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THE STRUGGLE FOR OUR CITIES

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Today, more than four years after the LA riots, our urban crisis remains marginal to the political debate in this country. No other major industrial nation has permitted the level of destitution and decay found in America's cities. We see the consequences every day: deadly levels of crime and violence; Third World levels of infant mortality; a growing army of homeless people sleeping on park benches and in vacant buildings.

Persistent poverty, racial segregation, and fiscal crisis are the most fundamental problems facing our cities. A majority of America's 40 million poor people live in our cities, and they are increasingly concentrated in ghettos and barrios. While their poverty stems from both unemployment and low-wage work, their ghettoization results from racial discrimination.

Of course, some cities are worse off than others. The devastation of Youngstown, Detroit, Flint, Newark, Camden, Hartford, Bridgeport, or Gary is perhaps the most visible symbol of the decline of American manufacturing in the economy. But even those cities that have successfully revitalized their downtown economies in recent years--primarily by serving as administrative centers for service industries--have not stemmed the growing tide of poverty only blocks away from the glittering glass and steel of new office towers, convention centers, and sports complexes. "Trickle down" doesn't work at the local or the national level.

The concentration of poor people in our cities, the flight of the middle class to the suburbs, and the exodus of decent jobs in urban areas make it almost impossible for city governments to raise necessary revenues to provide basic services. To avert fiscal collapse, many cities have closed schools, hospitals, health centers, police stations, and fire stations.

In seeking explanations for these symptoms, scholars and activists tend to focus on large-scale economic forces. The globalization of the economy. The deindustrialization of our economy. The widening gap between rich and poor. The persistence of racism, especially among lenders, landlords and realtors.

We also look at the impact of public policy on conditions in our cities. Post-war federal policies pushed people out of cities and pulled them into suburbs with highway-building, government-insured mortgages and tax breaks to whites in suburbia (but not in cities), and bulldozer urban-renewal policies. Since the late 1970s, the federal government has been shredding the social safety net. Most federal programs that serve cities, whether "people" programs or "place" programs, suffered dramatic cuts. First revenue sharing. Then housing subsidies. And now AFDC.

In dealing with urban issues, progressive activists tend to recognize the importance of policy, but we have an ambivalent attitude about politics, particularly electoral politics. If we want to address America's urban crisis, we must be clear-eyed about the basic causes of our cities' plight as well as about the political obstacles and opportunities involved in putting urban America closer to the top of the nation's agenda.

PROGRESSIVE URBAN ACTIVISM

Since the mid-1970s, progressive activists have made significant headway in urban politics. They have generally used three, often overlapping, strategies: community organizing, labor organizing, and electoral politics.

Today there are thousands of community organizations based in urban neighborhood around the country. Most engage in relatively modest efforts--pressuring the police to close down a local crack house or getting city hall to fix potholes. Others, more ambitious, have formed tenant unions, built community development corporations, challenged police abuses, fought against environmental and health problems, mobilized against plant closings and layoffs, worked to reform public education. National networks such as ACORN, the Industrial Areas Foundation, Citizen Action, and others have helped improve the capacity of these local groups to develop leaders, mobilize campaigns, and win local victories.

Urban activists also sank their roots in the labor movement, focusing their organizing efforts among workers in low-wage industries--hospitals, hotels, janitorial services. This work has primarily been among women, immigrants, and people of color. Unions that have made the most headway in recent years have drawn on the tactics and themes of civil rights crusades and grassroots organizing campaigns that emphasize dignity and justice, and that forge alliances with community and church groups. Recently, unions and community groups in several cities have run "living wage" campaigns to require private firms with municipal contracts or subsidies (such as tax breaks) to pay their employees decent wages and benefits.

Finally, a growing number of these community activists have built electoral coalitions--forging ties between community, union, environmental, women's rights, civil rights, and other organizations--to win a stronger voice in local government decision-making.

Indeed, over the past 20 years, progressive grassroots movements have gained a stronger foothold in running local governments than they previously had. In a few cases, progressive coalitions have actually taken power in city hall. Networks of activists also have created lasting networks to support electoral work--such as the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policy, the Planners Network, the New England Citizen Action Resource Center, among many others.

But the lessons of the past two decades of local activism are ambiguous. When progressive community and union activists forge partnerships with progressives in local government, they clearly can make a difference. They have put pressure on banks to stop redlining and have forced landlords to fix up slum buildings and stop rent gouging. They have provided support to union organizing campaigns and restored confidence in government by doing an efficient job of "civic housekeeping"--removing snow and garbage, recycling waste, fixing potholes. They have improved the wages and working conditions of public employees and employees of firms with municipal contracts. They have shifted spending priorities to discourage gentrification and promote rebuilding of poor neighborhoods by community-based groups. They have added more women and minorities in public employment and pushed private employers to do likewise. They have restricted police abuses and even gotten local police departments to work more closely with neighborhood groups.

