the “blogosphere” makes it impossible to control the news cycle in this way. Moreover, party members and supporters tend to be less deferential towards politicians and party officials alike, desiring to play a more active role in the political process. These trends combined necessitate the development of new party and extra-party infrastructure designed to facilitate a more inclusive movement, to dis-

seminate messages more widely, and to organize and leverage supporters more effectively at a grassroots level. European progressives need not just a better narrative but a better delivery system too; the old top-down party structures just won't do the job anymore.

To be clear, in explaining the elements of the European paradox we do not wish to claim that the Third Way was either a failure or unprogressive. On the contrary, we would argue that the Third Way was an essential stage in the renewal of social democratic thinking. Elements that today characterize the Third Way's shortcomings were once fundamental ingredients of its success. Reconciling social democratic thought with the market created the political space in which a reform of the state could be used to expand opportunity and modernize public services, helping shift the center ground of political debate in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a disciplined and controlled party was essential to rebuilding trust in a European public that was skeptical about the social democrats' ability to manage both the economy and its own political movement.

In short, the Third Way reconciled an electorate acclimatized to conservatism to the possibility of progressive politics. But the Third Way has had its day. If social democratic parties are to resolve the European paradox, then social democracy must move beyond the Third Way toward a new phase of progressive governance. The evidence suggests that we are now at the beginning of a long progressive arc. If social democrats are to profit from the favorable demographic and ideological trends we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, they will need to address three core challenges: coalition, definition, and organization.

# Resolving the paradox: Beyond the Third Way

---

## The coalitional challenge

In the United States, candidate Obama largely succeeded in capturing the current wave of modernizing demographic change by embracing a progressive agenda consistent with rising groups' preferences. Emerging demographic groups generally favored Obama by wide margins, which, combined with the strength (albeit diminished) his Democratic Party retained among the traditional working class, gave him a formidable electoral and governing coalition.<sup>6</sup> The coalitional challenge for Obama and American progressives generally is therefore mostly about keeping this demographically enhanced coalition together in the face of conservative attacks.

The situation is different in Europe, where modernizing demographic change has, so far, not done the leading progressive parties, the social democrats, much good. One reason is that some of these demographic changes do not loom as large in most European countries as they do in the United States. The immigrant/minority population starts from a smaller base so the impact of growth, even where rapid, is more limited.<sup>7</sup> And the younger generation, while progressive, does not have the population weight it does in America.

Beyond that, however, is a factor that has prevented social democrats from harnessing the still-considerable power of modernizing demographic change in Europe. That is the nature of European party systems. European social democrats typically face competition for the progressive vote from three different parts of the political spectrum: greens; far leftists; and liberal centrists. And not only do they have competition, these other parties, on aggregate, typically overperform among emerging demographics, while social democrats generally underperform (with the exception of immigrants in most countries).

In Germany's 2005 election, for example, the Social Democrats performed 7 points worse among members of the Millennial Generation (those born 1978 and after) than among voters as a whole, while the rest of the center-left (Alliance 90/The Greens, the Left Party and the Free Democratic Party) did 12 points better.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, among college graduates,<sup>9</sup> the Social Democrats underperformed by 5 points, while the rest of the center-left overperformed by 6 points. And among single<sup>10</sup> voters, the Social Democrats did 5 points worse than among all voters, while the rest of the center-left did 9 points better.

Denmark's 2005 election revealed similar fault lines. There, the Social Democrats did 3 points worse among Millennials than among the electorate as a whole, but the rest of the center-left did 10 points better. The patterns were similar among college graduates (social democrats 6 points worse/rest of the center-left 8 points better) and among singles (social democrats 3 points worse/rest of center-left 6 points better).

These patterns hold up when data are combined from a range of European countries.<sup>11</sup> Social Democrats underperformed across countries by 4 points among the Millennial Generation, by 2 points among college graduates, by 2 points among singles and by a percentage point among professionals. In contrast, the rest of the center-left overperformed by 9 points among Millennials, by 6 points among college graduates, by 7 points among singles and by 8 points among professionals.

