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POLITICS

Tuesday's Progressive Victories Show That the Tide Is Turning

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On Tuesday, Bill de Blasio won a landslide victory to become the mayor of New York City, voters in New Jersey and Seatac, Washington supported minimum wage hikes, and the Illinois legislature voted to legalize same-sex marriage. These are among the progressive victories that swept across the country.

Despite a few setbacks, progressives had much to cheer about, sensing that the tide is turning against the unholy alliance of big business, the Tea Party, and the religious right. Growing protests -- such as the "Moral Monday" movement in North Carolina, militant immigrant rights activism, battles to protect women's health clinics from state budget cuts, strikes by low-wage workers, civil disobedience actions to challenge voter suppression, and student campaigns against global energy corporations -- reflect a burgeoning progressive movement bubbling up from below the surface that is beginning to have an impact on elections.

By far the most impressive symbol of this rising tide is de Blasio's landslide win, which the *New York Times* called "a sharp leftward turn for the nation's largest metropolis." De Blasio campaigned on a bold progressive platform, promising to address the city's widening income inequality, gentrification, and hollowing out of the middle class. De Blasio, the city's public advocate, trounced Republican Joe Lhota (a transportation official and long-time advisor to former Mayor Rudy Giuliani) by a 73 to 24 percent margin. His victory represents a rejection of 20 years of business-oriented municipal policies under Giuliani and Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

De Blasio pledged to end the city's racist "stop and frisk" police practices, to expand affordable housing, and to increase pre-kindergarten classes by raising taxes on residents earning over \$500,000, subject to approval from the state legislature. After winning a come-from-behind victory in the Democratic primary, de Blasio built a powerful grassroots campaign that drew on unions, community organizations, and other progressives. On Election Day, more than 10,000 de Blasio volunteers were turning out voters.

In addition to this overwhelming mandate, the new mayor will have a more progressive City Council to work with. The 51-member Council will have at least 21 new members, many of them supported by unions and the Working Families Party, which also played a big role in de Blasio's victory. The council's Progressive Caucus is likely to double in size from 10 to 20. Council member Brad Lander, a former community organizer, cofounder of the Progressive Caucus, and key de Blasio ally, was re-elected by a wide margin in his Brooklyn district.

Americans' growing frustration with widening inequality, stagnant wages, and persistent poverty can be seen in the mounting momentum to raise wages. Even as New Jersey voters were giving conservative Republican Gov. Chris Christie a second term, they also overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment to raise the state's minimum wage by a dollar to \$8.25 an hour. The new law includes an automatic cost-of-living increase each year. Last year Christie vetoed a bill to raise the state's minimum wage to \$8.50 an hour, so the Democrats in the state legislature pushed back by putting the question to the voters. On Tuesday, it passed with 60 percent of the vote despite opposition from business groups, including the Chamber of Commerce, and Christie, who said that raising the wage is "just an irresponsible thing to do."

Three thousand miles away, voters in the Seattle suburb of Seatac, Washington embraced the Good Jobs Initiative' to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour for workers in Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and at airport-related businesses, including hotels, car-rental agencies, and parking lots. At midnight, it was winning 54 to 46 percent, although many mail-in ballots had not yet been counted. The new law, sponsored by labor unions and other progressives, applies to more than 6,000 workers. Washington State's current minimum wage is \$9.19, the highest in the nation. Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn and challenger Ed Murray (who beat McGinn on Tuesday) both supported the Seatac initiative and raised the possibility of doing the same thing in Washington's largest city.

The two minimum wage victories come on the heels of growing activism by low-wage workers around the country, including strikes and other protests by employees at fast-food restaurant chains and Wal-Marts. A year ago, voters in Albuquerque, N.M., and Long Beach, California, raised local minimum wages, adding to the more than 150 cities that have adopted living wage laws. Last month, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation raising the state's minimum wage from \$8 to \$10 an hour - a bill he had vetoed a year earlier. Activists in Idaho, South Dakota, and Alaska are gathering signatures to put minimum wage hikes on the ballot next year. Their counterparts in Maryland, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Hawaii are pushing state legislators to raise the minimum wages in their states, too.

The momentum at the local and state levels is likely to have ripple effects in the nation's capitol, where President Obama has

proposed raising the federal wage threshold to \$9 an hour and liberal Democrats in Congress have embraced hiking it to over \$10 an hour, including an annual cost-of-living adjustment. Unions and other progressives will be using the issue to target Congressional Republicans facing tough re-election campaigns next year, hoping to pressure them to support a minimum wage hike or face the wrath of angry voters. Public opinion polls show that the vast majority of Americans believe that people who work full-time should not earn poverty-level wages.

