

No Factions in Foxholes

Confronted by the crisis that is the Trump presidency, American progressives have overcome identity politics' barriers and joined up in mutual defense.

By E.J. Graff

April 5, 2017

This article appears in the Spring 2017 issue of The American Prospect magazine. [Subscribe here.](#)

We all know this: Across the blue United States, there's an unprecedented revolt against Donald Trump. Between three million and five million attended the January 21 Women's March, whether in Washington, D.C., or around the nation—as far north as Fairbanks, Alaska, as far south as Antarctica. According to Count Love, around 175,000 protesters turned out at hundreds of demonstrations the following week at airports and in public squares to protest the Muslim travel ban, with almost 50,000 more in other scattered protests by March 1. People's Action estimates that upwards of 150,000 have been showing up at their congressional representatives' town halls (even if the representatives themselves didn't show), or at Resist Trump Tuesdays. And I'm writing this in early March; I can only imagine what else will have brought folks out by the time this is in print.

Perhaps just as important, this big blue revolt, or whatever you want to call it—a resistance, a mobilization, a movement—isn't doing business as usual. In the normal progressive coalition politics since the 1960s, champions of various issues or identities have jockeyed for funding and airtime. In the Trump era, that's out the window.

Today's citizen activists say they intend to stand up for all the issues on the progressive checklist, demanding that all liberals act like we are one country, indivisible. As many have noted, the multi-city Women's March was (almost

pointedly) not a march for women's rights but a march organized by women that roared on behalf of democracy and fairness, human rights and science. Its plethora of handmade posters shouted, "Can't touch this," whether "this" was women's bodies, Muslim civil rights, the environment, black lives, bathrooms for trans folks, Obamacare, and—well, you remember as well as I do, because odds are you were there.

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But the protests are just the part easiest to see. In the background, both novices and longtime progressive organizations and activists are working triple-time to be—not just in concept, but in action—intersectional at long last. For years, many leaders and activists have worked to pull down the barriers and put a halt to the “oppression olympics” that pit one identity against another. They've been coming together for Moral Mondays, canvassing together for marriage equality, putting on interfaith potlucks, lobbying for sick time and family leave. Unions like the Service Employees International Union have not only funded and organized the Fight for 15, but also encouraged its worker-activists to expand the campaign's agenda to such causes as Black Lives Matter. On campus, professors and students have delved into the reality that issues aren't separate, that each life is lived at one particular car-crashing intersection of race and religion, work and family, gender and sexuality, child care and health care, and [your issue here]. And the new intersectionality also comes from social media's transformation of how we communicate, many to many, intimately and simultaneously.

What's accelerated this development is, of course, President Donald Trump. The NAACP sends out a blistering press release about how Trump's rhetoric led to anti-Semitic vandalism in Jewish cemeteries. MALDEF, the Latino civil rights group, signs on to a statement condemning the Trump administration for withdrawing a guidance that lets transgender kids go to the bathroom where they're most comfortable. As Kate Kendell, longtime head of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), puts it, “No more coloring in the lines or protecting your own turf. We are facing an existential threat.”

Of course, it could all fall apart. The economic chasm between the (mostly white) professionals and the (mostly brown and black) folks on the economic and law enforcement front lines looks particularly gaping, as it has for years. The new left's capacity to win over white workers on economic issues remains unproven at best. Nevertheless: Watch this space. If the nation can survive the Trump administration's coming foreign policy and economic and climate disasters—a big if—we will find, on the other side, a new progressive movement that will reshape the Democratic Party in ways no one can predict quite yet.

THE MANY ANTI-TRUMP GROUPS that have sprung up since his election have been multi-issue from their outset. Indivisible, for instance, is brimming with mainly white, middle-class, middle-aged outrage, but not just over issues that particularly affect middle-class and middle-aged whites. Meryl Neiman was a corporate lawyer until she had kids, at which point she channeled her energy into school and playground advocacy. Now she coordinates Indivisible Columbus/District 3. “You are drawing upon a pool of people that ... might have been voters, they might have been canvassers, they might have been financial supporters, but they were not working for Planned Parenthood or doing activism professionally,” she explains. Now, she says, they're channeling their decades of professional skills and experience into anti-Trump activism in ways that include pushing one another to run for local office, flooding members of Congress with requests for meetings, showing up at town halls, rushing to airports, demanding information about Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detentions, holding regular street protests—and educating themselves and one another about the issues. Northern Colorado Indivisible is assigning its own members to research and prepare factsheets and backgrounders on various issues so they're ready to ask intelligent questions.