But, the hard truth is that despite the existence of thousands of grassroots community organizations, despite the many progressive union locals, and despite the hard work of many progressive candidates, the whole of "progressive urban activism" is smaller than the sum of its parts. It hasn't yet "added up" to a progressive national political movement. In large part this is because all these local efforts are fragmented, isolated from each other, unable to build on each other. With some exceptions, local community groups and even national networks that are engaged in essentially the same thing basically ignore each other's work rather than finding ways to combine forces strategically.

INTERTWINED FATES

In developing any urban strategy, we have to face an important reality: America is now a suburban country.

Today, more than three-quarters of all Americans live in metropolitan areas. Two-thirds of them--in other words, about half the nation's population--live in suburbs. In every region of the country, even where city populations are increasing, the fastest-growing parts of the metropolitan areas are the surrounding suburbs. During the 1980s, for example, Los Angeles grew by 17.4 percent, while its suburbs grew by 29.5 percent. Baltimore lost 6.4 percent of its population while its suburbs grew by 16.5 percent.

The 1992 Presidential election campaign was the first in which an absolute majority of voters came from suburbs. Even more important, the number of Congress members who represent cities is declining, while the number who represent suburbs is increasing. After the 1992 redistricting, the House had 98 urban districts, 170 suburban districts, and 88 rural districts. The rest were a mix of urban-suburban or rural-suburban populations.

This poses a number of both political and policy questions. Given these demographic realities, forging a federal urban policy will require appealing to some segment of the suburban electorate and its representatives in Congress. The questions we face are:

Why should suburbanites care about cities? Can we build coalitions between cities and inner-ring suburbs? How can we persuade a suburban Congress person to vote for an urban policy agenda?

Some politicians appeal to compassion--what cynics have called "do gooderism" or charity. Much of the early War on Poverty effort invoked this spirit. But while compassion may yield results during economic good times, it isn't likely to last when a majority of Americans feel economically insecure. Suburbanites might also be lured to support urban policy by the argument that good urban policy is good "riot insurance"--as urban programs were dubbed in the late 1960s. But this approach predisposes people to view cities as dangerous war zones that need to be contained. It leads to harsh and punitive policies.

A more compelling strategy is to show how the fates of cities and their suburbs are inextricably intertwined. A spate of recent studies make the case that urban decay contributes to suburban decline, just as healthy cities and robust suburbs go hand in hand. Federal efforts to revitalize cities need not be premised on helping "them," but rather on helping "us"-based on a recognition that cities and suburbs within the same metropolitan region are in the same boat. If one end springs a leak, pretty soon the whole vessel will go down.

RETHINKING SUBURBIA

To realize this strategy, we need to rethink our old notions of "city" and "suburb." The stereotype of the affluent lily-white bedroom suburb no longer fits, if it ever did. True, in the postwar era, the disparity of median incomes of cities and suburbs has widened. In 1960, the per capita income of cities was five percent greater than their surrounding suburbs; by 1989 it had fallen to 84 percent of suburban income. This, however, masks the significant diversity found within communities that the US Census and the media define as suburbs. A growing number of middle-income Americans find themselves trapped in older inner-ring suburbs that look more and more like troubled cities.

Cities and their inner-ring suburbs have much in common. Many face a number of the same problems: crime and violence, high rates of infant mortality, crumbling infrastructure, inadequate housing, and chronic fiscal crises. In the US, 8.7 percent of the suburban population (compared with 19 percent in the central cities) live below the poverty line. While the majority of poor people live in cities, 30.5 percent of the nation's poor live in suburbs.

Two recent books, David Rusk's *Cities Without Suburbs* and Nell Pearce's *Citistates*, make the case for regional approaches to addressing economic development, environmental, transportation, and other issues. But the recent history of metropolitan-wide solutions is not promising. Affluent suburbanites, as well as working-class suburbanites, generally resist such attempts. They prefer to go it alone than to share decisions making and tax bases with central cities. Also, during the past several decades, as African Americans and Latinos gain power in city halls these groups, too, resist diluting their newly found power with suburbanites.

There are several efforts to build city-sub-urb coalitions at the local level, but they are quite fragile. Some exceptions, however, are worth mentioning. Myron Orfield, for example, a Minnesota state legislator, is making a formidable effort to build a progressive metropolitan coalition. He sponsored legislation to create a tax-base-sharing plan to reduce property tax disparities among municipalities in the region so that inner-ring suburbs and the two major cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) had a stake in regional cooperation plans. His legislation also created an elected metropolitan council with the authority to establish "fair share" housing goals for each municipality.