The ability of social democracy's center-left competitors to attract emerging demographic groups has allowed these parties to capture a larger share of the vote in the last several decades, in contrast to social democracy where vote share has been declining. As mentioned earlier, the average social democratic vote has been under 27 percent in this decade. This figure is a 4-point drop from the 1980s. But the rest of the center-left has increased their average vote share by 5 points over this time period, bringing them up to 32 percent. Collectively, they are now larger than social democracy, constituting about 55 percent of the center-left vote. That about reverses the situation back in the 1980s when social democrats still represented 53 percent of the center-left vote.<sup>12</sup>

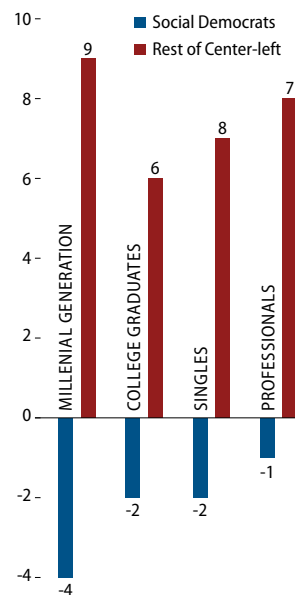
These data help bring the coalitional challenge for European progressives into focus. Social democrats have been caught in a kind of electoral pincers movement. On the one hand, the traditional working class is declining as a share of the electorate and is also giving less of its support to social democrats over time—with that lost support generally going to the right (occasionally to the far left). Since the 1960s, for example, working-class support has declined by 20 percentage points for Sweden's Social Democratic party, 17 points for Danish Social Democrats and by 12 points for the British Labor party.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, social democrats are not getting their expected share of progressive emerging constituencies, with much of that going to their center-left competitors.

Looked at purely from a party perspective, the implication of these trends might seem clear. The social democrats' coalitional challenge is to stop the bleeding among their traditional working class supporters and enhance their appeal among growing demographic groups and an increasingly diverse progressive community. But from a broader progressive perspective, this will not be enough.

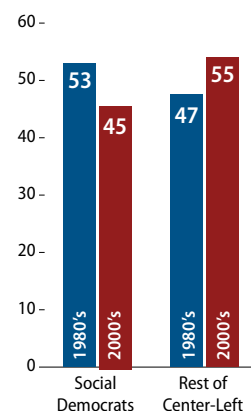
The fact must be faced that, as sociologist Tibor Dessewffy put it in his analysis of the June European Parliament elections, the era of social democratic dominance is over. That does not mean that social democracy is in a state of terminal decline. In all likelihood, these parties will continue to play leading roles on the center-left. But a return to their electoral

### Performance Among Emerging Groups Relative to Overall Electoral Performance

Social Democrats Vs. Rest of Center-Left, 12 European Countries



### Average Share of Center-Left Vote

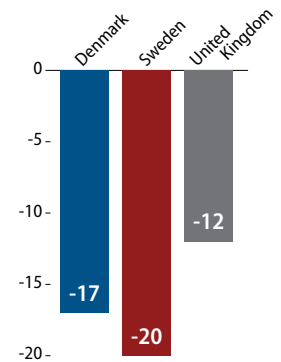


dominance of the 1960s and 1970s is unlikely. The world has changed too much and their center-left competitors are too strong.

The coalitional challenge for progressives in Europe must therefore include the difficult task of knitting together the center-lefts of different countries into dominant electoral and governing forces. Only in this way can center-left parties, including the social democrats, fully harness the power of modernizing demographic change and the progressive leanings of large sectors of the European population. Social democrats will achieve only limited success going it alone.

Of course, it can be argued that such a coalitional strategy is implicitly already in place. Individual center-left parties currently try to maximize their votes and then, after the election, should the results warrant it, there is nothing to prevent them for coming together in coalition and trying to form a government. But the times may call for more than that. Building effective progressive coalitions likely requires the elaboration of common purposes and programs *before* elections and, indeed, on an ongoing basis.

