

The Road To Victory Goes Through the End of the Democratic Coalition

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[Todd Gitlin](#), [Dan Gilmore](#), Russell Arben Fox and others are thinking about the road ahead. I am as well. We lost, and more importantly, we lost under conditions that are about as favorable as you could ask for. We really lost: it's got nothing to do with rain or electronic voting machines or Ralph Nader or Fox News. John Kerry ran the best campaign he could, and he was a reasonable enough standard-bearer for the Democratic Party as it stood before November 2, 2004. It's a matter of cold, hard numbers. The old Democratic coalition got all of its people to the polls, it got all of its people mobilized, it got angry and motivated and had a razor-sharp focus on a single goal, and it lost.

The Democratic Party as we have known it since the New Deal is finally dead. I come to bury it, and from its ashes, reinvent a coalition that can drive a wedge right into the heart of the Republican Party and take back national power from the hardcore constituencies behind George W. Bush.

Do not dream that all the party needs is the right standard-bearer, another Bill Clinton. It's now clear that Bill Clinton was not the renaissance of the Democrats, but their last waning gasp before the sun set on the coalition, a man whose sheer political charisma—as well as the good fortune of being in office during an economic upturn which had little to do with him or his policies--enabled him to hold together for one last run an old and fragmenting set of interests and constituencies.

The right leader cannot overcome the social math simply by personality or skill. The old coalition needs at least one major new social constituency reliably and permanently added to it, and there are no constituencies available who can be wooed without throwing overboard some fundamental part of the established hodgepodge of programs and ideologies that live disharmoniously aboard the Democratic ark.

It's not just the numbers that those who oppose Bush need: we also need people who live somewhere else than where the current core constituencies of the Democrats live. American politics is highly localized by its nature. It doesn't matter if 49.5% of the national population are "blue staters" if they all live together in a few concentrated locations. As long as that's so, the opponents of the current dominant faction of the Republican Party will face defeat again and again, because 49.5% of the population living in about 12% of the actual geographic space of the nation (mostly in cities) equals

a Senate and a House that will always go to the “red state” faction, and a Presidency that can only be won under unusual circumstances.

The road to victory is not a question of political tactics or political leadership. It is a question that resides with the logics of social history, that requires a fundamental realignment of political ideology to match actually existing constituencies and actually existing communities.

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Much as I would like to think so, it’s also not enough to wait for four more years of failure, dishonor and malfeasance and think that this will make enough people come around to our point of view. Because the case was made very clearly this time that Bush and his colleagues were incompetent. More than anything else, this has fueled the despair among those of us who oppose him. Can’t they see? Don’t they know? Are they stupid? Are they blind?

I’ve asked the same questions, voiced the same cries. What I’ve had to face in the last three days is this: a desire for competency and respect for political process is a cultural value, as surely as abortion is. My intense belief in the importance of those things is just that, a belief. More to the point, it is a self-serving belief, a belief that advances the interests of my own social class. I believe in the importance of competency, knowledge, “best practices” of decision-making because I’ve been trained to be part of an elite that holds those things to be of importance, and aspires to them as a matter of course. I believe in those things as a way of life, as a part of self and identity, as deeply as any evangelical believes in the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ in all things.

I could just write off Michael Dukakis and Al Gore as inept or clumsy in the way they made a case for the superiority of trained, competent, intellectually proficient governance, and I could also concede that the case they might make for the negative consequences of less competent or process-driven governance was actually pretty abstract and even debatable in terms of the likely performance of their opponent. (Not to mention the fact that when you get into the nitty-gritty of particular executive departments, it’s far from clear that the Clinton Administration exhibited policy-making competency to any great degree.) This time the case is just screamingly clear. I’ve reluctantly come to the conclusion that you can’t attribute the failure of that case to carry the day to the stupidity, obduracy or even malevolent ideological intent of the majority of Bush voters.