A majority of Americans now also embrace another progressive idea - same-sex marriage. In the past, conservatives tried to increase Republican voter turnout by putting anti-gay marriage measures on state ballots, but that strategy no longer works as public opinion has dramatically shifted in the past few years. On Tuesday, the Illinois state legislature passed a measure to legalize same-sex marriage. Under the legislation, which Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn has pledged to sign, gay couples could start marrying in June. Illinois will become the fifteenth state to legalize same-sex marriage, a number that is certain to grow rapidly now that the Supreme Court struck down the federal Defense of Marriage Act.

And it is certainly no accident that this week the Senate cleared the way to vote in favor of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) to ban discrimination in the workplace based on sexual orientation and gender identity. On Monday, the Senate voted 61-30 to circumvent a filibuster of the bill, which has been introduced repeatedly since 1994. Reflecting the nation's changing mood, seven Republicans -- Sens. Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, Susan Collins of Maine, Orrin Hatch of Utah, Dean Heller of Nevada, Mark Kirk of Illinois, Rob Portman of Ohio, and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania -- joined 54 Democrats in voting to invoke cloture in order to advance the bill. Two Senators who support ENDA -- Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo) and Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) -- were absent. The Senate is likely to vote on final passage this week. The bill will face higher hurdles in the House, where Speaker John Boehner has reiterated his opposition to ENDA on the absurd ground that it will "cost American jobs, especially small business jobs," but the growing number of Republicans who are now embracing LGBT rights may eventually force Boehner - or his successor - to revise his stance.

In another milestone Tuesday for the gay rights movement, Seattle became the second largest city in the country to elect an openly gay mayor. State Sen. Ed Murray, a gay Democratic state legislator, appeared to be headed for victory in Seattle's mayoral race. With 40 percent of the votes reported, Murray had a large lead -- 56-43 percent -- over incumbent Mayor Mike McGinn. Last year Murray sponsored and led the successful Referendum 74 campaign which legalized same-sex marriage in the state. Both Murray and McGinn are liberals who hold similar views on most issues. Both favor more public transit and universal kindergarten, and both embraced the campaign to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour in neighboring Seatac. McGinn, a one-time Sierra Club activist, was the first big-city mayor to push for divesting Seattle's pension fund money from energy companies that contribute to global warming, a cause that is gaining momentum on many college campuses. Annise Parker, a lesbian, was elected mayor of Houston (America's fourth largest city) in 2009. Other large cities that have elected gay and lesbian mayors include Providence, Rhode Island and Portland, Oregon.

In Boston, State Rep. Marty Walsh edged City Council member John Connolly to become the city's next mayor. A long-time labor leader, Walsh gained the support from unions and key community and minority activists to win with 52 percent of the vote. As in Seattle, Walsh and Connolly - both liberal Democrats -- agreed on many issues. Walsh 's background as a working class union leader who won his personal struggle to overcome alcoholism helped catapult him to victory. National unions contributed heavily to help elect Walsh, who will become one of the few labor leaders to lead a major city. (Antonio Villaraigosa, a former union organizer, ended his two terms as Los Angeles' mayor earlier this year due to term limits). Walsh will replace Tom Menino, a moderate Democrat who served as Boston's mayor for 20 years but declined to seek a sixth term for health reasons.

In Minneapolis, community organizer and Occupy Homes activist Ty Moore was in a close race for a seat on the City Council. Moore was running as a Socialist Alternative candidate against Democrat Farm Labor Party candidate Alondra Cano, who would be the first Mexican-American to serve on the council. Moore, whose campaign earned the support of SEIU and the Green Party, co-founded the local Occupy Homes movement, which staged sit-ins to prevent banks from seizing foreclosed houses. His campaign focused heavily on stopping foreclosures and raising the city's minimum wage to \$15 an hour. By early Wednesday morning, neither Moore nor Cano had reached the required threshold of votes to be declared a winner. Minneapolis uses a ranked-choice voting method, which processes ballots through a series of rounds, in which the lowest ranked candidate (or candidates) is eliminated, and their votes are redistributed to the next-ranked candidate on those ballots. The final outcome should be announced later this week.