Decline in Social Democratic Share of Traditional Working Class Vote Since 1960's



---

## The definitional challenge

U.S. and European progressives face similar and some distinct challenges in developing a coherent political vision that is sound on policy grounds, values-based, and strategically designed to capture emerging demographic groups. The problems are twofold and will require us to develop a modern progressive vision that moves beyond the middle way of the past two decades to create a more forceful defense of government action and a new political coalition across the red, green, and liberal spectrum.

First, the basic ideological perspective of the Third Way is in need of serious adjustment in the current environment. A cosmopolitan progressivism that embraces markets and economic growth, reform of the welfare state, trade liberalization, open immigration, and advanced education as paths to greater opportunity is laudable and may have worked when times were good. But it is a philosophy that seems increasingly out of touch with the realities of many voters' lives given the recent economic decline and long-term trends in economic insecurity.

The Third Way appeals especially to economic elites and winners in society and much less so to the rising numbers of displaced voters trying to make sense of the chaos and instability all around them. When the traditional defenders of the working and middle classes are viewed as the status quo in a two-tiered economic system, it is little wonder that left- and right-wing populist movements are gaining so much steam in both the United States and Europe.

Continuing to promote a technocratic, moderate progressivism in this political culture will surely fall on deaf ears among voters who are getting much sharper messages from

more left-wing and conservative parties about how corporations and immigrants are threatening their social status. This helps to explain the rising resistance among political independents to President Obama's above-the-fray posture as well as the inability of social democratic parties across Europe to gain electorally from the financial crisis of 2008. A progressive philosophy grounded primarily in the values of professional elites will remain highly vulnerable to charges that it caters to the wealthy and redistributes to the poor while leaving the middle class out in the cold.

Populist threats are nothing new in history and progressives should not overreact or cater to the worst instincts of these movements. But populist anger should not be dismissed as incoherent or ignorant either. The steady decline of middle-class incomes and job security is well documented. The rapidly changing structure of the economy and the shift in the social composition of many western societies has been occurring for decades. The inability and incompetence of governments in dealing with corporate power, political corruption and multiple economic challenges is not a fiction. The decline in trust of institutions across the spectrum—from the media and the church to business and government—reflects real failures and mismanagement.

Despite its hyperbolic rhetoric and tinges of racism and xenophobia, contemporary populism works precisely because it is grounded in many truths about how elites have let down their countries and their people. Many voters are justifiably angry about their own position in life and they want answers that progressives and social democrats are increasingly not giving them.

History also shows us that the best way to combat such populist surges is to make the anger and energy work for progressive goals. Progressives need not abandon their universal values and commitment to a liberal society but they must find a way to harness left-wing populism for the benefit of a larger reform agenda that reins in the corruption and economic inequality and rejects laissez-faire governance. This was the successful model of the early progressive reformers in America and Europe and the basis for the successful presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the post-war social democratic governments in Europe.

For progressives today, it will require more fire in the belly and a much more forceful and principled attack on the forces of economic privilege, a renewed commitment to social welfare policies, and a regulatory agenda that genuinely checks excessive private power.

Second, the empirical conditions of the global economy and the middle class today require a serious rethinking of the Third Way commitment to market theories and private sector-driven growth. The financial crisis has shaken the economic foundations of the existing free-market consensus among political elites and forced a re-evaluation of the wisdom of deregulation and the proper role of the state in the economy. Progressives need to remind people of a few simple truths:

- Markets often fail.
- The private sector does not invest in public needs such as schools, infrastructure, health care, and transportation.
- Businesses cannot be counted on to police themselves and restrain excessive risk-taking.

If you want stability, security and opportunity, you need a properly functioning government that considers the needs of its people and economy first and the needs of parochial interests last.