More, it is simply not what they look for in a leader. They look for a leader who symbolically summarizes and emphasizes the values and beliefs that sustain their lives within their own communities and that connect them to the larger imagined community of the nation. Nor do they have any reasonable expectation that competent governance will address the priorities and issues they face in their everyday lives. They do not think that good policy or bad policy can help or hurt them. In this, they may be wrong, but not wildly or absurdly so, and in particular, they are not wrong that the kind of competent

policy-making that the Democratic Party holds out to them as the remedy for their problems holds no remedy at all.

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Much has been made of the “moral values” that connect red-state communities with the Bush Administration, and unite them in their hatred or at least rejection of blue-state constituencies and culture. Little has been said, so far, about the historical sources of this strong attachment. Some of what has been said is enormously flawed and is less analytically explanatory of why the red-state communities identify as they do and more accidentally revealing of how deep the contempt of blue-staters for their antagonists runs. It is simply ignorant to argue that there is a fundamental continuity between the South that lost the Civil War and the red-staters of today. It’s a cheap shot, and completely unsatisfying as a working hypothesis in social history.

We know full well that the defenders of Jim Crow in the 1950s came to that position not because of a continuous, uninterrupted political and social project that stretched back to the antebellum world, but as part of a sudden, intense social and political mobilization that stretched back no further than the 1930s. Rick Perlstein has taught us equally that Barry Goldwater’s campaign mobilized tangible social constituencies behind American conservatism, most prominently small business owners, and in response to both real and perceived grievances with the growing power of the federal government and postwar elites.

Similarly, the consciousness of “moral values” in rural and peri-urban communities, and in suburban communities that are home to white-collar lower middle-classes who feel alienated from and marginalized by the cosmopolitan habitus of David Brooks’ “bobos”, comes from somewhere tangible and real, it comes out of particular histories of social conflict and social formation. It’s not just drooling hicks from the backwater who somehow persist in irrational attachments to creationism or evangelical religiosity.

At least one piece of this historical puzzle is the defensive mobilization of rural and peri-urban communities against the intrusive, transformative projects emanating out of civil institutions that were captured by the reformist elite comprised largely of Baby Boomers, an elite that adapted well to globalization and the transformation of the US economy towards services and away from manufacturing.

On the morning of November 3rd, many of us awoke and asked, “Why do they hate us so?” Because really, they do. It’s no use talking of unity and sweetness and how we’re all Americans and so on, not yet, not now. If this marriage is to be saved, we’re going to have to get real. Using “moral values” first as their shield and now as their sword, the heart of the red-states is on the march. Any casual contempt a blue-stater might feel for a rural Alabaman is returned, much of the time, a hundred-fold.

Why? Because in some measure, that hatred is based on a rational parsing of economic and social facts, an implicit understanding of the drift of American history and its likely

forward arc. It's not just a tit-for-tat gesture. They hate us because we are in economic and social and cultural terms the winners, the owners of the future. Because they are the losers.

People living in many of the communities that comprise the red states are there because they could not or would not leave. Anybody who could leave, has, or is, or will. Why should they love us? We steal their children, we kill their towns. We show the next generation the bright lights of the big city every day and we ask them to love us for doing so. My father grew up in two shitty little cities in California, Banning and El Centro. His whole life he was grateful to have escaped. He was driven by the need to escape. Many of the men who were his friends when I grew up were the same way: driven professionals, consumed by careers and social mobility, consumed by a hunger to get away.

Whomever is left in the red states is left because they have no skills which are transportable, because they have no capital to pay for the costs of relocation, because they have no social networks to act as their safety net in the blue-state world, because they have family or friends who are not leaving and that they cannot bear to leave, because some dominant person in their life terrorizes them and bullies them into staying. Because they like it where they live and figure nowhere else could be better, even if there aren't any jobs besides minimum-wage service jobs where they are. Because, like my paternal grandfather, they don't particularly have any ambitions beyond getting along ok. Because they don't know the people who live in cities and suburbs, or what they think they know of them, they don't like.

They do hate us. Because we are their children who fled, or the children of their children, or maybe the children of the people who seemingly have always squatted at the heart of middle-class power in American.

