ARGUMENTS

Middle America Reboots Democracy

We spent months talking with anti-Trump forces—and they're not who pundits say they are.

BY LARA PUTNAM THEDA SKOCPOL FROM FEBRUARY 20, 2018, 2:26 PM – 21 MIN READ

TAGGED DONALD TRUMP GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM POLITICS RESISTANCE

Resistance march in Philadelphia, March 8, 2017. -- Photo by Joe Piette via CC 2.0

Nancy Reynolds looks like no one's idea of a revolutionary, least of all her own. She has a quick and contagious smile, shiny coiffed hair, a bad knee, and four grandchildren. Heartbroken after the defeat of Hillary Clinton—for whom Reynolds had spent long hours canvassing in the fall of 2016—she marched in protest in January 2017. When the 2018 anniversary march rolled around, she made sure to fit it in, but it wasn't easy. These days Nancy Reynolds has campaigns to run: as Hampton Township coordinator for one friend's Pennsylvania state senate campaign; as a canvass organizer for the slate of first-time candidates she helped elect to Hampton town council in November 2017, breaking long decades of Republican dominance; and now as signature-gatherer for her own campaign for election to her local Democratic Party committee as well. A retired children's librarian, Nancy has long been a powerhouse within her local community, which is nestled in Pittsburgh's northern suburbs. Prior to 2016, local and state politics were not on her radar screen. Now they dominate her to-do list every day.

Similar stories to Nancy's are unfolding in suburbs and towns all across her home state and the country. She and tens of thousands of other women, mostly mothers and grandmothers ranging in age from their 30s to 70s, are fueling an American political transformation that most media outlets are systematically missing, or at least misreading.

To be sure, outlets have reported a handful of high-profile indicators of nationwide civic rumblings: big turnouts to hundreds of Women's Marches in January 2017, and again a year later, as well as the emergence of a flood of Democratic congressional challengers for 2018, with a record-breaking proportion of women. But there's a deeper and broader shift powering these indicators, and those who see only nationally visible events may miss it entirely. Far from the bluest strongholds, a huge demographic swathe of forgotten Americans is remaking politics, and it is not the one getting most of the press. The new upsurge is not centered in the progressive urban enclaves where most national pundits live; nor is it to be found among the grizzled men in coal country diners where journalists escape to get out of the bubble. Neither of those poles looks much like most of America anyway. About **half the country** lives in the suburbs, twice the number who live in either fully urban or rural settings. More than half of Americans are also women—and of those, half are in their thirties to sixties. It is in this Middle America, and among these Middle Americans, that political developments since the November 2016 election have moved fastest and farthest.

One of us, Lara Putnam, is a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, who teaches history but does not usually get to watch it in the making. Yet over the past 14 months, as she has met woman after woman like Nancy, in the course of her own citizen engagement work in the cities and suburbs of southwestern Pennsylvania, Putnam has come to believe there is an epochal "generation" in the making: a cohort of Americans for whom life-cycle stage and personal trajectory collided with public events—the election of Donald Trump; the Women's Marches and calls to action that followed—in ways that changed life after life in very similar, and very consequential, directions. Meanwhile, the other one of us, Harvard University political scientist Theda Skocpol, has been making field trips to eight non-big-city counties in North Carolina, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Pennsylvania—and in each place she has found newly formed citizens groups also spurred to action by the November 2016 election outcome. Skocpol has (along with Harvard PhD student Leah Gose) collected questionnaires from organizers and participants in some three dozen local groups active across all regions of the state of Pennsylvania. When notes were compared, our observations lined up almost perfectly, laying the basis for this article.

The tidal shift underway has little in common with the precedents pundits lean on. This is not a leftist Tea Party, because newly engaged suburban activists hail from across the broad ideological range from center to left. It's not a Sanders versus Clinton redux, because that "last year's news" divide is flatly irrelevant to the people working shoulder-to-shoulder in the present. It's not an Occupy Wall Street-type questioning of liberal democracy, because these activists believe laws can make good government as strong and transparent as possible. It's not the 1960s, with young people leading the way—although there are lots of helpful teenagers in the background saying, "Mom, it's fine: go to your meeting; I'll get dinner myself."