If the Third Way movement attempted to restructure the state to reflect advances in the economy, a renewed progressivism is now needed to:

- Reassert the position of government in a mixed economy.
- Balance the worst tendencies of private economic activity.
- Promote national needs.
- Work beyond national borders to forge international action on key global challenges from energy and climate change to financial regulation and basic economic opportunities for the billions of people left behind in the global economy.

This is not to suggest that a return to older forms of social democratic thinking is in order. Rather, the goal of a modern progressivism should be to elevate our long-standing commitment to human advancement, positive freedom, political equality and the common good that defined the social democratic heyday to the level of our commitment to economic modernization that defined the Third Way successes of the 1980s and 1990s.

Moreover, a modern progressivism should recognize that governments do not just regulate markets or provide the conditions in which the market can thrive—such as the provision of educated, skilled and healthy labor—but also can also promote new markets. A critical example here is the market for renewable energy. We stand on the cusp of potentially one of the largest growth opportunities in centuries, shifting to a low-carbon economy, but that will not happen without a radically enlarged and rapidly growing market for renewable energy. Market growth at this level is unlikely to happen without the support of a post-modern industrial policy, properly structured incentives, investment in infrastructure and other carefully targeted policy steps.<sup>14</sup>

For American progressives, this new approach means taking much more aggressive steps to defend and promote the role of government in securing the freedom and economic opportunity of the people and directly confronting the entrenched libertarian ethos of a conservative movement that disdains all government activity. For European social democrats, it means recognizing that the social basis of their countries has changed and that they can no longer win on their own and must work with green, red and liberal parties to build viable electoral and parliamentary coalitions to advance progressive goals.

Both of these goals will require structural changes to party organization and messaging as well as new political coalitions that harness the ideas and energy of non-party infrastructure in non-profits, think tanks, grassroots groups, labor unions, and online activism.

---

## The organizational challenge

All great political movements swell the numbers of those engaged in the political process, encouraging either new generations to participate or inspiring anew those previously disengaged. In the United Kingdom, for example, the advent of New Labour was accompanied in a near doubling of party membership. Yet these successes pale in comparison to the mobilization and mass participation witnessed during last year's U.S. presidential campaign. As a result, throughout both the Democratic primary and the presidential election a continuous wave of European political organizers and strategists swept across the Atlantic eager to participate in and learn from the innovations being made by the Obama campaign team.

In the time since, much has been written about the innovations in Internet campaigning, the use of social networking tools, and the fundraising and organizing capacity they generate.<sup>15</sup> While it is true that technology played a more decisive role than in any previous election cycle—Obama raised almost three-quarters of his \$687 million online from 4 million people; 13 million people signed up to receive regular e-mails; and countless neighborhood events and campaign operations were organized through the social networking tool, MyBarackObama.com—one should not forget that Obama's tactics were essentially of an old-fashioned variety. The primary focus was on grassroots mobilization, canvassing, and saturation advertising. What then are the lessons that Europeans should draw from this electoral success?

On reflection, it is essential that Europeans distinguish where the use of the Internet and new information technologies ranked on the list of contributing factors to the success of Obama's campaign, and the importance of a broader set of progressive institutions had in providing the foundation stones upon which this historical campaign was built.

So, just how important was new technology? According to Paul Tewes, the mastermind of the Obama insurgency in Iowa, "message and organization won the campaign; technology served it." For Tewes, the campaign's success was driven by the level of trust bestowed upon its supporters and organizational tone and style matched the campaign message. "Respect. Empower. Include" was the mantra of the campaign and the three words could be found on colorful handmade posters decorating the walls of every Obama regional office in the country.

A great deal of time was sacrificed ensuring that "volunteers were as close to the campaign as the campaign management," according to Obama's campaign chief David Plouffe.

