

Election season makes me feel like the kid who doesn't have a stuffed animal on "bring your teddy bear to school" day. Everyone else has a favorite who they can tell good stories about and cuddle with, but I don't so I feel left out. Then I remember that there are good reasons to resist getting pulled down by the undertow of elections.

Like cute stuffed animals, politicians make people feel good while having a marginal effect on positive social change. The main differences between stuffed animals and politicians are that 1) stuffed animals are actually cuddly, and 2) people don't invest vast amounts of political hope and agency in stuffed animals. I recognize that arguing against what many people hold dear makes me kind of a grump, but I aspire to be one who is not stuck in idle criticism but is offering alternative ideas. The variety of grumpiness that I espouse is one grounded in grassroots social movements that focus on direct action independent of party politics.

The prickly issue of politicians relates fundamentally to questions of the leftist orientation to the state. The cheery reformer smiles big and promises to make the system work for you. The grouchy revolutionary rolls their eyes and gets back to transforming the system from the bottom up. The recent prominence of social democratic politicians, like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has provided a big platform for the cheery reformers to make their case to the public. They speak of universal healthcare, free college, and many other nice things.

What of the curmudgeons? In rejecting electoralism do they abhor healthcare and cherish student debt? Do they ignore the plight of the masses by focusing only on utopian goals at the expense of immediate material reforms? Are the grouches ruining socialism? As a card-carrying grouch, let me soothe your fears and dispel some mistaken notions about political crankiness.

First, grouches like free and universal health care as much as starry-eyed reformers. The grumps just think that running election campaigns

are a less effective strategy to secure positive reforms. The grouches drastically de-center voting, object to giving time or money to political candidates, and instead focus on building grassroots campaigns to take mass disruptive actions like work stoppages and civil disobedience to win demands in the short-term. Second, while less the focus of this article, building grassroots social movements is the only way to increase working class power that makes far-reaching social transformation possible in the long-term.

Granted, the state is an enigmatic beast, and politicians are strange and unwitting critters. These are complex phenomena whose causes and effects are not obvious. Confusion about the nature of the state is reflected in common discourse about the merits of electoral strategy, which often regrettably devolves into sparring aphorisms such as “All politicians are sellouts,” “We can’t ignore political power,” “The Democratic Party is the graveyard of social movements,” “Do you want Trump to win?”

This essay spells out the revolutionary group’s critique of electoralism by showing how the institution of voting for politicians makes citizens into political bystanders and undermines their ability to effectively win popular reforms. These criticisms are complementary to the more well-known points about how electoral politics under capitalism are dominated by the wealthy through corporate lobbying and shady campaign funding. Social movements comprise the true architecture of positive social change that lies behind the shimmering facade of electoralism.

## Representative democracy? Harumph

The ideal of representative democracy holds that elected officials govern in the interests of the population or at least in the interests of their constituents. In reality, there is an immense gap between public opinion and existing policy. The reformers think the state can be fixed and made to embody the public interest, while the revolutionaries are

“I have come to think of my role as one which operates outside the realm of partisan politics.”

Rather than seeing electoralism as a necessary part of social movements, it is better seen as dead weight. Social movements are complex and no one has the power to design them exactly to their own liking, but we can engage with and boost those parts of social movements that we find most effective.

## Conclusion

We’ve looked at allegedly progressive politicians passing good reforms (FDR and labor rights, LBJ and civil rights), bad politicians passing good reforms (Eisenhower maintaining New Deal social spending, Nixon implementing the EPA and OSHA), supposedly better politicians passing bad reforms (Clinton, Obama, Mitterand, Hollande), and have just glossed over the more obvious cases of bad politicians passing bad reforms (like Trump’s tax cuts for the rich). In each case closer inspection reveals that the specific person in office had a profoundly insignificant impact on the overall trajectory of positive policy change compared to the size and assertiveness of social movements that existed alongside them.

Rather than buying into the myth that voting does anything, we’d be better off making a better world by getting together with others to actually do something. With real effort, some strategy, and a little practice, doing something as method for creating social change might actually work.

Politicians pee into the wind while social movements drop anvils from the sky.

government is better led by grassroots social movements than by trying to install in the government higher-level managers who will fix the problems from the inside and from the top down.