The protagonists of the trends we report on are mainly college-educated suburban white women. We tell their stories not because college-educated white women are the most Democratic slice of the electorate (they aren't) or because they are the most progressive voices within the Democratic Party (they aren't) or because they have a special claim to lead the left moving forward (they don't: nor do they pretend to). Rather, what we report here is that it is among these college-educated, middle-aged women in the suburbs that political practices have most changed under Trump. If your question is how the panorama of political possibility has shifted since November 2016, your story needs to begin here.

What's Going On Out There?

Pundits regularly portray the action underway since November 2016 as a national movement—"The Resistance." This can enshrine a common misperception, however: an understandable one, though, since the metropolitan advocates to whom the national media turn to explain the "newly energized grassroots" at times exaggerate the left-progressive focus of the activism underway and overestimate their own importance in coordinating it. Moreover, since this mobilization is both decentralized and based in face-to-face rather than virtual actions, it is impossible to scope from a distance. This revolution is not being tweeted; and even in the private Facebook groups most local groups maintain, the most prolific posters may not represent the views and focus of the members most active in real life. Local interviews and observations are, therefore, the best way to understand what is going on.

To be sure, new national resistance organizations like Indivisible, Sister District, Run for Something, Action Together, Swing Left, Women's March, and many others have stepped up—and staffed up—to offer encouragement and tools via Internet outreach; and many of these national groups aspire to coordinate and speak for more widespread local activism. Most local founders of post-November 2016 grassroots groups say that they did indeed (sooner or later) read the *Indivisible Guide;* and they also testify to using ideas and tools from many of these national organizations. Nevertheless, it is clear that the national organizations did not themselves create the dizzying array of local groups—the "**pop-up groups**," one bemused but grateful Virginia campaign manager called them—that spread like wildfire in the days, weeks, and early months after November 2016.

Though not nationally directed, the new activism cannot be understood as just local, either. As similar small groups have emerged in parallel across America, they have taken inspiration from one another, looked for ways to link up in regions and states, and continued to take pointers from national sources. Still, we know of no local group whose vision, plans, capabilities, or ties are limited to those offered by just one national-level advocacy organization or coordinating framework. Instead, local leaders seek out many ideas, tools, and connections, actively picking and choosing what they and their fellow participants find most helpful in their particular circumstances. We suspect that leaders and funders of national "resistance" organizations may fail to grasp the degree to which local citizen activists are eclectically leveraging varied menus of assistance, taking what

they need from various offerings rather than lining up under any particular national flagship.

Again, these local stories have been similar across the country. Regular citizens bitterly disappointed with the 2016 results emerged from what many call a "period of mourning" to start planning activities, coordinated by pairs or trios or handfuls of self-appointed leaders. Some of these sparkplugs already knew one another, while others connected on buses to the 2017 Women's Marches or "met" online, sometimes facilitated by the PantSuit Nation Facebook group that connected hundreds of thousands of women in anticipation of the first female President. Although men are certainly involved in the local groups that have taken shape since the election, women are indeed very much in the vanguard making up about 70 percent of the participants and most members of the leadership teams.

Often employed or retired from teaching, business, nonprofits, or government social service posts, these organizers already knew how to put out messages, plan gatherings, and share information. Word spread through churches, unions, PTAs, and local good government groups, and dozens of friends, neighbors, and co-workers assembled for founding meetings in living rooms, in libraries or church basements, or at local restaurants. Aware of the homogeneity of their communities, many sought to take on board the calls for attention to race-based disparities that came to the fore around the first Women's March. In localities where few minority people are directly involved, leaders regularly sponsor discussions of racial justice issues or reach out to cosponsor events or campaigns with NAACP chapters and immigrant-supporting groups.

In the early months of 2017, entire groups met often face to face. Soon, many hived-off committees or task forces started focusing on particular tasks, like coordinating calls to congressional offices, organizing information sessions, gathering petitions for anti-gerrymandering referenda, or putting out newsletters. Everywhere, participants worked through much of 2017 to save health reform; and many undertook campaigns to fight gerrymandering or address educational and environmental issues or speak up on behalf of refugees and immigrants. But it would be wrong to see these groups or their parts as issue specialists, because the common refrain everywhere is about protecting American democracy and reclaiming citizen ownership of public life. Before "this election," explained one Ohio woman, "I have never been involved in any type of politics,

activism.... I couldn't have told you the names of my state reps." Following the jolt of Trump's victory, "I had to do something...get involved somehow."