Nobody would call Terry McAuliffe a bold progressive, but progressives and liberals are nevertheless embracing his victory in the Virginia governor's race on Tuesday as one more nail in the Tea Party coffin. The former head of the Democratic National Committee and a close ally of Bill and Hillary Clinton, McAuliffe defeated state Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, an ultra-right Republican embraced by the Tea Party. Virginia is swing state. Since 1977, it has elected governors from the opposing party of the sitting president. Although Obama won Virginia in both 2008 and 2012, the lower turnout in this year's off-year election was expected to favor Cuccinelli, who had already won statewide office and was a well-known figure. But McAuliffe's campaign was successful in winning over younger (under 45) voters, a majority of women, and moderates, many of whom viewed Cuccinelli as too conservative, according to polls. Cuccinelli was hurt by his extreme right-wing views on birth control, abortion, and divorce, and by the recent Republican-led shutdown of the federal government, which particularly affected the many Virginians who live in the Washington, D.C. suburbs. Even so, McAuliffe barely squeaked by, winning by a 47 to 46 percent margin.

Liberals and progressives have reason to breathe a sigh of relief over McAuliffe's slim victory. Had Cuccinelli won, he would have followed the playbook of Republican governors who have refused to implement the Obamacare program, supported anti-union legislation and cuts to the social safety net, and embraced severe limits on women's reproductive health care, including abortion. In fact, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, along with Senators Rand Paul (R-Ky) and Marco Rubio (R-Fla) - all Tea Party favorites - campaigns for Cuccinelli. Although McAuliffe, who made his fortune in banking and real estate, was often criticized by progressive for his close ties to business in his role as a Democratic Party fundraiser, he seemed to shift somewhat to the left during the campaign. In a state with a large number of gun owners and where the National Rifle

Association has its headquarters (in suburban Fairfax, outside Washington, D.C), McAuliffe came out for strong gun controls and even boasted of his "F" rating from NRA.

McAuliffe's narrow victory was not the solid defeat for the crackpot Tea Party wing of the Republican Party that Democrats had hoped for. But other races on Tuesday suggest that there's a growing divide within the Republican Party between its business wing and its Tea Party wing, which may soon be gasping for breath in most parts of the country. In a Republican primary contest in Alabama, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business lobby groups poured huge sums to help former State Bradley Byrne defeat Dean Young, a Tea Party lunatic who last week said in an interview that Obama was born in Kenya. The business and Tea Party wings of the GOP both oppose higher taxes, government regulations on business, and labor unions, but the so-called mainstream corporate Republicans fear that if more Tea Party candidates win GOP primaries, voters will elect more Democrats to Congress and state legislatures. Although there are still many right-wing businesspeople, like the Koch brothers and their ilk, who fund Tea Party candidates, the major business lobby groups, as well as political operatives like Karl Rove, want to defeat the Tea Partyists before they destroy the GOP's legitimacy. They worry that recent polls show that as many as 40 Republican House members are vulnerable to defeat next November as the party's favorability ratings sink among moderate and independent voters, who blame the GOP for the government shutdown and for the gridlock in Washington. The Democrats, who have 200 seats in the House, need to add 18 members to take back control of Congress' lower chamber.

Although Tuesday's political landscape definitely reflected a surging tide of liberal and progressive victories, business and conservative groups prevailed on two major ballot measures.

In Washington state, voters rejected an initiative that would have required labels on foods containing genetically engineered ingredients. Initiative 522 lost by a 54.8 percent to 45.2 percent margin. The pro-labeling campaign was vastly outspent by big business. The anti-labeling No on 522 campaign set a record for fundraising with \$22 million in donations, almost all of it from out-of-state corporations and lobby groups, including the Grocery Manufacturers Association, Monsanto, DuPont Pioneer, Dow AgroSciences, and Bayer CropScience.

In Colorado, voters turned down a tax hike that would have provided an additional \$1 billion for schools and would have resulted in smaller class sizes, pay raises for teachers, increased support for English-language learners, and full-day kindergarten. The initiative, called Amendment 66, would have changed the state income tax from a flat rate of 4.63 percent to a two-tiered system. The first \$75,000 of taxable income would be taxed at 5 percent and everything above that threshold at 5.9 percent. The plan had the support of national teachers' unions and Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper. The campaign was a rare case where the teachers unions worked on the same side as corporate philanthropists like Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg, who support school privatization. The Colorado initiative included a provision to increase funding for charter schools, a major goal of the network that education historian Diane Ravitch calls the "billionaire boys club." The supporters of the school financing initiative, vastly outspent its opponents, but the measure nevertheless lost by a 66 percent to 34 margin.

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