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To Bring Change, Political Insiders and Outsiders Need Each Other

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Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have recently been arguing whether Martin Luther King Jr. or President Lyndon Johnson was more important for securing civil rights legislation. Their campaigns and the press have turned this tempest into a controversy over race. But it is really a dispute about political strategy and the role of social movements and protest in American society.

As Obama (a former community organizer) and Clinton (who wrote her college senior thesis about the legendary organizer Saul Alinsky) no doubt know, all important progressive change requires both outsiders and insiders.

The insiders, elected officials and lobbyists, see their job as pushing through changes in law that can alter the living conditions, incomes, and access to opportunity and environment of our citizens. Legislating involves the "art of compromise" that requires the skills of brokering deals, negotiating, and forging consensus.

Outsiders -- community activists, street protestors and radicals -- need different skills. They often view compromise as "selling out" by politicians tied to corporate and elite interests. Activists believe that the influence of campaign contributions, and the trade-offs required by legislative give-and-take, make most elected officials undependable allies.

But an examination of American history reveals that progressive change comes about when both strategies are at work. To gain any significant reforms, activists and politicians need each other. Boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience, and mass marches - traditional outsider strategies - help put new issues on the agenda, dramatize long-ignored grievances, and generate media attention. This type of agitation gets people thinking about things they hadn't thought about before and can change public opinion.

Smart liberal and progressive elected officials understand that they really need "radical" protestors to change the political climate and make reform possible. When "disruption" is taking place in the streets, policymakers can appear statesmanlike and moderate when they forge compromises to win legislative victories.

The political dynamics of the civil rights movements followed this logic. Today, King is revered as close to a saint, with his birthday now a national holiday. But many Americans, including President Johnson, initially viewed him as a dangerous radical. He was harassed by the FBI and vilified in the media. However, the willingness of activists to put their bodies on the line against fists and fire hoses tilted public opinion. The movement's civil disobedience, rallies, and voter registration drives pricked Americans' conscience. These efforts were indispensable for changing how Americans viewed the plight of blacks and for putting the issue at the top of the nation's agenda. LBJ recognized that the nation's mood was changing. The civil rights activism transformed Johnson from a reluctant advocate to a powerful ally.

At the same time, King and other civil rights leaders recognized that the movement needed elected officials to take up their cause, attract more attention, and "close the deal" through legislation. King's "I Have A Dream" speech at the August 1963 March on Washington inspired the nation and symbolized the necessity of building a mass movement from the bottom up. LBJ's address to a joint session of Congress in March 1965 -- in which he used the phrase "we shall overcome" to urge support for the Voting Rights Act -- put the President's stamp-of-approval on civil rights activism. Johnson said: "There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. And we are met here tonight as Americans -- not as Democrats or Republicans. We are met here as Americans to solve that problem."

This dynamic has been replayed many times throughout American history. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 only after suffragists combined decades of dramatic protest (including hunger strikes and mass marches) with inside lobbying and appeals to the consciences of male legislators -- some of them the husbands and fathers of the protestors.

In the 1930s, workers engaged in massive and illegal sit-down strikes in factories throughout the country. In Michigan - where workers had taken over a number of auto plants - a sympathetic governor, Democrat Frank Murphy, refused to allow the National Guard to eject the protestors even after they had defied an injunction to evacuate the factories. His mediating role helped end the strike on terms that provided a victory for the workers and their union.

President Franklin Roosevelt recognized that his ability to push New Deal legislation through Congress depended on the pressure generated by protestors. He once told a group of activists who sought his support for legislation, "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me do it." As the protests escalated throughout the country, Roosevelt became more vocal, using his bully pulpit to lash out at big business and to promote workers' rights. Labor organizers felt confident in proclaiming, "FDR wants you to join the union." With Roosevelt setting the tone, and with allies like Senator Robert Wagner maneuvering in Congress, labor protests helped win legislation guaranteeing workers' right to organize, the minimum wage, and the 40-hour week. Likewise, the victories of the environmental movement starting in the 1970s -- such as creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the dismantling of nuclear power plants -- required activists who knew that a combination of outside protest and inside lobbying, orchestrated by friendly elected officials, was needed to secure reform.

None of the original goals of these movements have been completely achieved. But the mass marches, civil disobedience, and hunger strikes have led to changes in law and in society that have improved the lives of millions, led to greater social equality, and improved the quality of our air and water.

Like Dr. King, savvy protestors have understood that legislation is often a compromise. They recognize that compromises can co-opt a movement's ideas and energies with token changes, but can also be stepping-stones towards more dramatic reform. The impact of legislative reforms depends on the leadership, depth, and persistence of the social movements.

In Los Angeles over the past decade, the labor movement has developed a sophisticated inside/outside strategy. During election campaigns, janitors, hotel workers, schoolteachers, pipe fitters, nurses, and other workers register voters and staff phone-banks to help elect pro-labor City Council members. But even after their allies are in office, the unions use large-scale protests and civil disobedience to draw attention to their concerns. Their actions have enlisted the support of clergy and community leaders, and, transformed some fence-sitting politicians into strong advocates for workers' rights. In September 2006, for example, more than 3000 people participated in a mass rally outside Los Angeles International Airport to agitate for strengthening the city's living wage law. Several hundred people, including a few City Council members, engaged in civil disobedience and volunteered to get arrested to underscore their solidarity. But most of the pro-union politicians play the insider role, encouraging employers to improve wages and working conditions and voting to adopt living wage and other worker-friendly laws.

If Obama, Clinton, or Edwards is elected in November, he or she will face a strategic test of wills. To win universal health care, labor law reform, or legislation to reduce global warming, the President will confront fierce resistance from powerful forces. Big business will try to undermine any change that threatens their profits and power. The President will need to use his or her bully pulpit to highlight the issues, shape public opinion, cajole moderate Democrats and Republicans, and, importantly, encourage people to mobilize at the grassroots level.

Activists need advocates in the White House and Congress to voice their concerns and pass legislation. But even with such allies, activists have to keep the heat on, be visible, and make enough noise so that policy makers and the media can't ignore them. To advance a progressive agenda, a widespread grassroots movement -- which provides ordinary Americans with opportunities to engage in a variety of activities, from emailing their legislators, to participating in protest -- is essential.

Historians can debate how to divvy up the credit for future victories, but we already know that we won't see any progress without both noisy protestors and sympathetic politicians.

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