In the words of civil rights organizer Ella Baker, “Strong people don’t need strong leaders.” That quote, especially as applied to politicians, encapsulates everything this essay is trying to articulate.

*“You’ve been swooning over social movements this whole time but haven’t even shown how they do all these supposedly great things.”*

The good news is that learning about social movements is more exciting than scrutinizing all the ins and outs of why voting for politicians isn’t effective. The best place to learn about what social movements are and what they’ve accomplished is by learning about their history. While I’ve used the labor movement of the 1930s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s as examples, every major beneficial historical change in the US has been accomplished through social movements in some form.

It’s true that all social movements are multidimensional and have elements within them that have tended towards political elections, but all social movements have also had strong anti-electoral tendencies as well. There’s a reason why narratives about social change in the 1930s that came about from labor struggle highlight strikes and unions and not the various left and labor political parties of the day. Similarly, while some in the Civil Rights Movement, like Bayard Rustin, wanted to reorient the struggle towards working within the Democratic Party, many in the base and the leadership were resistant. Neither Martin Luther King Jr. nor Ella Baker were opposed to electoralism in the strong sense I’m advocating, but they were at pains to keep their movement independent of political parties and instead focus on mass direct action. King held a press conference in 1967 to put down rumors and push back against the pressure he faced from his more electorally-focused friends and supporters about the idea of running for president,

unconvinced. Before getting to the heart of the critique of electoralism, it’s worth reviewing the evidence that our government does not embody the democratic rule of the people.

In a recent paper, political scientists Miles Gilens and Benjamin I. Page perform a large-scale quantitative analysis of public opinion data compared to legislative policy and conclude “that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens ... have little or no independent influence.”

To take just one important example, why is the US the only wealthy industrialized country in the world that doesn’t have universal healthcare? From 2008-10, the only time when major healthcare reform seriously made it on the table in the last 50 years, 77% of Americans polled said that it was the government’s responsibility that everyone’s basic healthcare needs be met, 73% supported a public option for the government to compete with private insurance plans, and 60-70% across a series of polls showed support for single-payer healthcare.

The resulting Affordable Care Act produced none of these overwhelmingly popular reforms. Instead, the continued defectiveness of our healthcare system is evident today with 30 million Americans still lacking health insurance, 44 million additional Americans remaining under-insured, and an average of 20% of all people *with* health insurance forgoing or delaying treatment each year for a “serious condition” because of high costs. Healthcare offers a stark illustration of the public opinion-policy gap, but similar discrepancies can be found across the most important policies in the country, including defense spending and wars, education funding, and climate change.

Despite the insistence by some that the high school civics class theory of politics holds true, most Americans have a low (and perhaps accurate) estimate of the quality of our governing institutions. Public approval for Congress in recent decades has mostly oscillated between

10-30% and only 34% of Americans think the two major parties adequately represent the people.

While public opinion data alone provides neither a sufficient analysis nor a coherent vision for leftist politics, it's often considerably more reasonable than the policies actually in place and provides a useful starting point for understanding the inequalities of power in society. That voting for mainstream politicians to implement popular policies is not what it's advertised to be is the unifying starting point for the buoyant reformer and cantankerous revolutionary alike. That voting cannot be fixed is the less obvious but central thrust of the group's grumpiness.

## Voting? Phooey

Voting for politicians is a tactic for creating social change that involves expending virtually no effort. Yet, the common-sense notion that if you want something you have to work for it holds true in the realm of social change as much as anywhere else. When people tell me that all (or much of what) we need to do to change the world is check a box for a few minutes at a time once every 2-4 years, I wonder how that actually works. The pen may at times be mightier than the sword, but is the fill-in-the-bubble quiz called a "ballot" really mightier than all of society's billionaires, militarism, structural racism, and gender violence?

*"But what about all the deliberation, debate, and discourse that goes into voting? Surely that's an effortful endeavor?"* Surely, but deliberation, debate, and discourse are prerequisites for political action of any kind, so the only distinguishing feature of voting is that the act itself requires no effort.

