

Can Progressive Experts Make Progressives?

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1 Whither the left voter?

In late summer 2016 the *New York Times* published an investigative article by Declan Walsh on support for then-candidate Donald Trump in coalmining country (West Virginia) ([Walsh, August 2016](#)). The reporter ventured to West Virginia not long after the publicization of dismissive comments by Hillary Clinton about the prospects for coal – comments that, for some West Virginians, confirmed a suspicion that the rest of the country, political elites, and the Democratic cadre around Clinton looked down on them:

“I kind of feel that people are looking down on us,” said Neil Hanshew, a miner, voicing a common sentiment. “They’re looking at us like we’re a bunch of dumb hillbillies who can’t do anything else.” (quoted in Walsh 2016)

In the November elections Donald J. Trump won West Virginia with almost 69 percent of the vote; Clinton received 27 percent.

From a twenty-first century perspective, the West Virginia presidential result is unsurprising. But, in a longer view, it is very surprising indeed. Despite the conventional wisdom of politicians and punditry, West Virginia is not an intrinsically “red” (that is, “conservative” or Republican) state. Between 1980 and 1999 West Virginia sided with Democratic candidates in four out of five presidential elections (1984 being the exception). It was only from the year 2000 onwards, after eight years of Democratic presidency, that West Virginia went consistently Republican in presidential elections. In other places, in particular the “purple” states, Trump campaign victories marked more abrupt shifts. Ohio, which went for Bill Clinton and Barack Obama (in both cases, twice), went to Trump in 2016. Wisconsin, a historical stronghold of pro-labor American progressivism, went to Reagan but then went back to Democratic presidential candidates in every election from 1988 to 2012. But Wisconsin, too, went for Trump in 2016.

What does it all mean? In a sense we cannot really know the significance of the contemporary political moment except with the passage of time. There is, in the meantime, no shortage of argumentation as to what explains the outcome of the 2016 US election. One of the most striking things about this discussion, however, in social scientific circles and punditry alike, has been the theme of total surprise – alongside much post-hoc debate over the predictive (in)accuracy of polls, the political discontent of the [“white working class,”](#) and the mysteries of the electoral college.

And yet, arguably, signs of a disintegration of an American political and economic world capable of sustaining any sort of predictable, representative, party politics have long been on the horizon. Alarming trends that have been duly noted in book after book, and article

after article, include wage stagnation for the majority of the American working population; downward mobility for the non-college-educated; growing economic and wealth inequality; indebtedness and financial insecurity, especially among younger-generation and first-time racial/ethnic minority homeowners, single parent families, and students; the decline of both organized labor and a political system that makes it possible; polarization in national partisan politics and a newly ideological, activist-driven politics paired with political alienation, party disidentification, and declining voter turnout; the expansion of American institutions of surveillance and punishment; and the return of poverty. In sociological hindsight, part of the puzzle of the 2016 American presidential election, and the populist anger that it expressed, is why it should be puzzling at all.

One could imagine an alternative scenario, in which the social sciences recognized the political implications of the sum total of their findings and were then able to sound the alarm effectively. But the fact is that, even if the social sciences had the political clout and the collective capacity to intervene in this way, it is not clear that they really did recognize the implications. This kind of recognition depends on how one conceives of democratic politics in the first place. In the case of the once-Democratic voters of West Virginia, here we might note that, once upon a time, the conventional social scientific wisdom was that the Democratic Party is “left,” miners are a “left” constituency, and the chief drivers of left constituencies are economic and social insecurity. The upshot was that, in bad economic times in particular, miners (and lots of others) would flock to the Democratic Party. This kind of thinking is clear in the writings of the late Seymour Martin Lipset who, in his 1960 work *Political Man*, insisted that the American Democratic Party was, and had always been, the party of the poor, rural, and working classes – that is, a party of the left – and that left voting was driven by three prime motivations: “security of income,” “satisfying work,” and “social recognition of one’s value” (or status) (Lipset 1960: 232). On all counts Lipset held up coalminers as a model case: ever vulnerable to bouts of unemployment, Lipset described miners as “among the most consistent supporters of the Democratic Party” (Lipset 1960: 234).

