

The Pennsylvania primary and the crisis of the Democratic Party

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Hillary Clinton's convincing victory over Barack Obama in the April 22 Pennsylvania primary ensures that the bitter contest for the Democratic presidential nomination will continue for weeks, if not months. More importantly, it highlights the crisis that is overtaking the party.

The election revealed a party that is fracturing along racial, ethnic, gender and other demographic lines. As in previous primaries in industrial states devastated by plant closings and declining working class living standards, Obama won an overwhelming majority of African-American votes and a large majority of votes cast by young people.

Clinton easily outpolled Obama among white voters, older voters and women. The demographics of the state, where blacks are concentrated in a few urban centers and elderly whites make up a large proportion of the electorate, produced a geographic near-landslide for Clinton, who won all but seven of the state's 67 counties.

Obama won only in Philadelphia, in two of Philadelphia's suburban counties, in nearby Lancaster, in the county that includes the state capital of Harrisburg and in two counties around State College, where Penn State University is located.

Clinton won by large majorities in the economically depressed industrial areas of northeastern and western Pennsylvania, including the counties in the state's southwest which were once centers of coal mining in the region.

Many Democratic commentators and officials are wringing their hands over the continuation of a primary struggle that has grown increasingly acrimonious and has divided the party apparatus as well as the Democratic electorate, perhaps irreparably. They worry that the envenomed process will ruin the party's chances in the fall general election, handing the White House to the presumptive Republican candidate, John McCain.

It is becoming increasingly likely that significant forces within each of the camps will sit out the election if their candidate fails to obtain the nomination. But the party leadership seems overwhelmed and powerless to put a halt to the internal bloodletting.

Notwithstanding the mutual venom between the two campaigns, no significant policy differences can be discerned in the public statements and policy pronouncements of the candidates. Both make populist appeals without in any way challenging the power or profits of the corporate elite. Both combine anti-war rhetoric with pledges to keep US troops in Iraq indefinitely and expand the military in preparation for new interventions.

The policy differences that do exist are largely hidden from public view. Within the top levels of the Democratic Party establishment, the split began over the war in Iraq. Foreign policy strategists such as Zbigniew Brzezinski identified Clinton with the decision to support the disastrous intervention in Iraq. This faction promoted the Obama campaign as a means of carrying out a shift in foreign policy, after eight calamitous years of Bush, to more intelligently and effectively defend US economic and strategic interests around the world.

On the basis of the vaguest of abstractions, Obama was presented as the candidate of "change," of a "new politics" that would unite all of the

disparate elements of American society and restore the "American dream." His persona—young, a newcomer to national politics, multi-racial—seemed to embody this professed goal.

This persona was carefully developed. Brzezinski, in an April 19 interview on the France 24 television channel, indicated its importance for those who are backing the senator from Illinois. "... America has to redefine its place in the world; in fact, America has to redefine itself," he said. "And I think that he [Obama] symbolizes that needed change..."

Obama's campaign tapped into broad and deep discontent, particularly among young people, over the war, economic insecurity, the corruption and criminality of the Bush years, and gathered popular support.

Clinton fought back, rallying support among the more pro-war sections of the party establishment and fueling a process of polarization that has exacerbated tensions between competing Democratic Party interest groups. That the resulting internal crisis takes the form of growing centrifugal tendencies along racial, gender and ethnic lines is bound up with the peculiar evolution of the Democratic Party.

In the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Democratic Party under Roosevelt forged a coalition embracing more far-sighted sections of the ruling class, the trade unions, including the newly formed industrial unions, the professional middle classes, small farmers and urban middle-class layers, from shopkeepers to intellectuals.

Under conditions of a breakdown of the entire capitalist system and growing social unrest, Roosevelt for a period opportunistically encouraged the formation of industrial unions in order to force through, against a largely hostile corporate elite, limited social reforms that he deemed necessary to stave off social revolution.

There were, however, strict limits on his support for the union struggles of industrial workers. When the partial economic recovery collapsed in 1937 and strike battles threatened to assume revolutionary dimensions, Roosevelt denounced the newly emerged CIO. Following the police killing of striking Chicago steelworkers in the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre, he declared famously, "A plague on both your houses."

