

The U.S. Electoral System and Progressive Electoral Strategy

Facilitator's Guide

Overview:

This training, the third in our series, centers on electoral strategy. To do so it touches on the U.S. electoral system, gives a brief primer on the composition of the Republican and Democratic parties, analyzes the current moment of polarization and instability in the parties, and highlights the opportunities for the left and social justice forces in this moment.

This training builds on some of the content and themes of the first two sessions: **Organizing on Shifting Terrain and The Right, The Far Right and Trump.**

This guide is intended to help facilitators lead a presentation and discussion with a group of organizers, activists, or leaders in your organization or collective. Any of the three sessions can work as a stand-alone training, although the three are better in concert.

Facilitators can use this guide as an introduction to the core content and to explore options for facilitation. We have also created a Resource Guide of related readings if you want to dig deeper into some of the theories and arguments that underlie this presentation.

Key Points:

In this training — **The Electoral System and Progressive Electoral Strategy** — there are several key points that we are trying to make. The central point is the need for an anti-right, inside/outside strategy relative to both elections and the Democratic Party.

1. **The US has a winner-take-all electoral system** in which only two parties can successfully contend for power. Due to this system, alternative third parties are reduced to the role of spoilers: i.e., they are not only highly marginal but they actually help the party most politically distant from them to win (e.g., the Greens help the Republicans win; the Libertarians help the Democrats).
2. One outcome of the long-standing two-party system is that **the two parties are wide coalitions of a variety of social sectors, forces, and ideologies.** Though both parties are usually anchored by and dominated by a section of the corporate class, this corporate dominance can and is being challenged. Rightwing populists have displaced the corporate right as the leader of the Republican Party and leftwing populists (Bernie) mounted a big challenge and gained significant power in the Democratic Party.
3. This is a moment of **much greater than normal political polarization** – growing out of decades of Right wing activism, extreme racial polarization that heightened after the election of Obama, and growing economic inequality. Trump has brought this situation to a head.

4. The Left and progressives have struggled with how to deal with these dynamics. An anti-right, independent, inside/outside strategy is needed. A “Tea Party of the left” is crucial to unite progressives, combat/defeat the right and contend for power both within the Democratic Party and at every level of government.

Detailed Slides and Content:

The following is a breakdown of the slides with some additional notes, references and discussion questions.

Slide 1: Title slide

Make sure to do a welcome and introductions, and perhaps set goals and ground rules for the discussion

Slide 2: Why Elections Are Crucial

[Continue the introduction and setting the context for the presentation.] This slide discusses why elections are crucially important for progressives. Why are so many progressives not involved or organizing in elections? How does the non-profit sector impact this?

Slide 3: Developing an Electoral Strategy

[Continued introduction.] If we agree that electoral politics are important, then what should our approach be? Electoral strategy should not just be a matter of opinion or desires, but based on an analysis of the system and the balance of social forces. We need to ground our approach and strategies for elections in an analysis of the electoral system. So here we go...

Slide 4: The US Left and Electoral Strategy

This is another title slide for the next part of the presentation/discussion: analysis of the U.S. electoral system

Slide 5: Winner-Take-All!

It's probably helpful to understand the proportional representation system, as it flourishes in most democracies other than the U.S., Britain and Canada.

Proportional representation systems vary from one country to the other, but here is a model case. A national election for all the seats in the parliament (Congress) is held at one time. The winners in each parliamentary district are normally determined by who gets the most votes (not necessarily a majority). In addition, however, any party that gets, say, 5% or more of the vote, will get something close to 5% of the representatives in the parliament. In other words, political majorities rule, but political minorities get representation rather than being shut out as they are in winner take all systems like the U.S. This means that parties are usually strongly politically defined and represent definite constituencies, can grow from small to large (or vice versa) within the system, and can fight for their constituencies and form alliances in the parliament. In most cases there are at least four parties often more, sometimes a dozen or more. And in all cases the left has either one, two or even three separate parties (e.g., the communist party, the socialist or social-democratic party and the green party)

Further, most countries with proportional representation systems (and even some that have winner take all, like the UK) do not have separate elections to choose the Chief Executive (President or Prime Minister). Rather the party that wins the most parliamentary representatives is given the right to “form the government.” Forming the government means choosing the Chief Executive and the Cabinet, the executive branch. To do so, however, they must either by themselves have a majority of the parliament or, if not (and it’s rare that they do), they must form a coalition with other parties to achieve that majority. This involves coming to a formal agreement on a legislative platform (which, since they are a majority of the parliament, will definitely be passed), who will hold each Cabinet post, etc. This gives small parties the chance to become part of the government and influence the governing legislation. For example, the Green Party in Germany was part of the governing alliance led by the German Social Democratic Party for many years during which time their rep was the foreign minister—even though the Greens never received more than 8% of the vote. Again, this is a much more democratic arrangement than the winner-take-all, presidential system of the U.S., and also gives the winners of an election the ability to make strong legislative change.