Self-avowed Democrats are key participants in this new form of engagement, but many local groups have deliberately reached out to Independents and disaffected Republicans, and they often self-consciously adopt names and ways of operating that allow them to remain welcoming and inclusive across partisan lines. The Democrats among them are pragmatically inclusive as well. Unlike the ongoing factional battles at the Democratic National Committee and in some state Democratic parties, as well as on social media, in these local groups former Bernie and Hillary supporters—joined by others who supported neither—have spent little time rehashing the past. Shock at the November 2016 results and horror at the stances and rhetoric of President Donald Trump and the new Congress drove their start. But the time spent on venting was everywhere limited, as people asked what could be done to get democracy back on track, and found the answers were right in front of them.

More than a national movement, then, what is underway is a national pattern of mutually energizing local engagement. Sociologically, what we are witnessing is an inflection point—a shift in long-standing trends—concentrated in one large demographic group, as college-educated women have ramped up their political participation *en masse*. The visible collective protests they have joined in response to national events are just a small piece of a far more consequential rebuilding of the face-to-face structures of political life that the same people have ended up leading. The grassroots are leaning in, and their little-d democratic commitments are as important as their capital-D Democratic alignment.

Targeting Legislative and Local Elections

If you spend time around people like Nancy Reynolds, you will find it jarring to hear the national messaging from the Women's March and Indivisible, which have only just began announcing the "time to turn to elections" as January 2018 loomed. In contrast, many of the local groups whose emergence was linked to Indivisible and the March a year ago are already ten months into an electoral "turn." They have one election cycle under their belt and concrete targets in their sights for 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Although weekly protests—such as the "Tuesdays with Toomey" events across Pennsylvania, in which groups of activists gather with signs, chants, and song at the

offices of Republican Senator Pat Toomey, to make their concerns known—may seem to be the simple enactment of a national "resistance" agenda, in fact these gatherings reinforce personal connections that speed proactive local engagement. Weekly protests turn out to provide the ideal setting for incubating electoral plans, as participants share knowledge about incumbents and potential candidates, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of organizational allies, and turn weak ties created through Facebook into strong personal bonds.

As a federal polity with multiple gerrymandered layers, the United States is maze of overlapping, oddly shaped jurisdictions that do not line up well with natural communities —and no one knows this better these days than the local activists trying to contact office holders or change electoral equations. "Pop up" groups have coalesced around the disparate geographic units that make up the elections system, from wards to townships to counties. In the greater Pittsburgh area alone, for instance, there are about three dozen such groups. This might seem a sign of disorganization or factionalism, but in practice it seems instead a reflection of their pragmatic focus on local elections. The need to contest "every seat, every election" is a new mantra among activists in red or purple communities, appalled by the range of elective offices they discover all around them for which Democrats stopped even fielding candidates over the last decade.

And they are making remarkable progress. As new activists expanded their knowledge of local politics with stunning speed in the tumultuous first half of 2017, they recruited and supported Democratic candidates for offices ranging from coroner to borough council member to state senator. At the Congressional district level, new umbrella groups—such as "PA 12 for Progress" and "PA 18 for Progress"—support and draw on the smaller groups. In turn, Pennsylvania Together, a state-wide coalition encompassing hundreds of new grassroots groups, holds periodic regional training sessions in different parts of the state and bi-weekly conference-call webinars in between.

Pennsylvania Together has identified more than 60 candidates who ran for local or municipal office in this state with new local groups' support in November 2017. Most were first-time candidates; more than half were women; four out of five won. That last fact is all the more striking because the candidates were often running in places presumed to be so heavily Republican that Democrats hadn't fielded campaigns there in recent memory. In Chester County, a large exurban and rural county west of Philadelphia, Democratic candidates swept row offices that Republicans had carried

with an average 17-point margin of victory in 2015. School boards and township councils that had not had Democratic members in decades now do: sometimes, in the majority.