Ensuring that the treatment of volunteers was steadfast in its commitment to these principles was the part of the strategy that did the most to create the biggest “get out the vote” operation of all time. This focus was also an essential precondition for the successful integration of new technology into the campaign. Locally organized events or canvassing calls made from lists downloaded from the Internet just would not have been possible without large degrees of trust being bestowed upon volunteers from outside of the party.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, it will be immensely difficult for many European parties to generate the levels of enthusiasm witnessed during the Obama campaign. For one, the rhetorical strength of President Obama will not be easy to match; inspirational leaders of his ilk are all too rare. The context in which this campaign took place is also exceptional. An unpopular war in Iraq and an economy in recession provided fertile grounds upon which to mobilize against a massively unpopular incumbent. Whether it was an inspirational candidate or the impoverished record of the incumbent that brought people to the campaign, what is clear, and what progressives across Europe can learn from, is that volunteers stayed because of the way they were treated.

This will not be easy for those trained in the style and tone of Third Way politics. They will have to come to terms with an approach to campaigning that actively encourages volunteers and activists to share openly with those they canvass and demands that campaign organizers invest time in involving grass roots activists and volunteers. For much of the last two decades, progressive parties in Europe have been actively working to centralize campaigning within the party headquarters and to discipline or minimize the role of local members and supporters. This was the form of “professionalization” or “centralization” of party operations and message deemed necessary to ensure that local ‘militant’ or ‘maverick’ fringes—usually leftist—did not damage the party’s narrative and image nationally or among swing voters. In this context, there is a danger that some may think the task is purely one of adapting new technologies and bolting them on as additions to how party politics and campaigning are currently carried out.

This would be a mistake. What is needed now is a new relationship between the center—the war room and party headquarters—and the local party members and volunteers on the ground. Supported by new technical innovations in social networking and database management, a more collaborative relationship between those who set strategy and message at the campaign head office should allow greater leeway in the choice of tactics and message delivery on the ground. In return, through greater participation in canvassing and campaigning, the central office will receive more accurate and up-to-date information from the local level, giving them a clearer view of how successful their strategy is and how receptive people are to their narrative.

In this regard, the Obama campaign owes a great deal to the 50-state strategy initiated by former Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean, who set in place much of the party infrastructure on which Obama built across the country. While building and manag-

ing back-end infrastructure capable of compiling and processing detailed information about registered voters seems far less glamorous than social networking sites and Internet fundraising, an army of canvassers and volunteers are ineffective unless they—and the information they compile and use—can be organized purposefully. This is not simply a matter of new campaign techniques, but rather a root-and-branch transformation of a political party's philosophy combined with significant investment in party development and modernization.

While the party infrastructural development undertaken by the Democratic National Committee was a crucial ingredient to the Obama campaign's success, equally important was the creation of a series of extra party institutions and movements that independently developed to harness the emerging progressive majority in the United States. The power and importance of right-wing institutions such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute has reached the level of mythology. Until recently, however, no such counterbalance existed on the progressive side.

In earlier times, progressives in both Europe and the United States could rely on the support and mobilization of the trade union movement. With the decline in the size and strength of trade unionism, and the growing importance of new social movements, such as the anti-war and poverty coalitions and the environmental movement, progressives must now channel the energies of broader social groups.

Howard Dean's campaign for president in 2004 illustrated to progressives the power of the Internet to raise funds, and the importance of the netroots movement in giving voice to progressive voices through websites such as MoveOn.org, Daily Kos, Talking Points Memo and the MyDD. This growth was complemented and assisted by the formation of Democracy Alliance, a coalition of donors formed in 2005 to give to progressive causes, and by a series of independently funded, extra-party vehicles for voter mobilization and education.

The creation and growth of the Center for American Progress, as a new type of progressive think tank, further crystallized the progressive renaissance in Washington. Designed to be both a research institute and a message platform, from its earliest days the primary goal of the Center was to actively promote a progressive agenda in the traditional and new media. With daily briefings, a host of talking heads and an aggressive Internet and blog strategy, the Center quickly established itself as a counterweight to its conservative rivals.

