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## UNIVERSAL MOBILIZATION: EASIER THAN GOING IT ALONE, ISSUE BY ISSUE

Ralph Nader



The great abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, declared: "Power concedes nothing without a demand; never has and never will." Logical follow-ups to this memorable exhortation are: "What, and strategically to whom, is the demand?", "What is necessary to turn the demand into change?"

There is a dampening quality to most progressive exposés, analyses, and advocacy. While we live in a golden age of muck-raking (books, articles, and documentaries pouring out daily), there are fewer positive results today than decades ago, when such output was a fraction of today's. One explanation is that exposés themselves often leave readers and viewers with nothing concrete to do. Witness Michael Moore's popular documentary, *Sicko*. After riling up the audience with outrageous stories, the last scene ends anticlimactically with Michael taking his dirty laundry up the Capitol steps. Investigative books are no better. Look at the last page or two of most muck-raking books and see how they tail off with some vague exhortation to get active, if that. It's as if getting concrete and programmatically strategic would take away from the artistry of the work.

Unfortunately, the progressive intelligentsia hardly read each other's works. They rarely come together to jointly strategize beyond their specific agenda; or about any of the larger-scale urgencies as we saw during past populist, labor, and civil rights movements. Progressive leaders often admit, when asked, that they don't even know what other progressives are doing, the Internet notwithstanding. There are,

to be sure, exceptions to these generalizations about the self-limiting silo syndrome. "Can-do" neighborhood or community groups and some well-networked environmental groups are examples.

By and large, however, the continual deterioration of our democratic society, the relentless concentration of corporate power—economically, politically, culturally, psychologically, militarily, technologically—and the maturing corporate lock on the government, whose elected officials they fund, are racing far ahead of any self-restraint, accountability, or control under the rule of law. Power increasingly rules over law. Global corporations are power-concentrating machines. Opposing consumer, environmental, and labor groups are outnumbered, overpowered, and mostly on defense. Playing defense means almost never playing offense. This is a license for the corporate supremacists to rule over the unorganized populace driven to ever-lower expectations (or demands). Monetized elections are operated in their own zone of charade by a two-party tyranny that lunges to see who will service their corporate paymasters and weaken democracy. Notice how the entire civic community and its groups—the fountainhead, historically, of our striving for justice—are deemed by these parties and their "horse race"-obsessed media to be irrelevant and are regularly excluded from media coverage of elections.

Why, then, do I go around the country telling people that "it's easier than you think" to make serious changes in our country? Abraham Lincoln often said

that “public sentiment” is everything, which today is described as public opinion. As my book, *Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance to Dismantle the Corporate State* argues, there has long been a broad convergence of agreement between Left and Right on many issues, especially when you deal with where people live, work, spend, and raise their families.

Binary politics thrives from the few real divisions between people. The drumbeats about “our polarized society” serve the agendas of the Republican and Democratic parties as well as the plutocracy. Divide-and-rule has been the tactic of ruling groups for thousands of years. Consider instead some areas of concurrence by the Left and Right that enjoy widespread public support, some as high as 70% or more—often a decisive eyebrow raiser for members of Congress. They include opposition to crony capitalism or corporate welfare, support for excision of anti-civil liberties portions of the Patriot Act, criminal justice reform, cracking down on corporate crime against consumers, clean elections, programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, worker rights and privacy, break-up of the big New York banks that are too big to fail, a higher minimum wage, not being the world’s policeman, ridding the Defense budget of its enormous waste, revision of trade agreements, access to the courts, a Wall Street speculation tax directed to investments in public works and upgrades in communities throughout the country, shareholder power, clean air and water, stopping commercialization of childhood that undermines parental authority, and many more. In the past, despite strong corporate opposition with campaign cash, Congress handily passed the auto safety law (1966), the Freedom of Information Act amendments of 1974, the False Claims Act of 1986 and the Whistleblower Protection Act of 2013. Why? Left-Right support from back home.