Lipset’s account of the eternal character of the Democratic Party and the left voter has an air of matter-of-factness that is clearly of a different time. But Lipset’s language does not indicate any sense of historical contingency; rather, it suggests that the party–voter relationship has certain lawlike tendencies, one being that economic insecurity translates into left (or Democratic) voting. The sense of surprise that one finds in the wake of the 2016 election suggests that this lawlike understanding of politics, however ill-suited to historical events, is alive and well. Indeed, if one starts from an assumption that democratic politics consists of parties, on one side (“suppliers” of left/right policy positions, in market language) and, on the other side, voters (“demanders”) who enter into a political game with pre-determined interests and positions, then American states’ shifts from “blue” to “purple” to “red” (thanks partly, or maybe mostly, to shifts in the inclinations of working class people) make little sense. The laws of the political market appear to have been inverted. An unfortunate side effect is the invocation of a familiar “puzzle”: that of the ignorant or irrational voters who do not realize they are voting against their interests. The

problem, in this way of seeing things, is not that social scientists and punditry are overly steeped in ahistorical, rigid conceptions of how politics works; it is that voters do not understand who they should be voting for. Or, in other words: since it's not us, it must be them.

2 Politics are moral markets

Clearly this way of thinking is not tenable. More importantly perhaps, the notion that voters are the political equivalents of *homo oeconomicus* is not mere academic theorizing; it is also a political logic with real consequences.

If political candidates and the people around them think of politics as a market, in which the key task is to match supply with demand – that is, to match conservative politicians with conservative voters, liberal (or social democratic) politicians with liberal voters, progressive politicians with progressive voters, and so forth – then they approach the political game in a way that can have the dynamics of a self-fulfilling prophecy: demographic, polling, past voting habits and surveys become a means of targeting one's "market" and de-prioritizing unlikely buyers; when those who are de-prioritized then pick the other candidate (or don't vote at all), then the wisdom of the targeting strategy is validated. In other words, market models of politics, insofar as they serve as strategic tools in electoral politics – such that, true in market-like fashion, political "consumers" express their discontent by exiting the political game – are performative in a self-fulfilling way.

Now, if representative politics really *was* a market, then this would not matter. But it is not – or at least not in a stripped-down, acultural sense. In the same way as one cannot divorce actually existing markets from morals, one cannot divorce actually existing politics from culture. In other words, insofar as politics is a market, to borrow the terms of Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy, it is a *moral* market ([Fourcade and Healy 2007](#)). Political "suppliers," like the purveyors of life insurance, have to peddle their wares in moral packaging ([Zelizer 1978, 1979, 1981; Quinn 2009](#)). That packaging has to allow people to make sense of their situations in a new way, to identify remedies to their daily concerns, and foster a "moral community" ([Durkheim 1912 \[1995\]](#)). As political sociologists of the "articulation" school suggest ([De Leon et al. 2015](#)), a party does not constitute "consumers" (partisans) simply by appealing to pre-given groups; it *constitutes* partisans by propagating the functional equivalent of a religion, and by making itself the church.

Insights from economic sociology are useful for elaborating on the articulation perspective. In the introduction to her pioneering article on the making of life insurance markets, Viviana Zelizer described the limits of thinking in terms of markets in an acultural, stripped-down way thus:

The problem of establishing monetary equivalences for such things as death, life, human organs, and generally ritualized items or behavior considered sacred ... is as intriguing as it is understudied. Perhaps the absorption of many social scientists with "market" models and the notion of economic

man led them and others to disregard certain complexities in the interaction between the market and human values. (Zelizer 1978: 592)

To think about the making of *political* “markets” one need only make slight modifications to Zelizer’s argument: the problem of establishing *political* equivalences for sacred things is understudied, and social scientists’ absorption with the notion of political man¹ has generated a disregard of the interaction between politics, experience, and human values.

The question we should be asking, then, is not why voters fail to grasp that they should be left, but rather why party politics is failing to constitute party voters – and, in particular, left party voters.