Slide 6: The U.S. Two-Party System

The U.S. has never had more than two major contending parties, with the Republicans and Democrats as the two principal parties since 1860. The main leftwing third parties were the Socialist Party in the early 1900s and the Progressive Party in 1952 but neither impacted the presidential outcome. In the 1990s the Reform Party sponsored by Ross Perot won a substantial part of the vote (about 20%). Since most of its votes came from people who normally voted Republican, the Reform Party was the reason why Democrat Bill Clinton won in both 1992 and 1996, each time with only about 45% of the vote. Much more common than changes in the two main parties have been changes in the politics and social sectors and issues represented by the parties or dominant within each party, as in 2016. A strong example is that the Republican Party started out in 1860 as the leftwing, antislavery party, but by the turn of the century had become the center-right pro corporate party, while the Democratic Party transformed from the party of slaveholders to the party of the reform capitalists, the working class, African Americans and the New Deal.

Slide 7: Parties as Broad Coalitions

Although we are talking about social forces in each party coalition – the role of money and the rich has almost always been at the core of which party is holding power. When the most powerful sections of capital support a party, that party frequently gains the upper hand for an extended period of time. Which other social forces are in each party varies over time and has been influenced by a range of historical factors, the New Deal, the Voting Rights Act, etc.

Additionally, the power of the parties is not solely exercised through their formal party clubs, county, state and national committees. Instead it resides in informal and often shifting coalitions of visible and powerful electeds, core donors and fundraisers, key strategists and staff – together with key issue and constituency groups.

Slide 8: But...Insurgencies Are Possible

Because the power resides in networks in the party, and parties are coalitions of different interests and ideologies, there can be room for insurgent (left or right) candidates and trends to challenge and win. This is especially true when there is broadly felt popular discontent with the status quo and/or a crisis

in the status quo. The 2016 election is happening during a populist moment, when there is large-scale anger and revolt against the establishment of both parties. This creates both opportunities and threats. For the first time ever in U.S. history, a populist alliance has taken over one of the two main political parties: the rightwing takeover of the Republican Party.

Slide 9: The Dynamics of Party Conflict and the Potential for Inside/Outside Strategies Today.

This is the title slide of the next part of the presentation/discussion

Slide 10: The 2000s: Polarization and Change

The politics and elite economic strategy of the 1980s (Reagan), 1990s (Washington Consensus), and 2000s (War on Terror) laid the groundwork for this moment of crisis for working people and the planet. Poverty and inequality have increased, the U.S. continues to engage in multiple unsuccessful as well as unjust wars, we face climate catastrophe, and the scapegoating of immigrants, Muslims, and communities of color has intensified and produced resistance. After thirty years, this political and economic strategy is in crisis. So now ...

Slide 11: The Great Polarization of 2016

It's easy to think that whatever is happening now is a normal moment, and that things are usually this way. But the intense political polarization that we see right now between the parties and in Congress is extremely uncommon in U.S. history. The polarization is increased by the fact that since the 1990s, for the first time in at least 150 years, pretty much all forces left of center are in one party and all forces right of center are in the other. Prior to this the Democratic Party included, for example, both Blacks and Southern white supremacists, causing internal and external party conflict and compromise. Also, changing racial demographics in this country have eroded the white core electorate that the Republican Party has depended on for the last 50 years, and these trends are only continuing.

Slide 12: The Far Right Wing's Inside/Outside Strategy and the Republican Party

See these two articles on the GOP's Southern Strategy and the far right's inside/outside strategy.

How the Southern Strategy Made Donald Trump Possible, Jeet Heer

<https://newrepublic.com/article/130039/southern-strategy-made-donald-trump-possible>

Notes Toward a Social Justice Electoral Strategy, Bob Wing: <http://www.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/community-organizing/item/45-notes-toward-a-social-justice-electoral-strategy>

The key point on this slide is "inside/outside" strategy. What is inside/outside strategy? For the right, it means struggling within the Republican Party to win elections and determine policy while also building independent institutions and initiatives to push the party to the right.