Some of the Indivisible groups are developing a broader vision of what they're doing. Brandy Donaghy, who is black, says, “I actually had somebody call me and invite me to join the interim board of Indivisible Washington [state] because of the way I responded to some people in a conversation that was about Black Lives Matter.” Her group hadn't known the term “intersectionality,” she says. “Now they do, and they're interested. We're actually starting to listen.” And Indivisible Washington's “Daily Do's,” which

she describes as “bite-size actions” for people new to activism, includes explanations “as to why it matters, what it means. A lot of people don’t realize that undocumented immigrants pay taxes and don’t receive welfare.” If they read Washington Indivisible’s Daily Do’s, they know it now.

Indivisible isn’t the only game in town, of course: Hundreds, if not thousands, of homegrown efforts are under way, often spawned through local or personal connections.

New York City Councilmember Brad Lander told me that after the election, he and a local rabbi invited residents of his district to gather at a Park Slope synagogue to figure out what to do next, expecting to break off into small groups—which was clearly impossible when more than a thousand people showed up. By January, Lander said, they’d organized into “15 different working groups on everything from fighting [cabinet] appointments to standing up to Islamophobia, building bridges of solidarity with immigrants and neighbors.”

Nativo Lopez, national director of Hermandad Mexicana, has been astonished at the new diversity of the turnout at immigration protests. “I’ve never seen as many whites of different age groups participating, and even in some instances, more whites than Latinos,” he says. “It was a spontaneous uprising of Americans that went to the airports and said, ‘No, this is not my America.’ That’s a good sign, a very good sign.”

Soon after the election, San Francisco employment lawyer Kelly Dermody asked on Facebook whether her fellow lawyers would be interested in hearing how they could help nonprofit groups representing causes and constituencies that would soon be under attack. By the next morning, hundreds had said yes. Within six weeks, she’d pulled together what she called a “Good Ally” conference in the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, a venue donated by the city. Staffers from 35 nonprofits explained what they were facing and what legal help they would need going forward. The panelists came from an ABC of the left-of-center, advocates for issues that included civil liberties, climate, criminal justice, disabilities, domestic violence, environment, farmworkers, LGBTQ rights, reproductive health, service workers, voting rights, Asian Americans, Latinos, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs.

Of the 1,200 people who attended, fully 600 signed up to do pro bono work for the groups represented by the other 600. More are still signing up through an online portal.

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By focusing chiefly on the surge in middle-class activism, says Andrew Friedman of the Center for Popular Democracy, the news media are overlooking a similar surge “in many of these front-line communities, brown and black communities, working-class communities.” Ai-Jen Poo of the National Domestic Workers Alliance and Ellen Bravo of the Family Values @ Work Coalition, both of which represent mostly female low-wage workers, say that their members got themselves to the Women’s March and are turning out in numbers never before seen.

Organizers like these, whose constituencies are mostly poor, brown, black, and female, made clear that their folks needed no education in intersectionality, thank you very much, because that’s where they live. “Women were at the front lines for the Fight for 15 movement, and almost all of them are workers of color,” Friedman says. Ditto with the push for paid sick days and family leave for lower-wage workers.

These activists never saw economic justice and racial justice as separate. But that doesn’t mean that different groups actually worked on one another’s issues.

TO THE EXTENT THAT THERE’S any fusion under way, it has several sources.

First is the work that advocates and leaders have put into understanding one another’s challenges, particularly once women of color started insisting that their existence wasn’t marginal but central to progressive causes. Bravo

emphasizes that for years, leaders and organizers in the women's movement have been investing time and money in, as she put it, "serious conversations about race"—panels, conferences, convenings, private meetings, off-the-record talks—and about enacting a vision of justice that includes people up and down the economic ladder. How many years? In 1974, the Boston-based Combahee River Collective made a splash across radical feminism when black women, especially but not only lesbians, announced that they were tired of being left out of analyses. In 1981, a group of women of color released *This Bridge Called My Back*, which profoundly shook up the social-justice branch of feminism, leading to years of imperfect but earnest discussions. By 1982, Bravo says, she was one of several organizers "hired for five months to staff the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's National Conference in Milwaukee, where I live, and the theme was 'Race, Class, and Gender.'" By the early 2000s, the Ms. Foundation and other feminist donors were bringing together advocates and leaders to consider how to seriously incorporate a wide range of issues into feminist activism, whether that was organizing for sick pay, unions for domestic workers, or arresting cycles of family violence and addiction. Bravo recalls those discussions involving unions and many other grassroots groups, all of which, she says, "have [had] some serious conversations among themselves about race and what it means for their program."