*"But by engaging in debate with others and also encouraging people to vote, doesn't voting then become a kind of mass collective action that's exactly what's needed to change society?"* Mass collective action is not inherently progressive or effective, even if collective action of a

state has the capitalist class and state elites had to cede reforms and power to bottom-up forces.

While this piece focuses principally on social movements' relations to the state, a brief account should be given of how capital so effectively uses the state. The most visible way this happens is through capitalist funding of political parties and electoral campaigns and the aggressive lobbying operations they direct. But more important are the less visible methods of influence, especially how capital directs most of the spending that occurs in the private sector and thus controls the vast majority of society's material resources. Capital allocates these resources as necessary to discipline the state, with constant threats of divestment and non-cooperation. Additional points of capitalist leverage over the state include corporate ownership of media, the organization of corporate interests by industry (NAM, Petroleum Institute) and ideology (e.g., ALEC), corporate control of credit rating agencies which mediate government access to borrowing, and capital's ability to operate transnationally. Top-down strategies of capitalist control integrate seamlessly with the state's own essence as an elite institution of top-down rule.

*"So how can mass-based social movements acquire influence over state resources needed for large-scale popular reforms in the short- and medium-term if the state has built into it a bias against democracy?"*

A useful analogy can be made between the grassroots fight against corporate abuse and the grassroots fight against government abuse. The modern-day corporation is a more explicitly anti-democratic institution where shareholders give dictatorial powers to top executives to run things while employees are expected to do what they're told. No one suggests that the left should focus on trying to seize higher-level management positions at Walmart in order to change Walmart's policy from the inside and from the top down. Rather, direct action by workers and affected communities is correctly identified as the effective way to fight corporate harm. Similarly, the fight against harms imposed by our

I don't consider a vote a resource at any meaningful level because voting takes so little effort, and so I'm not against voting for politicians because you think one's better than another. But when it comes to actual resources, every donation or afternoon committed to social movements will do more to shift the balance of power in society to create change than commitment to a political campaign can do.

*“But power! You're forgetting power! If political office were so ineffectual why do politicians wield so much power?”*

It may seem confusing that politicians both have lots of power and are virtually useless at creating positive social change. Why is this? Despite appearing as contradictory claims, the idea that politicians are powerful and can't create positive change are two sides of the same coin.

The state is not a neutral tool that can be applied equally to any task. Rather, the manufactured imbalance of power against democracy *is* the state. Whether politicians, once in a office, will act in a way that advances the interests of the masses depends entirely on what the masses can do to force politicians to act accordingly. The leverage of the masses lies precisely in the disruptive potential of huge numbers of people taking action together. That unique leverage is scuttled when the organizational strategy for advancing the interests of the masses is diverted into merely campaigning for politicians. The optimist will claim that social movements can operate within and outside the state simultaneously, but that's not how the state works. Each step social movements take towards allying with politicians is a step they take away from grassroots power in the communities where the masses live and work.

This is why citizens using the state as a vehicle for social reform has been so impotent while elites using the state as a vehicle for social control and maximizing profit has been so overpowering. Only in those periods of immense social movement activity outside of the

certain kind is precisely what's needed to create social change. I find little conceptual distinction between the millions of people who buy Coca-Cola (over the greater evil of Pepsi) every day as a collective action from those millions who vote. Individuals buying Coca-Cola is not the cause of society's problems, but neither is it the solution. If anything, millions of people acting as mere aggregated sums through the institutions of the status quo is a prime way the status quo is perpetuated, not challenged.

*“But don't we need some way for the population to interface with governing institutions to influence their functioning and to ensure that they are run according to the desires of the citizens?”* Yes, but the best way to make that mode of interfacing as meaningless as possible is to make the form of interaction between the government and the citizens as narrow as possible, such as voting for politicians. I agree that people need to interface with existing governing institutions, but voting is the least effective way of doing so.

*“But if we don't vote, the bad guys will take over!”* Scaring people into voting is no way to create change nor prevent disaster. Spooking people distracts from deeper problems of the political system that voting doesn't address. However, for those who truly believe some politician is not as bad as the other one, it's not that I disagree. Despite my many grumblings, I don't insist that voting is entirely futile, just that it's mostly so. If you think it's worth the minuscule effort, go for it and don't feel bad about it. I'm just critical of the widespread belief that voting will have more of a positive effect than a normal effort-to-reward calculus would indicate. The degree that voting is overvalued as a form of political engagement is the degree it displaces other more effective forms and forestalls social change.