Slide 13: The Far Right Takes Over the Republican Party in 2016

For this slide, the core point is that the constellation of decades of economic decline and increasing inequality, decades of organizing by the far Right, and the increased Right-wing insurgency that occurred after Obama's election, have led to a dangerous populist moment where the politics and some of the institutions of the far right have moved even further to the right and have taken over the mainstream of the Republican party, defeating the establishment and their better funded candidates.

For a deeper discussion of the growth and influence of the far right on this election, see the other two sections of this elections curriculum.

Slide 14: The Left and the Democrats

The inside/outside approach has been less consistently present on the left than on the right. In its place has generally been issue advocacy without contending for sustained power within the party. At points in the past the union movement was powerful enough to make sure its interests had a substantial (though not dominant) place within the Democratic Party coalition, but in the wake of McCarthyism and conditions of the Cold War, labor's clout was much reduced, and in recent years de-industrialization and privatization have further taken a toll on labor's influence within the Democratic Party.

Slide 15: The Time is Ripe

But there has been movement on this issue. A variety of experiments in electoral work have taken place in the last decade, and we have seen several waves of the resurgence of mass participation in struggle. The base of the Democratic Party is now largely to the left of the party establishment on a variety of issues, but with divisions. All of this creates a basis to move.

Slide 16: What Electoral Strategy Now?

This is another title slide for the next part of the presentation.

Let's step back for a minute to talk about the potential benefits and drawbacks to the different approaches we can take to electoral politics...

Slide 17: Four Left or Progressive Approaches to Electoral Politics

There are four main approaches to electoral politics that have been most present among the left and progressives in recent decades. Let's go through them one by one.

Slide 18: Abstentionism

Abstentionism is the approach that advocates staying out of partisan elections entirely. There are a variety of arguments for this position, some of which are listed here, but many of us have come into contact with this position in movement work. Abstentionism cedes the electoral terrain completely to non-left political forces, despite the fact that this is the terrain where most people who engage in politics at all operate.

Slide 19: 3rd Party Efforts

Third party efforts are just that – building a third party outside the two-party system to better represent, in this case, progressive or Left politics. Blocked by the U.S. electoral system, leftwing third party efforts over the last fifty years have been notably futile, usually failing to win even one percent of the vote, having little appreciable effect on the public debate, and unable to develop momentum that builds strength from one election season to the next.

Slide 20: Passive Democrats (aka follow the leaders)

The next common approach is passive support for the Democratic Party candidates in elections, or backing Party leaders on issue campaigns. This approach often avoids pushing aggressively from the outside in ways that could give Democratic leaders critical press coverage, and avoids competing

within the party primaries or other structures. Even voter registration drives and get out the vote efforts are largely in the service of existing candidates. Both abstentionism and passivity are reinforced by laws barring non-profit organizations from partisan elections and limiting their policy advocacy.

Slide 21: An Independent Inside/Outside strategy, “A Tea Party of the Left”

Given our analysis of the electoral system and of the historical period, we believe the left needs an inside/outside strategy, similar to that of the right, as detailed on this slide. An easy way to imagine this approach is a “tea party of the left.” A movement that unites with all who can be united against the right but also organizes independently inside and outside of electoral politics and the Democratic Party to build its power to push the party to the left, challenge establishment candidates, and govern at all levels.

Slide 22: Key Elements of Inside/Outside

This slide details the key pieces of an inside/outside approach.

Slide 23: Risks and Opportunities in 2016

We end by thinking about the unique risks and opportunities presented by this election cycle and then identifying opportunities for action.

Slide 24: 2016 Action Possibilities

... and here are a host of action possibilities. Thanks for checking out this presentation – now we have some questions to talk about as a group.

Facilitation Prompts:

After going through the presentation and answering questions, the following are some ideas for discussion on the information presented and its ramifications for our work.

Which of the four approaches to electoral politics did you most support before this presentation? Has that changed at all? Have the conditions of this election cycle changed your past views?

Do options for work from the last slide line up with your plans? What are you planning for this election?

Who holds electoral power where you are organizing? Who are the key electeds, donors, and strategists?

What are the challenges and opportunities of building inside/outside strategy where you work?

How would the risks and opportunities listed impact the communities you live and work in and your organizing?