What's needed is a way to adopt a similar strategy at the national level. Most federal "urban" policies provide little incentive for working-class suburbanites. Federal formulas for "place-oriented" approaches--and even for many "people-oriented" approaches--generally bypass suburbs. The debate between "targeted" and "universal" federal programs is not simply a debate over race, but also about space. To many Americans, community development block grants and public housing are viewed as programs aimed at helping the inner-city poor. In contrast, national health insurance, public works and infrastructure grants, and increasing the minimum wage have a broader appeal--even though they disproportionately help people in cities. Their appeal is due at least in part to the fact that they also help people living in suburbs and rural areas.

DEMYSTIFYING CAPITAL MOBILITY

Businesses can move, but communities don't. Because our cities rely primarily on local revenues, all progressive urban activists face a serious dilemma. If local (or state) public officials move too aggressively to tax or regulate the private sector, businesses can threaten to pull up stakes and take their jobs and tax base with them. They also can mobilize a sustained political assault (often with the aid of the local media) against the incumbent for being inhospitable to business. Few politicians want to be stuck with the reputation that, because they lost the "confidence" of the business community, they drove away jobs and undermined the tax base. As a result, most officials accommodate themselves to business' priorities.

Of course, these are not new questions. At the turn of the century, manufacturers warned that American business would suffer if legislators enacted laws against the exploitation of child labor. In many ways, the history of progressive reform is a constant struggle between reformers seeking government regulations on business and business stating that such regulations will hurt the "business climate" and create unemployment. In an increasingly global economy, however, business is more mobile than ever. As firms become more internationalized, their ability to set the ground rules increases as well.

Because our federal system allows states and localities to set many business conditions, footloose corporations can look for the best "business climate"---low wages, low taxes, lax environmental regulations and a "union free" atmosphere. In this situation, many state and local government officials feel that in order to attract or maintain jobs, they have to participate in "bidding wars." This puts each participant in a weaker bargaining position and undermines the economic and fiscal health of all communities.

To cope with disinvestment and fiscal crises, many city development officials have become "entrepreneurs," competing with other cities for corporate investment. Some cities seek to lure businesses with tax breaks and other subsidies (such as the \$100 million tax abatements granted Trump Tower in New York or Los Angeles' \$75 million tax break for Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks film studio).

This bidding war has gone too far. These incentives and subsidies are unnecessary give-aways. In many, perhaps most, cases, private investment would have taken place anyway. Corporations are often bluffing when they threaten to move or demand tax breaks or regulatory relief, but city officials rarely call their bluffs.

Organizing efforts are always met with the same response. If you raise the economic stakes, businesses will not invest. Campaigns to raise the minimum wage or pass local "living wage" ordinances, to enact local housing "linkage" policies, to increase taxes on business, to strengthen clean air laws, to pass "plant closing" laws, to demand better wages, to enact rent control or to make utility rates more progressive all confront this dilemma.

At the local level, the key question boils down to this: When is business bluffing? Some firms and industries are more mobile than others. Local officials, unions, or community groups cannot always know when the threat of disinvestment is real. This puts them at a disadvantage if they want to "call the bluff" of businesses.

In *City Limits*, political scientist Paul Peterson argues that local governments have little room for maneuvering to adopt progressive policies—including housing strategies—that redistribute wealth, income, and political power. Progressive redistributive policies hurt cities because they entail increased taxes and/or reduced services for those residents and businesses that contribute most to the city's tax base and economic well-being. According to Peterson, only the federal government can promote redistributive social welfare policies.

Even so, a major difference among conservative, liberal and progressive city governments is their willingness to constantly test how far government can go before business acts on its threats to leave, cut back, expand elsewhere, or organize political opposition. If progressive elected officials are to challenge business prerogatives, they need to have a strong political constituency that will support them despite the potential threats of businesses. They also have to know when and how to compromise.

Business warnings are not always empty threats. Tax increases, wage increases, and various government regulations can damage business profits and lead to decisions to down-size, relocate, or close up shop. But the factors that contribute to business strength and weakness are not the same in all places, at all times, or for all industries or firms.

How do we tell when business threats are real and when they are bluffs? Unless we can answer this question, progressives—unions, environmentalists, community activists, elected officials—will be bargaining from a position of weakness. One question to ask is how to recognize firms or industries that are more or less "sticky"—which firms or industries are more tied to specific cities, states, or regions? Is it possible that businesses that have a stronger stake in localities may be our unwitting allies?