Except for the Congressionally-generated GI Bill of Rights of 1945, almost every major stride for justice never required more than 1% active citizenry, a small number of full-time organizers, strategists, thinkers, and lawyers plus a swelling of majority opinion. These included advancing the right of women to vote, economic protections for farmers and workers, political reform, increased civil rights, environmental protection, disability rights, and consumer protections. The 1% estimate even includes the larger number of people who occasionally marched, demonstrated, or were engaged in non-violent, civil disobedience. A modest amount of money, often from unions or rich benefactors, helped pay the bills for this advocacy. The long decline and bureaucratization of unions have been devastating to the civic culture.

The point I’m making is that on issue after issue, the question that must be asked and answered is: what combination of energies is required to prevail? Not just brilliant exposés, diagnoses, and prescriptions. What is required is action on the ground and human and financial resources, all part of the process I call Subordination and Displacement.

Bringing overdue advances on behalf of a sovereign people under our Constitution requires subordinating corporate sovereignty to the sovereignty of the people, thereby stripping the artificial corporate entity of its personhood and equivalent constitutional rights that real persons, including those in corporations, have been accorded. *Subordination* is a key unifying reform for all these justice movements affected by corporatism. The second fundamental unifying direction is *Displacement*—or *what happens* as local economies receive tens of billions of consumer dollars for credit unions, local renewable and efficient energy firms, cooperatives, farmer-to-market

vendors, community health clinics emphasizing prevention, and all sorts of small-scale, locally based, and accountable businesses. They diminish the sales of big corporations.

*Control of Congress* over time is the giant kick-starter of the processes of *Subordination* and *Displacement*. That means using Congress for what it is—the most generic and powerful of the three branches of our government with its powers to tax, appropriate, declare war, conduct oversight and investigative hearings, confirm nominees for the courts and government agencies, and pass citizen-empowering legislation. *Is there any decisional tool of a just democracy that is remotely comparable?* As Congress comes to operate under the influence of an organized people in each electoral district, mutually reinforcing specific redirections and reforms can be enacted veto-proof, with great alacrity. Even modest public pressure back home led the Congresses of 1964 to 1974 to enact our generation's major civil rights, consumer, environmental, and worker protection laws and the crucial Freedom of Information Act amendments. Remember, information is the currency of democracy. I witnessed this productive output first-hand, day after day, in Washington DC. I noticed the impact a fraction of 1% of the people, backed by public opinion and a few full-time advocates, could have in passing laws that protect people and strengthen our democracy.

So let's ask the key question that allows our imagination to envision real possibilities. *What if* about 100 seasoned leaders and 100 promising young successors came together to determine what resources and level of organization are needed to take control of Congress for electoral reforms, long-overdue necessities for the people (many of which were already in operation in Europe soon

after the Second World War), and to plan, foresee, and forestall perils rapidly approaching or on the horizon of a perceptive, deliberative, democratic society?

On a time frame of 36 months, spanning one election, they could reasonably conclude that a \$200 million budget would be needed to start the requisite Congress advocacy groups in each Congressional district, backed by 2,000 serious people (totaling less than 1 million people), each pledging 200 hours of volunteer time, and donating or raising \$200 each per year to open two offices in each district with four full-time "public citizens" directing action and coordinating these volunteers throughout their districts (each district has a population of about 700,000 persons).

Demonstrations and marches at key locations, including the local Congressional offices, are important to spark the élan, raise visibility, and attract new recruits. However, the thrust of the pressure must be on laser-like, *in-person lobbying*. The most powerful lobbies do not engage in mass rallies and marches. They are acutely concentrated on *in personam* lobbying. They work to know everything they can about the Senators and Representatives—personal, impersonal, friends, relatives, how they spend their leisure, their tastes and dislikes, their staff, their physician, dentist, clergy, lawyer, donors, cronies back home, ambitions, weaknesses, skeletons in the closet, voting record, public statements at committee hearings and on the floor, etc. So it is not surprising that the NRA [National Rifle Association], AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee], the military weapons companies, and many commercial interests eschew public demonstrations that only energize the ether and bring unwelcome attention to their power. All these successful lobbyists provide large campaign contributions to obliging