*“People died for the vote.”* More than that, they fought for the vote. That people fought and died for the vote and then won is less a testament to how voting is the most important thing. Rather, it's more

an argument that when people expend effort to build social movements to fight for a better world, then they win things.

“Social movements aren’t magic pixie dust that you can just sprinkle on every social-historical problem and expect it to go away.” As a tentative definition of social movements to ground these critiques of electoralism, let’s try this: Social movements are rooted in webs of mass organizations that build bases in and mobilize communities towards direct action that disrupts the status quo. Such actions include the strikes of the 1930s labor movement and the mass civil disobedience of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Social movements emerge out of a disconnect between official policy and shifting popular sentiments, where a significant (but not necessarily majority) degree of public sympathy gives mass actions legitimacy. Such mass actions demand that those in power alter formal policy and governing structures. Mass action simultaneously transforms its participants by reshaping their beliefs and practices of political agency and self-determination.

So are social movements magic pixie dust? “Yes” in that they are actually the source of past positive social change and have the potential to create such change in the future, but “No” in that they are in any sense a cheap short-cut. Social movements take a lot of work, but it’s the actual work of making a difference. Voting, on the other hand, might more fully be characterized as magical in that it doesn’t have any real-world effect of its own and its presumed consequences are based on misperception.

## Elections? Bah humbug

There are several defining elements of electoral campaigns that are inimical to social change. These elements are the same ones that corporations use to create markets of passive consumers focused on brand identities, shallow exchange transactions, and individualized consumption.

Just because I don’t think leftists should focus on elections doesn’t mean there won’t always be a constantly replenishing pool of political candidates maneuvering to be the next social movement darling. If you, like me, can’t entirely erase the notion that politicians have some effect, even if very small, there’s still no reason to invest energy in politicians. Left politicians *need* social movements but social movements *don’t* need politicians. If social movements are strong, politicians will come begging for support and will consult movements for fear of incurring their wrath. Social movements don’t have to give anything up in return for this or that politician doing what social movements demand.

Social movements should thus remain focused on building a base and moving towards collective disruptive action. If politicians want to tag along they can, but social movements shouldn’t divert any of their precious attention away from their true object.

## Social movements? Ugh, okay fine

Many people see general critiques of politicians as valid but still maintain that sometimes there are some good politicians worth supporting. I’m not inherently anti-politician when looking at the individual themselves. But here’s the rub: leftist forces in society have limited resources to put into efforts for social change, and so the campaigns of politicians compete directly with grassroots organizations for volunteer time and donations.

I’m against giving resources to election campaigns because politicians will *always* be less effective at creating change than social movements. This point belies the common excuse made for electoralism as a form of harm reduction. If harm reduction is supposed to have a positive net effect by decreasing the amount of bad in the world, actual harm reduction would come from engaging social movements because only they are actually effective.

that all politicians had to act within. The difference between Eisenhower winning in 1956 and Bernie losing in 2020 is far less an illustration of individual political acumen or charisma but of the relative power of social movements in those eras.

Richard Nixon spent his first years as president in the late 1960s trying to pass a version of universal basic income which would have been the largest redistribution of wealth to the poorest citizens in US history. This was not because old Dick had a big heart, but because he was staring down the largest and most militant social movements since the 1930s and needed to pander to and compromise with more radical demands. That Nixon also created the Environmental Protection Agency via executive order and signed the act that created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is a tribute to the grassroots activists of the 1960s and 70s and has little to do with Nixon's personal qualities or ideas as a politician. Once again, social movements are the dominant, short-term, and long-term cause of better policy, to which politicians are not even second fiddle but only the ninth or tenth.