Nevertheless, American liberalism, especially in the early years of the New Deal, generally supported a reform agenda that called for a restructuring of American capitalism to curtail the power of big business and introduce some form of industrial democracy into the workplace. Many New Deal Democrats advocated measures to redistribute the wealth and achieve greater social equality.

After 1937, Democratic Party liberalism began to retreat from an agenda of structural reform of capitalism, a process that was accelerated by World War II. American historian Alan Brinkley writes in his 1995 book *The End of Reform*:

"A decade later, in 1945, the ideology of American liberalism looked strikingly different. The critique of modern capitalism that had been so important in the early 1930s (and, indeed, for several decades before that) was largely gone, or at least so attenuated as to be of little more than rhetorical significance. In its place was a set of liberal ideas essentially

reconciled to the existing structure of the economy and committed to using the state to compensate for capitalism's inevitable flaws...

"When liberals spoke now of government's responsibility to protect the health of the industrial world, they defined that responsibility less as a commitment to restructure the economy than as an effort to stabilize it and help it to grow. They were no longer much concerned about controlling or punishing 'plutocrats' and 'economic royalists,' an impulse central to New Deal rhetoric in the mid-1930s. Instead, they spoke of their commitment to providing a healthy environment in which the corporate world could flourish and in which the economy could sustain 'full employment.'" (pp. 6-7)

Brinkley explains that the new liberalism placed its emphasis not on production and the producers of wealth, but rather on consumption and the consumer. Workers would improve their lot by benefiting as consumers from the economic growth and general prosperity of the country.

Calling the post-war form of liberalism "rights-based," he writes:

"The war, in short, was a significant moment in the shift of American liberalism from a preoccupation with 'reform' (with a set of essentially class-based issues centered around confronting the problem of monopoly and economic disorder) and toward a preoccupation with 'rights' (a commitment to the liberties and entitlements of individuals and thus to the liberation of oppressed people and groups). 'Rights-based' liberalism was in some respects part of a retreat from a broad range of economic issues that had been important to progressives and New Dealers for decades: issues involving the structure of the industrial economy and the distribution of wealth and power within it."

In line with this shift, the Democratic Party no longer presented itself as the party of the "working man," and instead portrayed itself as the defender of the "middle class."

For their part, the unions adopted this attenuated version of American liberalism, abandoned any struggle for industrial democracy or a curtailment of corporate power, and further integrated themselves into the Democratic Party. They cemented their status as pillars of the existing economic order by carrying out a ruthless purge of left-wing and socialist elements.

In his January 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt proposed what he called a "Second Bill of Rights," which would guarantee to all Americans a measure of economic security and certain social rights. It included the "right to a useful and remunerative job," the "right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation," the right of farmers to "a decent living," freedom for businessmen "from unfair competition and domination by monopolies," the right of all families to "a decent home," the right to "adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health," the right to "adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident and unemployment," and the right to "a good education."

To what extent Roosevelt himself took his proposal seriously is a matter of debate. In any event, after the war his "Second Bill of Rights" became a dead letter.

The credibility of postwar American liberalism and the "middle-class" consumer society it espoused depended on a continuation of the economic expansion that followed the war and ever-rising prosperity. But by the late 1960s, the boom was beginning to unravel. The impact of the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggles, urban riots and a strike wave fueled by worsening economic conditions undermined the New Deal coalition. Within a few years the Democratic Party was openly distancing itself from New Deal social reform policies.

Under the conditions of economic stagnation and raging inflation of the 1970s, large sections of the middle class as well as better-off layers of workers became disillusioned with the liberal reform policies—attenuated as they were—associated with the Democratic Party, which seemed only to compound the economic crisis while imposing ever greater tax burdens on

middle-income people.

As the promise of rising living standards through the expansion of the consumer society faltered, the Democratic Party sought to refashion itself, beginning with the McGovern campaign of 1972. In what was presented as a far-reaching democratic reform, the organization was decked out with layer upon layer of "participatory" structures, and racial and gender diversity increasingly became the watchword. The party incorporated into its very structure the principle of identity politics.

"Affirmative action" and similar policies were employed to dispense privileges to elite layers among various racial and ethnic constituencies and among women, while the living standards of the broad mass of working people, African-American and Latino as well as white, women and men, stagnated or declined.