How did they do it? Relying organically on what social movement theorists call "relational organizing," the newly active volunteers mobilized existing social networks to bring in newcomers and connect to expertise. They have also begun to work in alliance with organizations that have been at this far longer, including most prominently the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), who have opened to this new target audience their deep expertise in teaching the steps and skills that make collective action possible.

The fact that professional women from mid-life to early retirement years comprise the strong majority of new leaders and activists means that even those with no prior experience in political organizing have lifetimes of experience in working for change within existing systems. In contrast to some of the voices the media have embraced as national spokespersons of the "Resistance," the actual grassroots are pervasively pragmatic. These are individuals who have honed their skills in the "slow boring of hard boards," to use Max Weber's definition of politics, over years of professional and community life—and are now bringing those skills to bear full-strength on local political action.

Democratic Party officials seem notably less sophisticated about how organizing works. Nancy Reynolds, the retired librarian, worked throughout the fall of 2017 with a tight network of women (their partnership forged on a chartered bus to the January 2017 Women's March) to coordinate phone canvassing and door-knocking across Hampton Township. They elected three Democrats to a five-person township council that had been all-Republican as long as anyone could remember. As Reynolds tried to explain to a party strategist aggrieved that the party's online calling tools went unused, "My friends won't make calls for you. They'll make calls for me." In this exchange, as in many others we have witnessed, we've seen to what extent the ones needing education in political organizing are actually the nominal political professionals. The "amateurs" already get it.

In theory, the Democratic Party recognizes the importance of local relationships. The "Democratic Committee Member Handbook" distributed by PA Dems, for instance, suggests committeepersons should greet families moving in to their precinct and visit

every Democrat in the precinct regularly, as well as before elections. But in recent years such steps have only rarely been carried out. Indeed, in many places, elective committeeperson slots remain empty year after year. Unlike those party officials who simply shrug and move on when confronted with such gaps, the new grassroots groups —in place after place—are setting out to reanimate, or create, the local party capacities they found missing.

The new umbrella groups with communications networks reaching all the way down to the local level make it easy for campaigns to connect with grassroots partners. Unsurprisingly, candidates are making eager use of these connections. In contrast, while some places local Democratic establishments have welcomed the new grassroots groups, others they have not. As one group leader in Pennsylvania responded on a questionnaire, "Local Dems are not very interested in us. Believe it or not."

Revitalizing the Local Democratic Party

Although not all newly energized citizens identify as Democrats, as we've mentioned, most do—and all of them represent an opportunity for enlarging the party's ranks. But what exactly is there for them to join?

Many Democratic Party insiders, political consultants, and national leaders seem strikingly uninterested in the evidence that a surge of hands-on, face-to-face *organizing* —not just "enthusiasm"—might have something to do with recent electoral victories, or could be relevant to future prospects. They still seem focused on monetizing popular energy and hoarding contact lists, treating volunteers as interchangeable labor for last-minute door knocking. Each of us has witnessed, or been told about, numerous conversations between party officials and grassroots leaders in which the officials trumpet new tools for digital "engagement" and then tune out entirely when grassroots groups describe their struggles to get even the most basic answers to simple logistical questions, including: when local party committees meet, how decisions are made, and who can participate in any ongoing way. It is as if the insiders and consultants see the interpersonal dimensions of political mobilization as a black box, about which nothing can be known or done.

This lack of curiosity from party insiders is mystifying, because organizations can do *lots* to help (or hinder) peer-to-peer bonds, as these women's multiple victories have shown. Amway gets this. The National Rifle Association gets it. Academic sociology and political

science recognize “relational organizing” and “social capital” as powerful drivers of political change. Yet Democratic Party professionals seem insistently unaware that structures facilitating sustained interpersonal engagement might matter for the short- and long-term success of their party and its candidates. In an era in which political consultants get big-ticket contracts to work with Big Data, as far as we can tell, the party is still not gathering even the most basic *small* data about local membership or the state or local party efforts that could nurture or leverage ongoing participation.