Even though the historical examples I draw from are mostly at the federal level, it's merely for the convenience of using widely known reference points. Against the claim that one can have more of an effect on policy by engaging elections at the local level, all of the anti-electoral arguments made here apply equally to all levels of government. Despite differences in scale, the mechanisms and elements of elections are largely the same (voter as passive consumer, politicians as corporate brands). School boards are one of the most local levels of government and the school board members in my city almost all belong to the same center-left party and yet routinely violate their own stated principles when advancing school privatization and attacking unions. When local activists have mobilized and shut down meetings in protest, school board members have consistently caved to grassroots pressure and reversed their votes.

Every political campaign relies on constructing a branded cult of personality around a candidate. Because sound bites are an inadequate medium for presenting policy ideas, political campaigns come to revolve more around a candidate's personality than their policy proposals and political records. This isn't the fault of any individual politician; it's the logic that all political campaigns must apply if they want to maximize their appeal and exposure to fit the requirements of using mass media.

So the vast majority of voters come to know a politician through a picture of their smile as plastered across mailers and TV ads, a couple slogans like "tough on crime" or "tax the rich," and a few labels such as "experienced," "outsider," "bipartisan," "progressive," "movement-oriented," and so on. This political packaging comes to stand in for actual policy records and political relationships that might be indicative of future governance. Biden's recent presidential campaign had little to say about his role in financial deregulation that paved the way for the 2008/9 financial collapse or the 1994 Crime Bill that helped super-charge mass incarceration. While I am more sympathetic to many of Bernie Sanders' policy proposals, his campaign ads certainly didn't focus on some of the less flattering parts of his political record, such as his past symbiotic relationship with an arms manufacturer or his close friendship and political alliance with a Vermont billionaire real estate developer. As corporations know well, the best way to maximize appeal and exposure to mass markets (millions of voters are treated like millions of any other kind of customer) is to build a brand around a simple object that is injected with surface-level emotional appeal, however loosely that is tied to the rational interests of the consumer.

The most devious aspect of the individualizing nature of the election campaign is how it encourages people to outsource their political agency to a politician. It's the politician who has to promise they'll fix things, and the citizens come to see themselves as largely passive consumers whose only meaningful participation is choosing one political brand over another. All the laziness entailed in merely voting

results in the mindset that it's the politician's responsibility, and not ours, to fix things. Rather than expressions of the general will of the citizenry, elections are mass disavowals of political responsibility.

Since the vote itself is such a narrow form of political engagement, and it's the quantity of votes that determines the victor of the contest, election campaigns are organized around maximizing narrow engagement. A former long-time political campaign consultant commented:

[Obama for America (OFA)] organizers would often counsel campaign volunteers to stay away from engaging in discussions about specific issues and instead focus on sharing the "story of self," the "story of us," and the "story of now." This methodology is intended to engage the prospective voter at an affective level much like a 12-step group speaker or a born-again Christian sharing her story of how she found Jesus.... I am critical of the manner that OFA used [this] methodology to short-circuit a perfectly legitimate way of facilitating the raising of critical consciousness (a long-term proposition) for the short-sighted aim of mobilizing the electorate for an election-night win.

One study found that TV ads, campaign mail, and even the gold standard of door-to-door canvassing in the context of an election campaign were found to have virtually no persuasive effect on changing people's minds about candidates or issues. The only thing they do have an effect on is the likelihood that a person will show up at the polling station on election day. This makes the dominant interface between election campaigns and citizens into a short-term transaction to get a commitment from someone that they'll vote, just as corporations need to get you to the cash register or the Amazon checkout page. This kind of shallow interaction with complex issues as the primary form of campaign communication displaces institutional possibilities for deeper intellectual engagement and political organizing around issues.

for electoral campaigns that are of a fundamentally opposite nature to the best practices needed to build effective grassroots movements.

Of course, left politicians are aware of anti-electoral sentiments, and so they, without fail, will claim that they're "community-oriented," "a servant of the people," "in it for the right reasons," "committed to social movements," and so on. Or to take a famous recent campaign slogan, "Not me, us." Good intentions aside, that's not how elections work. Politicians get people to give them thousands or millions of dollars for staff and campaign ads about them and ask everyone to give them access to immense state power for which there are few formal mechanisms of accountability to voters.