members of Congress. But lurking in the background, if these legislators stray, is the stick—namely, withdrawal of campaign money and a possible primary or general election challenger. These lobbies can shift some votes, but they cannot compare with the new Congress advocacy groups backed by majority public opinion, spreading their Left or Right roots all over the district. This is especially the case in the first 36-month session. Members of Congress fear new civic energies coming out of their constituency that they find uncondusive to their gaming tactics and routines. Note the sudden emergence in 2009 of the tiny Tea Party in Congress.

This conference of 100 leaders and 100 successors will have to add up the assets they could assemble to get started as they convey their dramatic escalation of combined impacts to tap further energies within local communities. However, the pre-eminent hurdle they must overcome is whether they can invoke the crucial wisdom that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Can they work together as a top priority, or will their silo-ridden, “hold the fort” routines make that impossible and require new organizations?

Our experience suggests that getting together existing capable groups to build a movement of far greater consequences and power is improbable. Being mostly on the defensive, their time cup is filled, their worries about meeting next year’s budget are omnipresent. Sometimes they feel competitive with one another for funding or public attention, or access to friendly legislators. However, their long-time backers and their frustrations can move them to at least help to jump-start mobilizations toward the democratic civic transformations over corporatism and militarized Empire.

It comes down to, alas, money. Where can enough timely, agenda-supported funds come from? From social media, as with the remarkable Bernie Sanders campaign? A national political campaign with an organized civic foundation? A dutiful search for several enlightened billionaires unwilling to leave their country in such perilous decline for their descendants? All of the above? Clearly, some skilled extroverts of progressive bent need to be called to duty. Savvy people, who are persuasive in face-to-face meetings with pre-selected super-rich individuals. Two hundred million dollars can be compared with many similar or greater donations by individuals to universities or with Ted Turner’s \$1 billion to the United Nations. The examples are there for other very large donations.

By this time, readers may wonder why not much has been said about elections. Two explanations. First, when the people mobilize to recover the power they have given to Congress, incumbents begin changing their votes. Note the lessons of progressive history from needed regulation to social safety nets to the most recent turnaround on LGBT rights.

Who gave any of *them* a chance against the entrenched powers-that-be before Lincoln’s “public sentiment” provided the cutting edge?

Second, the much-lamented gridlock in Congress due to divided government has revealed a serious fault line among progressives and others that can’t be ignored. *They’ve largely given up on Congress passing their legislation.* “That’s not where the action is,” summarizes the astonishing responses I received from the offices of Al Gore, George Soros, and Tom Steyer, after sending them an outline for a powerful new citizens’ lobby on climate change,

saturation Congress daily and connected to groups back home.

Somehow the corporate world doesn't agree. With bi-partisan fervor, they attend to Congress, smothering that institution with lobbyists, getting their people installed in key staff positions, and pouring campaign money into the lawmakers' coffers.

A universal mobilization to recapture our national legislature, our most powerful instrument for justice, is the key to the future of a just country. We can start by organizing the required presence in each Congressional district and presenting a formal summons to each Senator and Representative to attend our town meetings around our diverse agendas. The active Sanders

organizers and networkers should help to lead the way on this, not only attracting the large Sanders constituencies, but attracting Left and Right support into an unstoppable dynamic on Capitol Hill for democracy and justice.

We begin by announcing the emergence of the sovereignty of the people so revered in our Constitution's preamble! The election of civic champions will follow the rise of sustained civic power. It's easier than you think.

**Ralph Nader** is the famed consumer advocate, former Presidential candidate, and author of many books, including *Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance to Dismantle the Corporate State* (2014, *The Nation Institute*). His latest is *Breaking Through Power: It's Easier Than We Think* (2016, *City Lights Books*).

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