What's left to the red states? What do they own? They own the political system, because our system apportions power by geography. They have a powerful, latent, historically-derived ownership of the moral foundations of American life, values that even many of the most blue of the blue-staters still respect and follow in some unconscious way. Somewhere inside, almost all of us find the iconography of Norman Rockwell resonantly powerful, even if we pretend to be too cool or cynical for all that. Mayberry is a place that all of us recognize, and we derive more than we think from it. Those places and images live in the red-states: they are the property of those left there, their heirlooms. In their resentment and alienation, left in the growing absence in the heartland, the red-staters have risen up and turned their heirlooms into mighty weapons which no one can take from them, and to which the blue-staters have few effective answers. "Moral values" are in this context what James Scott has called "the weapons of the weak", however uncomfortable that assertion might make intellectuals on the left.

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Much of this echoes the argument made by Thomas Frank in *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, but I depart sharply from Frank in his view that the red-staters are the duped zombie armies of a plutocratic business elite, that they have come to support policies and governance which have accelerated their decline and suffering. In this one respect, the old Naderite line that Democrats and Republicans are little different is true enough: the conventional Democratic approach to the problems of red-state America would do little to address its resentment and isolation. What might most Democrats trot out when asked what a good, competent, intellectually sophisticated, well-trained politician could do about red-state economic and social life? I'm wagering that we'd hear something about job retraining programs, about assistance with unemployment, about trying to attract capital and investment and change to their communities. The people who are left don't want job retraining: that just gives those who get retrained transportable skills that they will use to leave. They don't want an infusion of capital or investment that will turn their communities into yet another blue-state city or town, that will price them out of housing and living. They want the fabric of their communities intact, they want the reinforcement of their social power over their communities. *Gemeinschaft* is loving and familiar tyranny. There is a reason why all over the world, some people eagerly flee rural communities for urban ones, and it's not just poverty or suffering or need. It's desire, a desire to escape and be free, to become anonymous in a community of people to whom you owe nothing and are owed nothing in return by and so escape the grasp of family, neighbors, intimate strangers. Democrats cannot promise any of that, and their usual competent, well-meaning policy ideas are the opposite of that, no answer at all to the animating passions of red-state life.

Neither does the Republican business-class promise what is sought. I disagree radically with Frank on his proposition that they are the unchallenged masters and manipulators of red-state resentment. Indeed, I think they are in the near term more likely to be mastered by it, consumed by it, lost to it. They may have helped to awake it from its slumber, organize it, feed it cash and power and vision, but they do not control it. They have sown its wind, but they will not reap its whirlwind. I think we saw in this election the first tremors of alarm and concern among the business elites and suburban constituencies within the Republican Party. They chose not to break or fission this time, but some may be aware that they are playing a very dangerous game, one that has wounded other capitalist classes in other historical circumstances. Russell Arben Fox may be right that Bush and his associates are no anti-capitalists, but they have perhaps hitched their star to a form of anti-capitalist populism.

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This is where we arrive at the necessary end of the old Democratic coalition, which I would summarize as unions, racial minorities and educated cosmopolitan elites. In different elections and moments, there have been other significant constituencies added to this core, but these are the essential three legs on which Democratic victories and political power have rested.

Both parties combine potentially antagonistic social constituencies and use some larger narrative to cement them together. The economic interests of unions and some minority communities have frequently been in tension over the past two decades (and arguably far longer), and the terms of globalization and neoliberalism have basically benefited urban cosmopolitans enormously. Even when they talk a strong line against globalization, as some of my colleagues and students do, they essentially benefit from and rely upon it, and do not challenge most of its ordinary manifestations in their everyday lives. The old Democratic coalition dispenses forms of patronage through municipal governments in major cities; it comes together out of a mutual agreement to dispense the spoils of power in its strongholds, by tit-for-tat compensations to each group. It also comes together out of the resonant memories of past struggles and out of a shared conviction that regardless of what each group thinks of its partners within the coalition, it is more certain that Republican Party would and has threatened its interests more.