With the exception of the United Kingdom, there is a relative paucity of supporting progressive infrastructure on the center-left in Europe. Moreover, the infrastructure that does exist—such as the official party foundations—tends to be more conservative in its approach to progressive politics, focusing on research and policy development but neglecting the communication and organizational aspects that have proven successful in the United States. While such institutions are clearly valuable members of the progressive armory, alone they are insufficient, incapable of reshaping the parameters of public debate in favor of progressive arguments.

There are legal, institutional and cultural barriers to overcome in the development of a broader infrastructure within Europe. However, the establishment of institutions such as Tera Nova in France, Italianieuropei, Glocus and Italiafutura in Italy, Progressive Centrum in Germany, and IDEAS in Spain, suggest this is a path that some have now decided it is essential to travel.

To be clear, however, the organizational challenge is not just a European one. Many of the innovations in modern campaign associated with recent electoral cycles have been possible because each candidate in large part builds his team and approach anew. While this allows for innovation, it hampers the development of an institutionalized memory that can nurture and shape the progressive movement beyond the campaign phase. As the transition from campaign to governance has shown in the United States, it is not always easy to carry forward the political momentum of an election campaign into a movement for legislative reform. As President Obama struggles to push this agenda, his aides and advisors must also work to embed the organizational strengths of his campaign within the larger progressive community and pass them on to future progressive candidates. Current indications suggest that this will be a harder task than one first imagined.

In addressing this task, European progressive parties, with their deeper historical roots, and earlier successes in the establishment of the welfare state, may prove a source of inspiration to American progressives too. Progressives from the United Kingdom to Sweden, Germany to Spain have been struggling with how to retain a sense of insurgency while incumbent. Here, as in other areas, there is space for mutual learning.

# Conclusion

This paper argues that progressives, despite poor electoral results in Europe and severe policymaking difficulties in America, have significant future opportunities for growth. Gloom and doom is neither warranted nor helpful. Instead, European and U.S. progressives should focus on a collaborative effort to overcome the coalitional, definitional and organizational challenges facing our movement. We have much to teach each other, especially since in many instances America's strengths are Europe's weaknesses and vice versa, and much we could learn together.

Moreover, it is now more urgent than ever that we find ways to do so. The global economic crisis has presented the world with huge problems, but also significant opportunities. If American and European progressives are to seize these opportunities and offer effective progressive responses to these problems, we will need to address a series of common concerns:

- How can progressives manage public finances and budget deficits effectively while ensuring we maintain the levels of public investment necessary to guarantee high-quality public services for all?
- How can progressives fund the creation of new infrastructure and develop the new economic sectors essential to future prosperity?
- How can progressives work together to bridge the current gap on climate negotiations or to ensure that the leaders of the Group of 20 developed and developing nations address the rebalancing of the global economy with the same vigor and endeavor with which they addressed the original crisis?
- How, in the face of rising casualties, can progressives maintain support for the transatlantic alliance in Afghanistan, and ensure policies in the region deliver both our own security and a sustainable peace in the region?<sup>17</sup>

These are urgent questions. In the wake of the current crises, progressives cannot allow the forces of conservatism and the status quo to prevail. There should be no return to business as usual. To prevent this, progressives must not simply agree on the best policies, but also work together to build genuinely convincing narratives, rooted in shared values, about why these policies are necessary and provide a common agenda that offers hope for the future.

This weekend is the beginning of what needs to be an ongoing conversation. Deeper policy discussions are needed, and stronger collaboration in research and analysis will be essential. This work will be complex and require significant resources but the potential payoffs are very large.

Specifically, there are no comparable data on demographic change across Europe and America so similarities and magnitudes of change cannot be assessed. Nor is there good, comparable information on how demographic groups vote across different countries. And there is certainly no way to compare values and policy views by demographic groups across countries. Finally, we lack any crisp way to compare progressive organizational infrastructures, policy approaches and political messaging across countries.