The current nomination system was devised in which primary elections and caucuses largely replaced the old process, wherein the main contenders for the presidential nomination were chosen by party and elected officials, and the final choice was made by delegates at the national convention. This only intensified the demagogic character of the electoral process, as candidates appealed to various constituencies within the Democratic Party on the basis of slogans and images pitched to one or another racial, ethnic or gender group.

The Democratic Party assumed the form of an inchoate alliance of competing interest groups, including the civil rights establishment and more privileged layers of blacks and other minorities, feminist organizations, gay rights groups, environmentalists, etc. The unions, which had played a central role in the old New Deal coalition, became one among many interest groups allied to the Democratic Party.

The erosion of working class support for the Democrats accelerated in tandem with the support of the party for the restructuring of the US economy that was carried out in response to the decline in the global economic position of American capitalism. It was the Democrats under Carter who initiated the first major attack on the reforms of the New Deal with their deregulation of the airlines and trucking. In 1979, Carter appointed Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Volcker drastically raised interest rates to wring inflation out of the system on the basis of mass unemployment and an offensive against the wages and living standards of the working class.

The Democrats initiated the drive for wage cuts in the Chrysler bailout of 1979-1980, and supported the "deindustrialization" carried out by big business to shut down large sections of basic industry that were no longer profitable.

As part of its embrace of identity politics, the Democratic Party effectively redefined what it called "American democracy" to jettison any demand for social equality. From the 1980s on, it further alienated its former working class base of support as it collaborated with the Republicans in effecting a vast redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top.

Now, in a contest that pits a woman against an African-American, taking place under conditions of an unpopular war and deepening recession, the political consequences of the Democrats' embrace of identity politics are emerging in an explosive fashion.

In Pennsylvania, Clinton escalated her right-wing strategy for countering Obama's insurmountable lead in pledged delegates. She witch-hunted her opponent for his past links to a former member of the radical Weather Underground, demonized Iran and sought to stoke up fears of terrorist attacks, and made thinly-veiled appeals to racial prejudice (condemning Obama for his association with his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright).

A pivotal point came when Obama, in an unguarded moment at a private fundraiser, spoke of the "bitterness" of working class voters in small-town and rural Pennsylvania over wage-cutting, layoffs and deepening economic insecurity, and the indifference of both Republican and

Democratic administrations to their plight. Obama made the cardinal sin of broaching the reality of class relations in America, and compounded it by suggesting that economic deprivation found a distorted expression in working people “clinging” to religion and guns and blaming immigrants and foreign workers.

For this, the media, the Republicans and Clinton pilloried Obama as an “elitist,” making it clear that the ruling circles would not tolerate any open appeal to class antagonisms in the presidential campaign. Obama got the message, apologized, and remained on the defensive for the remainder of the Pennsylvania campaign.

This episode demonstrates how completely American liberalism and the Democratic Party are based on an evasion of the fundamental class issues that dominate American society. Instead, they focus obsessively on secondary issues of race, gender, age, etc., and thereby exacerbate such differences and impart to them a malignant character.

Since the party is not based on any coherent program, its candidates must make their appeal by adopting personas designed to win support from different constituent elements of the party amalgam. In the current Democratic primary contest, this has taken absurd forms.

Clinton, needing a convincing victory in Pennsylvania to keep her flagging campaign alive, repackaged herself as a tough working class lady, something of a female Rocky Balboa. This is rather implausible for a former first lady who, together with her ex-president husband, has amassed \$109 million in the seven years since they left the White House.

Obama, for his part, presents himself as the leader of a popular insurgent movement that is going to drive corporate lobbyists out of Washington and hand the government “back to the people.” At the same time, he says he will unite all and sundry—white and black, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, gay and straight, Democratic and Republican—in his crusade for “change” and a “new politics.”

Aside from the fact that his campaign has raised something on the order of \$150 million and currently sits on a war chest of \$42 million, and numbers among his key backers some of the wealthiest individuals in the world, Obama’s promise to forge an all-embracing unity sounds not only vacuous, but downright ridiculous given that his own party is hopelessly split.

The crisis of the Democratic Party is the crisis of an imperialist party, as was underscored by Clinton’s recent threat to “obliterate” Iran. For his part, Obama not long before threatened to bomb Pakistan.

The primary contest has degenerated into a spectacle of political crisis laced with fraud and deceit. It has demonstrated how hopeless and delusional is the notion that the Democratic Party can serve as a vehicle for progressive social change.



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