The problem is that the Republicans stitch together a larger number of potentially antagonistic constituencies and more crucially, they do it across a larger range of geographic space. In its current form, the Democratic coalition can capture no new major constituencies. That's what 2004 proved. The youth are not coming: they didn't vote much, and split evenly when they did. The white suburbanites are not coming: they stuck to the Republicans, seeing little in common with at least two of the three legs of the Democratic coalition (unions and minorities). The women are not coming. No one is coming. And some are departing: some minority communities either live within the zeitgeist of the red-state world or are sympathetic enough to their communitarian aspirations and values-driven vision to peel away from the Democrats. The unions, too, live more and more in the red-state world, not to mention the fact that the union movement as a continuing concern is almost entirely played out, exhausted, done.

The opposition to Bush will need to command the dedicated, structurally solid loyalty of at least one, possibly more, major American constituencies that it does not presently command in order to meaningfully oppose the forces that put Bush back into office in 2004. The opposition can only get to that point by throwing overboard at least one of the major historic components of its former coalition. More importantly, it will require the complete abandonment of many of the treasured causes and ideals that have characterized Democratic politics over the past two decades.

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There are two roads.

Russell Arben Fox has explored one with great subtlety and imagination. Essentially it amounts to choosing the traditions of communitarianism and "moral values" within the history of the American left and making them the glue that cements together an opposition to Bush.

There is a deep intellectual history to draw upon for those who wish to walk this road, an ample set of precedents, founding figures, ideas, and practical directions for political

change. There are plenty of people within the contemporary American left whose feet are already set upon this road. Many environmentalists have a strong affinity for communitarian rhetoric and ideas. Many liberal critics of mass culture and consumerism like Juliet Schor or my colleague Barry Schwartz clearly have this orientation.

But anyone who wants to walk this road has to recognize that to do so successfully—successfully meaning to once again contend meaningfully for national political power—will mean enormous and permanent concessions to the new alliances that a communitarian opposition will have to make. Anyone wishing to walk this road cannot speak the patronizing language of a cynical left about religion and moral values, you cannot insincerely promise to understand or respect or grant the legitimacy of such values. Anyone walking this road to opposition will have to mean it, deeply, will have to make communitarian values and sensibilities their habitus. This is not the road for vanguardists. It is not a road you walk if you just want to “tolerate” traditional values.

It’s only suitable for those on the left whose moral sensibilities are effectively already very close to the most optimistic, least resentful, most generously poised forms of red-state consciousness look like.

The political alliance that this road envisions brings together those in the old Democratic coalition who hold the trope of community close to their hearts and identities—the African-American church tradition, the old communalist-socialist left, some parts of the union movement, much of what lies behind “identity politics”—with some of the abiding interests and constituencies in the red-state social world. But the left that wants to walk that road has to recognize that it walks it as the junior partner, and that the fundamental, possibly painful, concession that will be required is an uncompromising embrace of strong federalism, that it will have to give up a reliance on federal or national remedies for what it sees as universal injustices. The glue that could hold this alliance together, and bring back some red-state expressions of communalism and values from the brink of the politics of resentment, would effectively be the declaration of a permanent truce in the long culture war, a truce guaranteed by the near-total devolution of authority over values, culture, morality, and rights to localities.

I lightly proposed the bifurcation of the United States into Bicoastia and Heartlandia in an earlier essay. Here I am dead serious: such a devolution is a necessary precondition of a successful alliance against the politics of resentment, against the slide towards a proto-fascist mobilization. Those on the left joining such an alliance would have to know that its price is conceding to all localities profound powers of self-governance. The old Democratic coalition in this configuration must surrender gun control. It must surrender abortion rights. It must surrender affirmative action. It must surrender rigid enforcement of church-state separation. Not surrender those things in its own communities: that would be the terms of the bargain. To each his own, to every state and town, its own values. This is not so strange as it might sound: we have dry towns and wet towns, towns with strong anti-pornography zoning and towns with strongly permissive zoning. It would extend those covenants as a matter of principle across the spectrum, to virtually everything but the most basic of rights enforcement.