I'm not claiming these politicians are Machiavellian. But by trying to squeeze the rhetoric of a social movement into an election campaign they end up losing all the parts of a social movement that make it meaningful and then succumb to all the authoritarian forces that make government slimy and coercive. I recognize that not all politicians are the same, but I also recognize that they are all seeking entry into the same political system and are subject to all the same political constraints.

*"But we need state power to allocate resources. That's why we need to run politicians so that they can work the inside track while we work the outside track."*

If politicians caused good policy, this would be sensible. But just as prominent examples were noted above of supposedly better or left politicians doing bad things in office, there are plenty of examples of politicians rightly considered bad by the left being forced into doing good things. That Republican Dwight Eisenhower's political platform in 1956 contains striking similarities with Bernie Sanders' in 2020 is not because Eisenhower was a radical but because the social movements that created the best of the New Deal reforms, many of which remained wildly popular, circumscribed the political boundaries



by doing exactly the opposite of everything that's bad about it, what do we get? We end up not with a good political campaign but rather a grassroots social movement without the unavoidable electoral focus on elevating a single person's ideas and character and without succumbing to the pressures placed on us by the rules of pacifying state institutions.

There's a wide spectrum of opinion on the left about on how useful politicians are. Kind of like my arguments above about voting, I don't think politicians are in themselves bad and I recognize that occasionally they can have a small effect on things. Many see politicians as the most important factors of social change, though I see them as the least important factors. Despite my crankiness I'm not anti-politician in the strict sense that I think they're bad people as individuals, I just can't discover any historical evidence or theoretical argument to be pro-politician either.

*“But can't we combine the best elements of social movements with the best elements of political campaigns and do them together?”*

Politicians who want to present themselves in a progressive light will try to attach themselves to social movements and will say that they are part of the movement. But if the arguments presented here are valid, electoral campaigns have nothing to add to social movements because social movements already contain all the good things we want and need to create social change.

Each element of an election campaign is just a worse version of that element of a social movement: Elevating the individual politician vs. community agency; the narrow engagement of the vote vs. kinds of community engagement and collective action needed to disrupt the status quo and win demands; investing resources in political ad campaigns vs. grassroots organizational infrastructure and support; etc... No matter how much a politician tries to be the exception, there are underlying institutional pressures baked into the rules of the game

The other dominant form of “action” around political campaigns is the rally. Like voting, attending political rallies doesn't involve much active participation. Whether it's the candidate themselves or one of their surrogates who's speaking, attendees typically sit or stand around for an hour or two while somebody talks at them. This kind of event further encourages the projection of values and hopes onto an aspiring public servant who “does stuff” while the citizen-voter doesn't have to.

The fact that electoral campaigns happen in short bursts in between long intervals of 2-4 years means that the infrastructure formed around these political candidates is fleeting and ill-suited for creating meaningful change. Furthermore, all the other groups and communities that get sucked into electioneering see their primary concerns and activities momentarily shoved aside while getting so-and-so into City Hall or the White House is prioritized.

An example from my personal experience comes from time I spent in 2013-14 in Occupy Homes Minnesota (OHMN), an anti-eviction group that used direct action to keep banks and sheriffs from forcibly taking people's houses. When a local socialist ran for a seat on the city council and claimed to be a part of the grassroots movement, much of the paid and unpaid leadership of OHMN diverted resources away from home defense and towards neighborhood canvassing for his election, depriving the org of much of what it needed to actually fight off the banks in a tense period when eviction rates were still high. The candidate ended up losing, but that hardly mattered as the OHMN leadership's decision to neglect its own mission and base for a few crucial months severely weakened an already struggling group. The organization collapsed and dissolved shortly after.

### **Politicians? Baloney**

Election campaigns are just one stage of the life cycle of the politician where grassroots forces are systematically weakened. Even when the less shitty politician does win the election, they are immediately put

under the extreme constraints of trying to govern in a capitalist society and many of their campaign promises are instantly hollowed out despite a politician's best intentions.

Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign literature sounds surprisingly progressive with his message of expanding social programs, making health care a "right," and taxing the rich. A few days before Clinton's inauguration, his chief economic advisor Robert Rubin, a former co-chairman of the board of Goldman Sachs, and Federal Reserve head Alan Greenspan told Clinton that the budget deficit was too big and that the only way to avert a debt crisis was to slash government spending, causing him to temper some campaign promises and reverse others. Likewise in 2008, Obama campaigned on a popular message of getting people through the deepest economic recession in 80 years, but upon entering office he bailed out the banks and corporations while barely lifting a finger to save homeowners or aid the unemployed.

While we've come to expect such disappointment from Democrats, the same dynamic plays out repeatedly among socialist politicians in other capitalist countries in the global north. In France, Socialist Party President Francois Hollande won the presidency in 2012 on a message of anti-austerity reform, but upon entering office and even having a majority in parliament, turned around and cut corporate taxes and slashed social spending. Before him, France's other most recent socialist president Francois Mitterand (1981-95) intended to implement steep radical reforms early in his first term. But under pressure from international finance and a lagging economy he quickly instituted a nation-wide wage-freeze, cut social spending, and came to symbolize the normalization of austerity within formerly left European political parties.

The Greek Socialist Party Syriza's time in power from 2015-19 is perhaps the most famous illustration of the abject failure of left politics in the electoral arena, as it repeatedly caved to austerity demands of the European Union, gouging out social programs and privatizing many of

civil rights leaders over the timing and priorities of these pieces of legislation.

In contrast, what's notable about the failure of European socialist politicians mentioned above in the period from the 1970s to the present is that there were not social mobilizations and uprisings comparable to earlier periods of the 1930s and 1960s. That lack of robust popular struggle independent of the state is largely responsible for the failures of European socialist politics of the last 50 years.

While it may not be uniquely the fault of socialist politicians that there weren't ground-shaking social movements in the streets during their time in power, radical politicians have always helped foster the substitution that elections are an important and essential part of social change, thus directing away emphasis and energy from grassroots activity. Every social gain can be narrated in the same broad strokes, where politicians always have played bit parts behind the lead of mass movements.

*"Well, you're just describing the worst parts of elections, but not all politicians have to use that playbook. Good politicians can run campaigns in a way that uses only the good and none of the bad."*

While political campaigns that look and feel like a McDonald's ad campaign are the norm, certainly some politicians have tried to break the mold to be a "different" and "good" politician. They try to focus on deep rather than shallow engagement, to center ideas about society and policy instead of surface-level emotional manipulation, to emphasize longer-term engagement and give people meaningful ways to participate beyond merely voting. But do these politicians ever succeed in living up to this ideal?

*"But shouldn't we keep trying til we get it right?"*

That's what a lot of people will do. But there's an alternative. If we take the prototype of the bad electoral campaign and turn it inside-out

negligible influence on policy outcomes compared to the vibrancy of the social movement and the communities where 99.9% of the important work gets done.

Consider two pivotal moments that fundamentally altered social relations in the US and led to era-defining legislation on labor unions and civil rights. The labor movement didn't acquire rights by voting for politicians to give them rights: Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidential campaign in 1933 didn't even mention worker rights, he supported an auto industry proposal in March 1934 that legalized company-run "unions," and he even refused to endorse Senator Robert Wagner's collective bargaining legislation circulating in Congress in early 1934. Roosevelt's labor secretary Frances Perkins said, "I'd rather get a law than organize a union" to address worker grievances and keep them from striking, preferring paternalistic government over the idea of allowing workers to have their own independent organization and power. Only after the most disruptive strike wave in US history rocked the country in mid-1934 and was threatening to go even bigger in what was already a crisis of profit of the Great Depression were major concessions granted for union rights in the National Labor Relations Act begrudgingly signed by Roosevelt in 1935.

Similarly, it wasn't the politicians who led the charge that resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but rather a social movement of community activists in the black freedom movement. Before becoming president and signing those bills, Lyndon B. Johnson spent two decades as a reliable pro-segregationist congressman of the Southern Democratic faction and was known for using the n-word profusely. Upon entering national politics, where he'd have to appeal to a broader social base than was needed to be elected as a Texas congressman, black social movements had by then shifted the national consciousness on race to the degree that he needed to become more tolerant publicly and willing to compromise with movement demands. Even then, Johnson was constantly at odds with

Greece's public assets. The social democracies of Northern Europe have been in retreat since the 1970s as social democratic parties make concessions to austerity and are increasingly losing parliament seats to centrist and even right-wing parties. Social democratic parties have consistently turned their backs on the social movements that provided the pressure that led to their enviable social programs in the first place. While socialist politicians and political parties have never really controlled governments in the US to the extent they have occasionally in European countries, the evidence from across the pond suggests that even if socialists were able to take over the US government, only disappointment would follow.