For example, they should be asking themselves: How many state party constitutions provide for ways of joining locally that can be scaled up beyond the finite number of elected committee slots? How many elected committeeperson seats are currently vacant? How many elected ward or township committees meet regularly? How many people attend? In the battleground state that is Pennsylvania—and in light of all the research confirming the importance of participatory mobilization—you might assume some party official is gathering and tracking such numbers, or at least worrying about how to start. As far as we know, you would be wrong.

Indeed the private citizens we know seem much more convinced than party leaders of the importance of local elective party positions. With remarkable regularity, new activists mention unbidden that one or more of their group members will be running for committeeperson in the coming election. The party would be well served by further membership options as well. Although in some places chartered Democratic clubs, women’s and youth groups, and “associate member” categories allow for expandable affiliation, in many others no such structures exist. Maintaining an artificial scarcity of membership slots—as happens when the elective committeeperson seats are the only option open—means that each new entrant into the party has to kick out someone already there. That’s no way to build a movement.

There are other obvious steps leaders of party and umbrella groups can take to maximize the clout and staying power of the new widespread local activism:

Provide basic access and proven tactics. New local groups need training to access the Democratic Party voter database and opportunities to share best practices on how to pace and integrate voter-registration drives, deep canvassing, and get-out-the-vote activities, along with information on legal rules and potential local partners.

Share off-the-shelf templates and low-cost joint access. For example, to the documents and legal and accounting expertise required for campaign finance law compliance. Umbrella groups at the regional and state levels are currently working on providing such resources. This is an area where potential efficiencies and economies of scale are clear.

Create channels for egos and ambitions. This great organizing energy and enthusiasm to run for elective office can also become a source of predictable tensions—with multiple Democrats now running, even for offices previously uncontested. The trick will be to make sure their individual networks re-coalesce to work on behalf of the victorious candidate once the primaries are over. Grassroots groups need to figure out norms (and bylaws) that allow them to navigate the primary cycle with a minimum of bruising and attrition.

Raise and spend money in innovative ways. Clearly, paid professional organizers could play some useful roles within the emerging system, in particular as liaisons between grassroots groups and electoral campaigns. In practice, some of that resource allocation may be happening already. Some small donors may have shifted away from giving money to the DNC and other national organizations in part because there are now so many locals running for office, and politically engaged private citizens are now more likely to meet such candidates personally. Regular citizens may have begun funding not just a 50-state strategy, nor even just a 435 congressional district strategy, but an "every seat, every election" strategy. National and state party leaders could see the value in such developments and work in cooperation with them—for example, by melding party money and local contributions to ensure that each district has embedded organizers along the lines of the 2008 Obama campaign. Even in apparently red districts, such arrangements would be money well spent, as it could help build ties across many election cycles.

An Unstoppable Transformation

At the current pace, it seems likely that the pop-up leaders and grassroots groups of 2017 will, by 2019, have repopulated the local layer of the Democratic Party in much of the country. National media misperceptions to the contrary, this will not look like a far-left reinvention of Tea Partiers or a continuation of Bernie 2016. It will look like retired librarians rolling their eyes at the present state of affairs, and then taking charge. And it will happen first and foremost in the suburbs, those middle-class, Middle-American

spaces that grew up alongside a generation—the Baby Boomers—whose last act of generational transformation may just have arrived.

This change will come smoothly and cooperatively in some places and through conflict and displacement in others. The change will move farthest and fastest outside of the metropolitan cores where local Democratic Party patronage structures still persist. Purple suburbs, mid-size cities, big towns in red regions—these are the unexpected epicenters of the quake underway. The cumulative result will be local Democratic Party leadership across much of America that is slightly more progressive and much more female than it was, although not much more socio-economically diverse. Everywhere, the renovated party locals will be passionate about procedural democracy: determined to fight gerrymandering, regulate campaign activities and finance, and expand and guarantee voting rights for all.

For those wondering who is going to rebuild the foundations of U.S. democracy—assuming the national guardrails survive—the answer across much of the U.S. heartland seems clear. The foundation rebuilders in many communities across most states are newly mobilized and interconnected grassroots groups, led for the most part by Middle America's mothers and grandmothers. They see the work to be done and are well into accomplishing it.

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