Who loses in this alliance? Basically, anyone who does not share the majoritarian values of their own community. In blue-state communities, the red-staters would lose, and vice-versa. Who loses of the old Democratic coalition? Basically, the cosmopolitan educated elite gets thrown overboard. Who else loses? I think the business classes, white-collar elites, and suburbanites. Because most of them want access to multiple value systems, to move liminally between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Moreover, I suspect they lose in quite concrete economic ways, because should this alliance succeed politically, it is certain to cause many economic elites in the United States considerable harm. Such an alliance would almost inevitably be implicitly anti-capitalist, protectionist, anti-globalization, on both the right and the left.

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This is not my road. I think, if I understand him correctly, it is Russell Arben Fox's road. It has much to recommend it in terms of its concrete political possibilities, its very real chances to pull back much of the energy of the current Republican coalition from the brink of resentment and hatred. It could renovate a sense of American consensus. It could draw forward the ur-narrative of the City on the Hill, of the New Jerusalem. It might also be an alliance which would pull back from American empire for a great variety of reasons.

It is not my road. I am with the part of the old coalition that would be tossed overboard. My narrative is not the New Jerusalem. It is "don't tread on me". It is America as the experiment in the universal promise of freedom, as unified by its constitutional guarantees. From many, one. The other road gives up on the red-staters, or at least on the people trapped in old, dying rural communities. Instead, it turns to the business elite and to suburbanites and says, "You guys are playing with fire, and you're going to get burned if you keep it up. Leave while you still can."

It is a soft libertarian road, characterized by an intense commitment to the universal enforcement of constitutional rights, by an uncompromising protection of free speech, free assembly, to the restraint of the power and capacity of the federal government, any government, to intrude on the rights of its citizens. But this road also has to abandon the strong version of the welfare state, to throw overboard strong regimes of governmental regulation of business, to subject government intervention in economic and social issues to very strong needs-tests and very intensive assessment of effectiveness. The rhetoric of this road would have to strongly favor meritocratic visions and conceptions of social mobility and economic policy.

Essentially this embraces the common interests of suburbanites, business elites and cosmopolitan liberals, and I strongly suspect, many of the so-called "Reagan babies" and "South Park Republicans", who vote Republican when they do much more for these logics than because of red-state "moral values" rhetoric. It throws overboard the old

union constituencies and their political allies, and to a lesser extent, throws over more conventional forms of patronage politics aimed at ethnic groups.

The first road embraces the communitarian heritage of the left; this road draws much more on 19th Century liberalism, and tries to pull out those aspects of the left-liberal tradition that owe heavier debts to that lineage. Again, it's a case where the left would enter very much as the junior partner into this coalition, not as a vanguard or leadership.

Of the two roads, in purely pragmatic terms, this strikes me as being much easier to carry out, and potentially much more capable of delivering short-term political gains. There are already signs of serious tension within the present Republican coalition on these issues. In purely practical terms, the danger of this road is that it not only does not check the growth of red-state resentments, but actually accelerates them. The main hope here might be that this coalition could effectively block the moral-values constituency from access to national power once again.

I personally find this strategy more appealing. The communalist vision is one that I ultimately find intensely repellent in personal, visceral terms. I'm prepared to neutrally enforce the rights of people to choose to live however they want to choose, but I'm not prepared to sign on with a coalition that actively, drippingly embraces a project to reinvent *gemeinschaft* for the 21st Century. I am a child of modernity, and I embrace it. I recognize the power of the historical wellsprings of red-state resentments, and I know the importance of responding to them with something other than blind hatred or temper tantrums. But I'd rather try to expand the definition and resonance of cosmopolitan values, and embrace an equally American vision of rights and freedoms: Pennsylvania, not Plymouth.

What I am certain of is that to a greater or lesser degree, this is what the opposition to the current coalition behind George W. Bush is going to have to look like. It will have to walk one of these two pathways in some fashion. There are no more voters, no more money, no more commitments, no clever tactics, no charismatic leaders, no better media, no nothing that is going to make the Democratic Party as it presently stands capable of stopping the cumulating economic, political and social disaster of the politics of resentment that drove Bush's victory in 2004. Communalism or soft libertarianism or some exotic combination thereof: you take your pick. Just don't stand still and wait for things to shake out differently the next time.
