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L.A. forces are present in the Garden State

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By **JOHN ATLAS** and **PETER DREIER**
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At a time when the Democratic Party establishment counsels a move to the "center" as the cure for a defeated and demoralized Democratic Party, a new path is emerging. On May 17, Antonio Villaraigosa, a progressive politician won a landslide mayoral victory in Los Angeles, defeating incumbent James Hahn, a moderate Democrat. The grassroots chemistry that gave rise to Villaraigosa's win may be present in the Garden State.

Days before the Los Angeles election, on May 5 and 6, Mark Murphy, of the Fund for New Jersey, brought together leaders of more than 65 non-profit groups at the Chauncey Center in Princeton. Frustrated over the unwillingness of New Jersey's Democratic establishment to come to grips with the major issues that confront the state, most of those who gathered there agreed to develop a common agenda and political action plan.

Leaders from groups like NJ Citizen Action, the Black Minister's Council, the Latino Leadership Alliance, Education Law Center, and the Association for Community Organizations Now sat around the table with urban anti-poverty groups from Newark and suburban groups like Skyline Clean (an environment group based in Ringwood) and Blue Wave (based in Montclair). New Jersey Policy Perspective, a Trenton-based research group, was in the room along with the Communications Workers of America. Some of the leaders suggested that the groups pool resources and make an impact in the upcoming governor's race.

Was Villaraigosa's win simply an idiosyncratic reaction to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and perhaps the product of a Latino mosaic unique to Southern California?

Villaraigosa's victory was not a Latino phenomenon. Los Angeles - virtually all of Los Angeles - has moved left. According to exit polls, 47 percent of voters identified themselves as liberals, compared with 27 percent moderate and 26 percent conservative.

Villaraigosa's wide victory margin was spread across all key demographic, racial, ethnic, economic, and geographic groups. He won majorities among all income groups.

His election was the culmination of a long, hard journey for Los Angeles' progressive grassroots movement, a movement made up of forces present in New Jersey.

New Jersey has what Villaraigosa had: A strong labor movement with membership rates well above the national average, major grassroots organizations in all sectors, and deep dissatisfaction with Democratic centrist inaction.

New Jersey's progressive forces are beginning to find their voice. ACORN, AARP, New Jersey Citizen Action and the Newark-based Institute for Social Justice worked on predatory bank lending. New Jersey Public Policy Perspective, working with many of the same groups and others, including unions, mobilized residents to increase the state's minimum wage and pass the millionaire's tax. Both measures were signed into law.

The Fund for New Jersey has jump-started a process that may well forge a powerful new coalition, an alternative to both Democratic and Republican establishment. Each of these groups at the Princeton meeting had its own political constituency, issue concerns and technical skills, but these grassroots leaders are beginning to realize that in politics, as in other segments of society, that the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts. It remains to be seen whether these groups have the staying power to make this blue state even bluer.

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