Electoral contests reward those politicians who highlight style over substance. It's not an issue of a politician's individual moral integrity but rather of the way the whole electoral and political system is constructed to remove as far as possible the vote from actually setting policy. Despite good intentions, politicians give socialism a bad name.

### **Political parties? Pffft**

*"If a politician betrays their constituents, they'll vote them out and get someone who truly represents them."*

That sounds reasonable, but there are a few reasons this is ineffective as a lever of meaningful democracy. First, with most terms of political office lasting four years, that's a tremendously long time to wait and for politicians to have free reign before they're "voted out next time." Second, there's no official way in the US for citizens to directly recall politicians. There are highly bureaucratic and lengthy methods for other politicians to unseat a particular politician, but they are very rarely used and almost always for scandals instead of the routine betrayal of the very campaign promises that got them elected in the first place.

Lastly, politicians aren't stand-alone agents but belong to political parties whose interests they are both beholden to and charged with safeguarding. These political parties exert strong control especially within a rigid two-party system. More often than not, if one politician goes away there's a "next-in-line" who's not substantially different because the party is a moderating force. Think of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden coming after Obama, all of whom advocate largely the same unpopular policies like privatized healthcare.

*"But people also choose which politicians stand for election through primaries and caucuses, ensuring democratic principles are maintained."*

The further one gets away from general elections and into intra-party politics, the deeper one gets into other mechanisms for choking democracy, such as gatekeeping, rules-manipulation, and back-door dealing. Sure, a few committed super-citizens can go to every caucus meeting and try to out-politic the entrenched politicking careerists, but the deck is stacked here as it is at every other level of the process. It's a lonely path as the further you go into the machine the farther you get from the actual communities you live and work in.

*"But this is where politics happens and so this is the necessary terrain of struggle. You have to struggle somewhere, and the deck is stacked everywhere, so why not direct our efforts at the parties that control the government?"*

The labyrinth backwaters of political parties are where a certain kind of politics happens, but it's an elite kind of politics, where functionaries compete for the approval of party funders and power brokers. Occasionally an insurgent politician can make it through the maze and get into office, but what alternative forms of politics are sacrificed in the process?

Grassroots social movements focus their politics in the workplaces, the neighborhoods, and the streets. These are the spaces and communities

where people are rooted, where their relationships are organic, and where the exercise of power is most impactful. Unions, strikes, community groups, pressure campaigns, civil disobedience, these are the forms and tactics of and for the grassroots. Yes, much of this power needs to be directed at pressuring political parties and the government, but it's more effective to do so from the outside where grassroots movements find fertile soil rather than from inside where the toxic sludge corrodes all it touches.

### **Social movements? Aww man, do we have to?**

*"All of the good policies that have come into the world were by necessity written into law by some politicians at some point, right? What was it those politicians did that we need our politicians to do today?"*

That's true. But if our purpose is to answer the bigger question of how to make the world a better place and not to confine ourselves to smaller questions of which politician to praise and vote for, then we have to re-frame things. Do politicians *cause* social change? They're a part of the overall vehicle of social change, but are they a major and irreplaceable part like the engine or a minor and interchangeable part like the ashtray?

The conjuring trick here is that politicians make it look like they do most of the work that leads to policy change. When a popular policy is passed they get a photo op and put pen to paper though it was actually the hard work and struggle of thousands of community activists that actually made the policy possible. Politicians are paid fine salaries, get their own offices in fancy buildings, and receive the lion's share of the credit when something positive happens. Grassroots organizers are often acting without being paid for it, doing so in much less glamorous settings, facing much higher risks, and are mostly nameless and faceless outside of the communities they are fighting alongside. Despite appearances, whether a politician works hard or not has