At the national level, we can raise the same questions. Federal laws actually promote bidding wars and competition among cities, regions, and states. The Taft-Hartley Act, for example, allows states to enact anti-union "right to work" laws. Our federal system allows cities to establish their own property tax rates and to cut special deals for particular investment projects, exacerbating bidding wars for business.

Should we change some of the ground rules that allow companies unfettered capital mobility? Should our tax laws, environmental laws, labor laws, and other laws be reformed to make it more difficult for companies to whipsaw our cities? (An important discussion of these issues is found in *The Region*, a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, June 1996.)

CONVERTING THE MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

We will never solve our domestic problems, including our urban crisis, as long as we continue to spend such a large part of our federal budget on national defense. Today, several years after the end of the Cold War and all the talk about a "peace dividend," our country has not significantly reduced its reliance on military spending. This has two serious consequences.

First, there isn't enough money in our federal budget for domestic economic and social programs. Second, our private economy is still dominated by military research and production, which means we divert much of our scientific and technical expertise and invest too little in civilian industries.

The Pentagon's priorities helped undermine key industrial sectors and the cities where they were located. Instead of military spending, government support for R & D might have helped to modernize the nation's basic manufacturing industries (e.g., steel and autos) or to develop new civilian industries to make the US more competitive internationally (e.g., high speed rail).

The Pentagon has long "redlined" America's cities. During the Cold War, the Pentagon played a critical role in the flight of business, jobs, and people from cities. As Ann Markusen and her colleagues have shown in *The Rise of the Gunbelt and Dismantling the Cold War Economy*, the Pentagon's decisions to locate military facilities and to grant defense contracts greatly influenced the growth and decline of geographic areas, serving as America's de facto "industrial policy" by shaping the location of businesses and jobs.

In 1990 alone, for example, 18 of the 25 largest cities suffered a total loss of \$24 billion in their balance of payments with the Pentagon. And a new study by two Harvard economists found that most big cities send more to Washington each year in federal taxes than they get back in social programs, defense spending, or public works projects. New York City contributed \$9 billion more to the federal government than it got in return. In those metropolitan areas that have won the Pentagon sweepstakes, the bulk of Pentagon dollars are located in suburbs, not central cities.

But proponents of economic conversion face a cruel dilemma: Even those who favor cutting defense spending do not want cuts that will hurt workers, firms, and communities in their own communities. Many local officials, Chambers of Commerce, and private sector trade unions resist cuts in military bases or military contracts in their areas. Most members of Congress recognize the need to reduce the defense budget, but each one says "not in my backyard."

Many military experts agree that current Pentagon spending levels can be cut by one-third to one-half over the next five years without endangering national security. But to make this politically realistic, we need to link large-scale military budget cuts to large expenditures on a program of conversion. That means retooling plants. It means retraining workers for new jobs and providing them with income assistance during the transition. It means assisting small businesses to help subcontractors and supplier firms. It means shifting research and development priorities to civilian uses. The plan should also help local communities adjust to military base closures and major reductions at defense contracting firms.

CONFRONTING SKEPTICISM

The recent debate over welfare reform, as well as renewed attempts to dismantle the Department of Housing and Urban Development, reflect the conventional wisdom that government efforts to help the poor and solve our urban problems have failed. To most Americans, "big government" is defined as programs and bureaucracies that deal with the poor, cities, and racial discrimination.

Indeed, many Americans believe that even if we had ample money, we would not know what to do with it. They believe that 30 years after the urban riots of the 1960s and the War on Poverty the condition of America's cities is worse than ever. Why waste our tax dollars throwing more money at cities and the poor who live there?

To critics and skeptics, programs such as public housing, Model Cities, Urban Development Action Grants, and welfare represent well-intentioned government gone awry. Giving cities more money means handing tax dollars to politically connected developers, big-city mayors who dole out patronage jobs to loyal constituents or incompetent bureaucrats, poor people who engage in destructive anti-social behavior, or well-meaning do-gooders who run social programs that seem neither to lift the poor out of poverty nor to teach them middle-class values.

Urban scholars, urban activists, and big-city mayors have spent much of the past several decades focusing on the negative pan of the nation's urban reality: "Our cities are burning; help us put out the fire." The news media's unrelentingly negative coverage of city crime, gangs, drug wars, racial conflict, and home-lessness doesn't help. Certainly we should not become Pollyannas and ignore the harsh realities of the urban crisis. But this drumbeat of negativism has its political consequences. Would you invest in a company that's been failing for 30 years?

