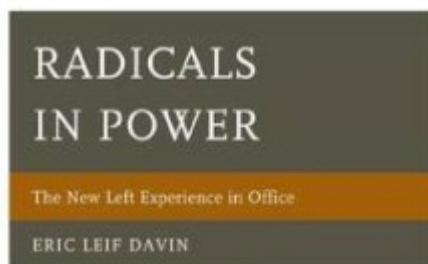


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Radicals in Power: The New Left Experience in Office



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Radicals in Power: The New Left Experience in Office. By Eric Leif Davin (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012). Pp 298. Hardback, \$80.00. ebook,

\$79.99.

Picture the 1960s and a barrage of images comes to mind: demonstrators clashing with police, draft cards burning, students occupying campus buildings. This, Eric Leif Davin argues, is the New Left we think we know: a movement of young radicals who prize confrontation. But in *Radicals in Power* Davin introduces us to New Left activists using electoral politics to create radical change. Davin calls this the Electoral New Left and argues that uncovering its forgotten history rewrites the “standard doom-and-gloom history” of the movement’s demise (xviii). His work is a welcome addition to the argument that the New Left lasted longer and was more diverse than first accounts suggest.

The Electoral New Left took shape at the end of the 1960s as an alternative to sabotage and violent confrontation. Davin adeptly contrasts the Electoral New Left with the Revolutionary New Left to build his argument about diversity of tactics in the movement. For example, he profiles University of Wisconsin students Paul Soglin and Karl Armstrong, both of whom were radicalized through clashes with police at campus anti-war protests. Armstrong turned to fire-bombing campus buildings, eventually killing a graduate student. Soglin, however, directed his frustrations into a successful campaign for a seat on the Madison city council. Each year he was joined by more radicals and eventually became mayor, a position he holds to this day. Once in power Soglin and his allies were able to restructure the police department and pass new funding bills for social programs and public transportation. In time, they transformed the town from a Republican stronghold to a center of leftist influence.

Davin devotes each chapter to one town or organization. He covers well-known centers of New Left activity such as Berkeley, Ann Arbor, and Madison but also includes places like Ypsilanti and rural southeastern Ohio. Combining these local studies Davin is able to identify certain patterns. Activists often began with hopes of using third parties to engage with national politics but, given the inherent limits of a winner-take-all system, they quickly found that local politics offered more traction. Radicals embraced a “local left populism,” (267) emphasizing issues like rent control, conservation of rural farmland, and more transparent city

government. They were vocal about their socialist convictions but able to appeal to residents in spite of ideological differences. Winning seats on city councils and school boards, radicals were often able to slowly shift localities to the left. The major parties inadvertently helped the radicals as well: conservative opponents in both parties often refused to work collaboratively with the radicals and sometimes tried to sabotage them, moves that backfired among a public wary about corruption.

The book's case-study approach works well. In addition to finding broader patterns Davin is able to comment on which activists were most effective and why. Two of the strongest chapters examine the different experiences of the Human Rights Party in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, Michigan. Davin argues that the Ypsilanti activists had an easier journey because many of them committed to settling in the area. Local leftist populism, he argues, depends on developing long-lasting ties with neighbors and effectively mentoring new generations of leaders. This underscores Davin's argument that electoral work took a great deal of time and patience. In several of his case studies the New Left did not obtain real power until the 1980s and progress was not always linear. Indeed, the subtle nature of the Electoral New Left is part of what Davin believes has led historians to overlook its story.

Davin's main sources are interviews he conducted with elected officials and he quotes from these at length throughout the book. The interviews provide in depth examination of some of the difficult questions the Electoral New Left faced. Davin allows activists to speak in their own words about balancing their commitment to political change with work and family life, trying to form meaningful coalitions without risking basic principles, and the limits of working within the system. Most agreed on the need for a combination of electoral work and pressure from outside the system, arguing against an either-or strategy. Davin conducted some of the interviews from which he draws many years in the past. This raises the question of what some of those elected to office would add with the benefit of further hindsight. Updating the interviews could also further interrogate the tension between working within the system or outside of it. While most interviewees agreed on a combination of these two approaches, the question of when to choose one course over another remains less developed. And, while Davin touches on the issue of making compromises, there is room for

additional detail about when and how this happened—and what it means to create a form of radicalism more comfortable with compromise.

The story of the Electoral New Left challenges the argument that the New Left imploded in the early 1970s amid factional discord and fantasies of revolution. Of course, by now arguing against this declension narrative is not new. Recent years have brought a spate of new works all focusing, as Davin does, on local case studies and employing a long sixties approach in revising the story of the New Left. Oddly, Davin does not engage with this recent literature and tends to portray declension as unchallenged.

Still, Davin is the first to provide sustained and comparative analysis of New Left electoral work and, as he argues convincingly, this side of the movement fundamentally changes how we view the movement's legacy. He challenges a view of the 1970s and 1980s as a time of conservative backlash and describes instead a dynamic interplay between the political right and left. Davin's engaging prose makes the book well suited for classroom use and accessible to a wide audience. Political activists will likely find the discussion of strategy useful and scholars looking to expand on the topic will find it a helpful starting point. Several of the chapters are quite short; the shortest is a three page chapter on failed New Left campaigns for Sheriff. These chapters fail to add much to the larger narrative but can perhaps provide inspiration for further research.

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