This problem can and should be addressed by setting up a centrally coordinated effort to develop these data and make them available to all progressive leaders and organizations. A secure basis in fact will be critical to the success of our collaborative work. And our collaborative work in turn will help build those progressive narratives so crucial to the future of the progressive movement on both sides of the Atlantic.

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Gerassimos Moschonas, "The Electoral Dynamics of European Social Democratic Parties (1950-2008)" in Cronin J, Ross G. and Shoch J. (eds.), *Futures of the Left*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming). Data are based on 13 European social democratic parties for which continuous data are available since World War II: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
- 2 Tibor Dessewffy, "Reflections on the Outcome of the 2009 EP Elections: Farewell to Social Democratic Dominance", undated.
- 3 Some political psychologists argue that policy positions only account for 10 per cent of why people vote a particular candidate or party. See Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008.
- 4 Charlie Leadbeater, *Living on Thin Air: The New Economy*, London: Penguin, 2000.
- 5 Until recently, when the global financial crisis and recession provided an opening for conservatives to discuss spending cuts, the center ground of debate about public services focused on the method of delivering quality, not the principle itself.
- 6 For a detailed analysis, see Ruy Teixeira, *New Progressive America*, Center for American Progress, March, 2009.
- 7 And of course immigrants who are not citizens cannot vote in national elections. Moreover, many immigrants are within-EU immigrants who tend to play a qualitatively different social and political role than non-EU immigrants. Perhaps the most politically relevant category would be non-EU immigrants and those with the race-ethnic characteristics of non-EU immigrants, regardless of immigration status. But these data are very, very hard to get.
- 8 Data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of 2006 European Social Survey data. German vote figures based on second vote.
- 9 First or second level of tertiary education.
- 10 Never married and never in civil partnership.
- 11 Authors' analysis of data from the 2006 European Social Survey using the same countries listed in note 2, with the exception of Luxembourg where data were not collected. Data are population-weighted to take into account the varying sizes of the different countries.
- 12 Based on the same 13 social democratic parties listed in note 2. Analysis by authors of data in Moschonas, op. cit. and on the Parties and Elections in Europe website, available at <http://www.parties-and-elections.de/countries.html>.
- 13 Authors' analysis of data in Gerassimos Maschonas, "Lower Classes or Middle Classes?: Socialism and its Changing Constituencies in Great Britain, Sweden and Denmark", presentation to Council for European Studies, March 5, 2008.
- 14 See John D Podesta, Kate Gordon, Bracken Heindricks, and Benjamin Goldstein, "The Clean-Energy Investment Agenda: A Comprehensive Approach to Building the Low-Carbon Economy" (Washington: Center for American Progress, September 2009).
- 15 Remarks here based on previous arguments made in Will Straw and Matt Browne. "Strategy and Organising – Lessons from the Obama Campaign" *Social Europe Journal* (April 2009).
- 16 Remarks by Paul Tewes and David Plouffe referred to in this paragraph were made at Center for American Progress Action Fund meeting, "Campaign to Governance" held in March 2009.
- 17 For a discussion of these issues see: Michael Ettlinger and Michael Linden, "Deal With It: A Guide to the Federal Deficit and Debate" (Washington: Center for American Progress, September 2009); John D. Podesta and others, "The Clean Energy Investment Agenda: A Comprehensive Approach to Building the Low-Carbon Economy" (September 2009); Richard Samans, "Beyond Business as Usual: G-20 Leaders and Post-Crisis Reconstitution of the International Economic Order" (Washington: Center for American Progress, September 2009); and Reuben E. Brigety II, "Swords and Ploughshares: Sustainable Security in Afghanistan Requires Sweeping U.S. Policy Overhaul" (Washington: Center for American Progress, March 2009).

---

---

The Center for American Progress Action Fund transforms progressive ideas into policy through rapid response communications, legislative action, grassroots organizing and advocacy, and partnerships with other progressive leaders throughout the country and the world. The Action Fund is also the home of the Progress Report and ThinkProgress.

---

---

Center for American Progress Action Fund