That's why, Bravo says, when the idea for a January 21 Women's March bubbled up from Facebook, longtime organizers stepped up to help it succeed logistically and to steer clear of "avoidable flaws [like] calling it the 'Million Women March' or having the leadership be strikingly absent of women of color." It's no coincidence that those feminists organized a town hall that was a mini who's who of the intersectional left, with Gloria Steinem talking with Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter, and a panel that included Planned Parenthood's Cecile Richards, Ai-Jen Poo, the Women's March's Linda Sarsour, and law professor and intersectionality rock star Kimberlé Crenshaw—an event that then sent attendees home with a diverse list of groups to contact and support.

Nonetheless, many women of color stayed home on January 21, or marched with caveats, angry that 53 percent of white women voted for Trump, or that white anti-Trump demonstrators had not shown up to Black Lives Matter protests against the shootings of young black men. But many acknowledged

the effort was necessary, however imperfect. Garza wrote a widely circulated essay about her hesitation—and her decision to march despite it:

Hundreds of thousands of people are trying to figure out what it means to join a movement. ... If our movement is not serious about building power, then we are just engaged in a futile exercise of who can be the most radical. ... We will need to build a movement across divides of class, race, gender, age, documentation, religion and disability. Building a movement requires reaching out beyond the people who agree with you. Simply said, we need each other, and we need leadership and strategy.

The evolution of the women's movement is just one example of intersectionality's long march.

The evolution of the women's movement is just one example of intersectionality's long march. Every left-of-center effort has long been wrestling internally with how to stand up for a diverse membership. Gara LaMarche, president of the Democracy Alliance, which funds a range of progressive projects and groups, has been seeing these shifts over the years, noting that in recent years, “immigration reform was being backed by NARAL, and that the NAACP came out for marriage equality, and the LGBT community showed up for the [anti-]stop-and-frisk movement.”

As a result of these years of efforts at bridging the gap, civil rights leaders got in touch with one another the day after Trump's election, agreeing that the resistance had to be all-for-one. As the election results became clear in the wee hours of November 9, 2016, Human Rights Campaign's Chad Griffin met with the NAACP's Cornell Brooks to share strategies. Various leaders told me about traveling nonstop, heading into meeting after meeting in those hectic days.

“I don't recall a time when we've seen, unquestionably, this much participation,” says Ellen Buchman, an executive vice president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, to which 227 organizations belong. Buchman said that the Leadership Conference has been convening an extraordinary number of task forces (“tables,” in the jargon), formal and informal, to plan and enact strategies against the Forces of Trump. When we spoke, the Senate was holding hearings on Senator Jeff Sessions's nomination to be attorney general; Buchman said the Leadership Conference meeting to

coordinate the opposition had 100 people in the room and another 100 or 200 on the phone, with local groups dialing in to coordinate efforts. “I had this voice in my head saying, ‘It’s a closed meeting with this many people?’ And the answer to that is yes, because there are that many institutions and people interested in this fight.”

Over this same period, the insistence by women and people of color that their lives be treated as significant percolated not just through left-of-center organizations but also through colleges and universities.

A second but parallel source of the push beyond silos has been fermented within the academy. Over this same period, the insistence by women and people of color that their lives be treated as significant percolated not just through left-of-center organizations but also through colleges and universities. While *This Bridge Called My Back* was being widely assigned in women’s studies classes and various organizations were grappling with the realities of intersecting identities, Kimberlé Crenshaw was writing her influential 1991 paper “Mapping the Margins,” which introduced the word “intersectionality” into academic discussion. Generations of left-of-center college students have by now absorbed the lesson that they should listen closely to those living with challenges that may differ from their own. When I interviewed Yale students for a PEN America report on free speech on campus last year, students of color proudly emphasized how they had organized both an online publication and a campus-wide organization that for the first time represented a range of groups, including Native, African, Asian, and Latino Americans. “These students are used to having very hard conversations about class, about race, about colorism, about national origin,” says Next Yale spokesperson Alejandra Padin-Dujon. “They’re very good at learning from each other and creating inclusive dialogue.”

University beliefs about left-leaning politics have a way of seeping into the liberal culture at large. Here’s a note, for instance, from the Indivisible Guide:

Trump’s agenda explicitly targets immigrants, Muslims, people of color, LGBTQ people, the poor and working class, and women. It is critical that our

resistance reflect and center the voices of those who are most directly threatened by the Trump agenda. If you are forming a group, we urge you to make a conscious effort to pursue diversity and solidarity at every stage in the process. Being inclusive and diverse might include recruiting members who can bridge language gaps, and finding ways to accommodate participation when people can't attend due to work schedules, health issues, or childcare needs.

In addition, where there are local groups already organizing around the rights of those most threatened by the Trump agenda, we urge you to reach out to partner with them, amplify their voices, and defer to their leadership.

A third and critical influence in this ongoing evolution has been social media. "A rising generation of millennials are more in touch culturally" through new media, says Nativio Lopez. "There's almost like a cross-pollination culturally of music, of themes, of issues, so more mass education is occurring, even if it's in sound-bite quality."

