

A Theory of Change

September 10, 2008

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People want to make the world a better place. But how? Barack Obama says I can change the direction of the country by voting for him. Al Gore says I can solve the climate crisis with a letter to the editor. MoveOn says I can stop George W. Bush by signing their petition. Perhaps, but these requests ring hollow. How is writing a letter to my local paper going to stop the polar ice caps from melting?

Most groups have a couple steps at the end (switch to alternative energy, stopping carbon from being emitted, preventing global warming) and a couple steps at the beginning (write your congressman and send a letter to the paper) but in between they seem to expect that some kind of miracle will happen. They're missing the concrete steps in between, the actual way we get from here to there.

In the nonprofit world, such a plan is called a Theory of Change. And the reason they're so rare is because they're dreadfully hard to come by. The world has no shortage of big problems, but it's hard to think of ways we might realistically solve them. Instead, the same few things — vote, preach, march — get trotted out again and again.

For over a year now, I've been looking for theories of change for politics. And I've found a few that I think just might work. But I can't pull them off by myself. So here they are, in case someone out there wants to help.

The Netroots Congress

Here's how you get elected to Congress today: First, you make friends with a bunch of wealthy people, being sure to agree with them on all the important issues. Then you take their money and hire a well-connected Washington, D.C. campaign manager. The campaign manager shows you how to ask for more money and then gives it to his partner, who makes some TV and radio ads and runs them in your district. They keep doing this until your money runs out and then, if you're lucky, you get more votes than the other guy.

Because of the netroots, it's now possible to change the first part of this story. Instead of raising your money from conservative or centrist rich people, you can now raise money from progressive people over the Internet. So instead of candidates who all agree that telephone companies shouldn't be punished for spying on Americans, you can have candidates who think every American should have free health care.

Concretely, you'd ask people who want to do this to sign up to pay \$X a month. Then you'd go around looking for candidates (or potential candidates) who genuinely believe in progressive principles. When you find them, you give them the money, and now they actually have a chance of getting elected.

Bonus: Get more money by fiercely promoting how bad the incumbent is or how good the challenger is.

This sort of thing has been done haphazardly and achieved some real successes. Donna Edwards, for example, is now a member of Congress. The idea here is to institutionalize it.

The Plain-Speaking Party

The last plan changes the first part of the election process I mentioned. But you could also try changing the rest of it. Right now, if you want to run as a Democrat, your biggest source of funding will be the Democratic Party, especially the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). To get their money, the DCCC [requires](#) you hire one of their friends. Their friends are all corrupt hacks who run the same failed campaigns again and again.

This is normally thought to be unavoidable because you can't win without money and you can't get money without the DCCC. What this misses is that you don't need as much money if you're running a radically innovative campaign.

Instead of raising money to run ads, do a PR stunt that will get lots of free media and word-of-mouth attention. Center your campaign around a clear proposal that most of the public will support but no other politician would dare touch. Be forceful and refuse to back down in the face of attacks from the press or your opponent. And, above all, always make it clear to people that you're an average person, not an average politician. No boring speeches, no political buzzwords, no meaningless cliches.

It's never been seriously tried outside of the movies, but I expect that the effect would be electrifying. The media would cover your every entertaining move and money would flow in from around the Internet. The 60% that doesn't vote in midterms would start to reconsider. Hell, Ron Paul attempted half this strategy while being completely nuts and he still received enough money and volunteers to win five House seats.

If you can actually win an election this way, you'll be able to get dozens more to follow your lead the next time around. Pretty soon, it'll be a movement.

Slate Cards

It's not just about the President and it's not just about Congress. (It's also not just about the US, but that's what we're focusing on today.) Local elections

also have an impact, if only the people who win them often go on to even bigger positions. (Who in Wassila, Alaska thought they might be picking a future president?)

Most local races don't get a lot of attention and most people don't do much research on them. Which makes them much easier to influence than bigger races. Imagine a site where you gave it your email address and zip code and every time there was a local election, it'd send you the progressive candidates to vote for. You could print it out and take it to the polls and feel much better about your pick for "register of probate".

In San Francisco, the local papers issue endorsements on all the races and each of the candidates they endorse chip in some money to send a postcard with the whole endorsement list to every voter. This group could do the same thing. It could also ask folks to chip in a couple bucks to help pay for mailing post cards to their neighbors. (Or they could print some out at home.)

Shareholder Democracy

Supposedly, corporations aren't actually controlled by their CEOs. The CEOs are instead hired by the shareholders, to run the business that the shareholders actually own. A lot of these shares are held by people who aren't big fans of business as usual. If they got together they could use their shares to vote for reform.

Now voting on shares is complicated enough that most people don't bother, but increasingly votes are being moved onto the Internet. It's possible for an aspiring organization to build some software that could automatically vote for people if they wanted. So you could imagine, for example, a couple million MoveOn members letting a new progressive group vote their shares for them, allowing progressives to apply some real pressure to misbehaving corporations.

Combined with legal changes that are being considered that would further make corporate voting more fair, this is something that could make a real impact.

Seriously Interesting Journalism

[I've written about this before.](#) The basic idea is simple: There's lots of fascinating stuff going on in the world. And yet, to become news, all the background and color is drained out of it. Worse, to be on TV, a story has to be so dumbed down that you feel stupid for watching it. And to be in the paper, a story has to have so little background that only an expert could understand it. A news show that covered interesting stories in a way that made them genuinely interesting would be quite popular and could have a tremendous impact.

More?

I'll try to remember to update this page as I learn more. Post your own ideas in the comments. (Remember: "Require all politicians to wear a lie detector" is not a theory of change — we're looking for ways to get there.)