3 The collapse of the political market

This failure is written all over American politics and, more specifically, the trajectory of the Democratic Party. Going by [National Election Studies](#), between the early 1950s and the mid-to-late 1980s the Democratic Party commanded the loyalties of the electorate (ranging between an early high of 52 percent to a low of 38 percent) at rates that were consistently higher than the rates of Republican identifiers. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Democratic leaners hovered at historically low levels (in the mid-upper 30s, for the most part), they *still* outnumbered Republican leaners, whose numbers (also) dwindled. Indeed, Republican leaners have *never* broken the 30 percent threshold. After the 1960s, in other words, Democratic defectors were not flipping to the Republican Party; they were becoming independents. Indeed, independent voter numbers rose dramatically between 1958 and 1978 and then, after a brief reclaiming of voter loyalties by both parties between 1978 and 1982, ticked steadily upward into the new millennium. The independent voter’s rise tracks right alongside rising polarization in Congress, on the one hand, and economic polarization in American life, on the other.

Given the always greater attraction of the Democratic Party for American voters, and the supposed “push” to the left that *should* come along with escalating economic inequality and mass wage stagnation, post-war electoral politics was arguably the Democrats’ game to lose. Since the 1980s, awareness of this has occasionally produced foretellings of a new Democratic majority on the political horizon. During the Obama years some Democratic operatives speculated that, at long last, the tides were turning in their favor and a new “progressive” moment had arrived. What happened?

This sort of question does not have a simple answer. Of course, it need not be answered solely in terms of what parties do or don’t do. Brown University sociologist Josh Pacewicz suggests that the answer has less to do with parties and more with the structural conditions in which political life plays out. Drawing from an extraordinarily careful eth-

¹ I retain Lipset’s gendered language here purposefully; like ever-rational *homo oeconomicus*, the social scientific imagination of the rational political actor has, as Lipset’s phrasing suggests, tended to be typed male.

nographic study of two mid-western cities, Pacewicz locates the breakdown of partisan coalitions in neoliberal, deregulatory policies in the 1970s and 1980s that left cities dependent on “mobile firms and competitive funding streams” rather than stable local resources. Community leaders who now had to sell their city or marketing plan to outsiders found themselves in a whole different game that rewarded partnership over partisanship (Pacewicz [2015](#), [2016](#)). This, Pacewicz argues, effectively rendered “old,” Keynesian partisan institutions and political practices obsolete. Local residents still had economic interests and oppositions, but city leadership was no longer playing a local, representative, partisan game – their attentions were turned elsewhere, outward, toward the task of marketing and attracting investment. The effect, Pacewicz argues, was a sort of emptying of the political stage, creating a vacuum filled by activists and an effective breakdown in the communicative dynamics that are essential to representative politics.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Pacewicz’ story is the notion that effective representative political institutions are, in the end, symbolic, communicative and cultural arenas, whose functioning depends on how politicians understand the people and places that they represent, and whether that understanding meshes with the experiences and self-understandings of those who are being represented. When those two things do not align, the political “market” breaks down. What his work suggests, in short, is that the era of economic market making killed the communicative institutions on which representative politics depended.

4 The possibility of reconstitution

This brings us, finally, to the framing concern of the present reflection: the matter of progressivism, expertise, and prospects for the (re)constitution of (left) “progressive” voters. The use of the term “progressive” here is deliberate: in other work I have traced how, between the 1980s and the early twenty-first century, mainstream left parties in Western countries became “progressive” ([Mudge 2018](#)). The term has a long history in American politics, but this particular reincarnation of progressivism had specific historical origins in the “third way” years associated with the figures of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. As with all changes in political language, the rise of progressivism had definite social origins: via transatlantic and European networks of experts and political elites, third wayism became “progressivism” between about 1999 and about 2005.

Where there is new political terminology there are also new cadres of political experts, or figures I call “party experts,” whose claim to fame in their respective worlds is a recognized ability to interpret the world and to translate those interpretations into programmatic principles and electoral strategies. And indeed, third way progressivism had distinctive kinds of experts behind it – strategic specialists from media and consulting backgrounds; “wonks” associated with foundations, think tanks, magazines, and other outlets; economists specialized in or recognized for their professional backgrounds in public and private financial institutions ([Mudge 2018](#)). Thanks in no small part to the efforts of progressive experts, by the early 2000s a network of avowedly “progressive” organizations

was in the making. Their records and mission statements, as well as data on their proliferation over time, suggest that the making of this new field of progressive strategic and programmatic expertise was a mimetic reaction to the proliferation and growing influence of free-market think tanks. My conversations with figures involved clearly suggest that this world emerged as a cultural extension of the third way movements in order to leave twentieth century leftism behind: in the longer term the aim was to develop a network capable of rivaling, or possibly displacing, the Socialist International.