The web and social media have immediately transmitted new ideas into American hands, in many cases eliminating any temporal gap between thought and action. The Dreamers, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter couldn't have spread as they did, says Nelini Stamp, membership director of the Working Families Party, were it not for cellphone videos of police killings and mass protests, passed along with simply a click; Livestream and Periscope and YouTube enabling anyone to literally hold these events in their own hands, feeling intimately involved; Twitter making it possible to debate (for good and for ill) widely and immediately; Facebook offering an always updated bulletin board reachable from wherever you might be; and now WhatsApp and Signal letting organizers communicate without being overheard or seen.

All that affected not just those who camped out in parks, marched in Ferguson, or rallied for the DREAM Act, Stamp says; it also affected the mainstream. "Watching people on the streets putting their bodies on the line for the last seven years, watching it at their fingertips," that awakened Americans to the possibility of protest. "Resistance has been slowly normalized, and now it's been catalyzed under Trump."

A fourth factor has been the activities of large, racially diverse unions such as SEIU and the AFL-CIO not just to rally their own members behind a panoply of progressive causes, but also to organize in minority and other left-leaning communities for immigrant and civil rights, a higher minimum wage, and increased voter participation. In Los Angeles, a foundation established by the local labor federation has assembled a network of lawyers committed to defend pro bono those arrested by ICE in immigration courts.

And, of course, the fifth and most decisive factor behind this still-tentative fusion is Donald Trump himself, and the woes his presidency inflicts on the world.

NO MATTER WHAT THE EFFORTS, the economic and cultural chasms in a nation as vast as ours will never entirely close. Whatever is happening among the United States' blue swarms, it's still an interfaith coalition rather than a mass conversion to a unified theology.

But is mass conversion even necessary?

"There's a tendency on the left in the United States to believe that people have to be converted to a common set of issues or a common platform before they can organize and work together," says Harvard political scholar Theda Skocpol. "Actually, that's not how it works."

It's very natural for the left to fall into kind of a prolonged ideological seminar, but that is not what we need right now.

"Frankly, Democrats don't all have to agree between, say, small-city Pennsylvania and big-city Cambridge, Massachusetts. They don't all have to be on the same page. Blacks and whites don't have to completely agree, and blacks don't have to be in charge and whites don't have to be in charge. We don't have time for that. It's very natural for the left to fall into kind of a prolonged ideological seminar, but that is not what we need right now."

What's needed now, says Skocpol, is registering voters, getting them to the polls, and retaking power in Congress, the White House, and the statehouses.

For these efforts, political unity isn't necessary—and attempts to achieve it would be deadly, Skocpol says. That's the lesson she found in studying the Tea Party, which, she says, "had top-down and bottom-up parts, but they agreed on one thing: Voting for Republicans against Democrats and keeping Republicans in office from compromising with Democrats. But, boy, they sure didn't agree on an agenda, absolutely not." Rather, they deployed "strategic ambiguity," a vagueness that "allows different streams to come together, especially in opposition."

"There's only one form of resistance that's going to work," she continues, "and that's voting. Voting for Democrats." When some of the local impromptu resistance groups have written Skocpol for advice, she says, she responds by telling them to fight on health care, because the possibility of losing health care can outrage and mobilize people across economic and geographic differences, and because she believes it's "probably the most radical thing that the Republicans want to do right now." But even more important, she adds, "Whatever else you're doing, learn the voter-registration rules, learn where the polling places are, make sure that everybody you know is registered to vote and is ready to vote, every single time they can vote." Because if Democrats do better than expected in the small elections and the 2018 elections, "Republicans in Congress will start to get scared and they'll start to pull away from Trump."

Greg Moore, a veteran voting-rights activist working with the NAACP National Voter Fund, wishes desperately that more focus on voting had been in place before the 2016 election. He and his colleagues had been trying since *Shelby County v. Holder* to wake Democrats up to the Republican effort to suppress minority and immigrant voting—and the fact that it was going to affect everyone's issues. "I just don't think they understand how serious of an impact it has on places like Wisconsin and Ohio and even North Carolina." Even if courts partially overturned various laws, he says, the court battles were dragged out so long that potential voters and poll workers didn't necessarily know what the final rules were, which caused confusion and had a dramatic effect in bringing down Democratic turnout. Similarly, had immigration reform succeeded some years earlier, that would have expanded the Democratic electorate.

But now, Moore says, hopefully, “a great awakening has come. People now see the danger that these paths have brought. And they’re using every tool at their disposal: town hall meetings, social media, organizing, taking steps forward. ... Together we have the strength to fight.”

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