There are now signs that the effort is coming to fruition. After a lull with the exit of the last “third wayer,” Tony Blair, from office, progressivism reached a new stage in 2012 when the German SPD chairman Sigmar Gabriel canceled his party’s £100,000 annual payment to the Socialist International and, later that year, held a conference of a new “Progressive Alliance” in Rome. The Alliance’s official foundation came in May 2013 in Leipzig, Germany – an event with a reported attendance of representatives from more than 70 left, center-left, and social democratic parties. Among the Alliance’s other major affiliates are the Swedish Social Democratic Party (which, remarkably, has also withdrawn from the Socialist International) and the British Labour Party.

It may well be, then, that the long-internationalized world of Western socialist leftisms is giving way to third way-descended “progressive” successors. But is this a move toward the reconstitution of left, or at least “progressive,” voter? Here we might note that the Progressive Alliance bears interesting similarities to its socialist forerunners. Among the similarities is its construction via institutions built by the very entities they seek to replace: not coincidentally, the Progressive Alliance’s foundation coincided with the 150th anniversary of the formation, in Leipzig, of the General German Workers’ Association (ADAV) – the Lassallean precursor of the SPD. This calls to mind how, in the late 1800s, the ADAV and other socialist parties-in-the-making formed partly via an incursion into liberal institutions: newspapers, associations, workingman’s clubs, political parties. Another similarity is to be found in the Progressive Alliance’s party-based, yet transnationalized, expert architecture. The ADAV, and Lassalle personally, had ties with Marx and the International, but after Lassalle’s death (1864) and ADAV’s 1875 merger with the “Eisenachers” (led by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel) the fledgling SPD-to-be’s transnational expert linkages, and its relationship to Marx and Engels, grew stronger. Like the Socialist International and its party affiliates, the Progressive Alliance is also a party-based network of transnationalized expertise, with linkages that stretch between London (the Policy Network), Brussels (the Foundation for European Studies), and Washington DC (the Center for American Progress, or CAP), and well beyond.

But a comparison also sheds light on important differences – which, from a politics-as-moral-markets viewpoint, casts the prospects of reconstitution in doubt. Early social democrats and contemporary progressive experts are strikingly different in their conceptions of constituencies and, perhaps more importantly, of how constituencies are made. For early socialist parties, socialism was something one was socialized into; early socialists were supposed to “educate, agitate, and organize,” in the classic Fabian phrasing. The aim, in other words, was to build political equivalence by translating working class expe-

riences into party theory and strategy using Marxist-socialist frames of reference. It is not clear, however, that the work of translation is among contemporary progressives' aims. Rather, today's political experts seem to favor a new sort of reductionism, from voter-to-data point, that essentially doubles down on the citizen-to-consumer reduction that characterized the neoliberal era. Relying heavily on demographic and polling data, focus groups, digital campaigning and "big data," progressive experts tend to represent progressive publics as pre-given and ready-made, and campaigning as a targeting-and-mobilizing problem: find the progressive voters and get them out to vote and the rest takes care of itself. In short, the philosophy is to assume progressives, not to constitute them.

As a case in point, a 2013 call-to-arms written by three CAP-based experts, invoking the essentialized notion of voters "over there," dismisses the notion of appealing to traditional working class constituencies in favor of appealing to ready-made progressive constituencies. They are particularly dismissive of the very category of voters that was identified by Lipset long ago as more or less naturally left. "The traditional blue-collar working class has shrunk severely and is now **unreliable** in its progressive inclinations," the report notes, but progressives can set their sights on a mix of "emerging" constituencies: "professionals, the highly educated, the younger generation, the unmarried – especially women – immigrants, and minorities" (CAP 2013: 3, emphasis added).

This understanding of working class voters and the view of the West Virginia miner who suspects that political elites "look down" on him are, in a sense, mirror images of each other: the progressive viewpoint essentializes, and thence dismisses, the working class voter; the working class voter experiences contemporary progressivism as a politics of dismissal and condescension. Both perspectives are true in their way, but really truth is not the central issue. The more important possibility is that they are constituted in relation to each other – that is, that one begets, or even necessitates, the other, deepening the same dynamics of disaffection and miscommunication that brought us to the current conjuncture.