Progressives have to address Americans' skeptical or hostile views about government and about our capacity to solve urban problems. For the past several decades, corporate America and conservative ideologues have successfully sponsored an assault on government activism. Corporate-sponsored and right-wing think tanks--such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, or the Heritage Foundations--have waged a sophisticated campaign to identify "big government" with waste, inefficiency, and threats to personal freedom and families. In doing so, they have diverted attention away from the waste, inefficiency, and threats to communities and families of big business.

Countering this view calls for a three-pan strategy. First, we must acknowledge that much of what we call "urban policy" has

been misguided. In truth, federal aid to cities--whether to revitalize downtowns, attract private business and jobs to inner cities, stabilize and improve poor and working-class neighborhoods, or provide fiscal assistance to local governments--has served, in effect, to "clean up" the problems created by federally assisted disinvestment. During the past half century, federal subsidies to help America's cities were a drop in the bucket compared to those that promoted suburbanization. It was hardly a fair fight. Federal urban programs were overwhelmed by federal subsidies that undermined the economic, social and political health of the nation's cities. If people are critical of an urban policy that seems doomed to fail, we should acknowledge that they may be right, and explain why that is so in a larger context.

Second, we should focus public attention on the responsibility of big business for urban decay. We need to point out that cities are the location of many of our nation's problems, but they are not the cause of them. Global economic forces, corporate business decisions, and federal government policies have combined to subvert the economic and social health of our cities. For example, the "working poor" is the fastest-growing sector of the nation's poverty population. A recent Census Bureau study found that almost one-fifth of all full-time workers now earn poverty-level wages--an increase from 12.1 percent a decade earlier.

Third, and most important, we must draw attention to the strengths of our cities. "Strengths" don't necessarily mean a city's new sports complex or its new urban festival market--the things that Chambers of Commerce and mayors like to show off. They include the roles of cities in our economic and civic life. They include the important roles cities play as engines of economic innovation and growth, as repositories of culture, and as gateways for immigrants and the poor. And strengths include the many urban success stories that may demonstrate to opinion leaders and the general public that cities can be improved by a combination of progressive policy and civic activism.

Most urban advocates have almost given up on trying to persuade the media, policy makers, or the suburban public that there's more to our cities than crime and hopelessness. The media pay little attention to what works--the growing sector of nonprofit community development corporations that are rebuilding inner city neighborhoods, for example, or the success of community groups in reversing the bank practice known as "redlining" and instead promoting community reinvestment. There is little news coverage of what Robert Putnam calls the "social capital" or what John Kretzmann and John McKnight call the "community assets" of our urban neighborhoods--those community institutions, organizations, and informal networks that help sustain people and improve daily life. We can't settle for this poor coverage. We have to do a better job of promoting what works in urban policy and urban organizing.

PUTTING CITIES ON THE AGENDA

Policy wonks like to debate urban policy prescriptions. Should we focus on macro-programs like public works, universal health insurance, and the minimum wage? Or should we focus on policies specifically targeted to the poor or to cities? Should we try to rebuild the ghettos or help ghetto residents move to the suburbs? Should we tear down high-rise public housing projects and give the poor vouchers? Should we force suburbs to "open up" to the poor by ending snob zoning requirements? Should we decentralize urban schools by giving parents, teachers and principals more authority? Should we give businesses tax breaks to entice them to invest in inner cities, or should we provide the poor with "reverse commuting" transportation to help them get to suburban jobs? Should we change the official definition of poverty to keep pace with inflation, which would increase federal funds to cities? Should federal urban funds go to city governments, community organizations, or poor people?

The truth is, these debates are irrelevant so long as we lack the political will to address the urban crisis. The reason that cities have long been off the policy agenda is not because urban policy experts have lacked good ideas for programs and policies. It is because cities--where most poor, working-class and minority people live--lack political power.

Reforms that would put cities back on the political agenda have little to do with urban policy per se. They are fundamentally political.

Building alliances between cities and inner ring suburbs, demystifying capital mobility, forging a progressive military conversion plan, and developing a media strategy to promote urban success stories will help. The bottom line is that we need to create a Congressional majority to address the problems of cities. We need to increase the political strength of city-dwellers while giving a significant part of the suburban population a stake in solving the problems of cities. We need issues and campaigns that can help unite the diverse progressive activist struggles around the country. I call these "mobilizing reforms"--- changes that will help level the political playing field and help to develop an electoral and governing majority to help America's cities.

One key mobilizing reform involves expanding the urban electorate. Cities generally have much lower voter-participation rates than their suburban counterparts. Urban interest groups were a key force in the successful campaign to pass the federal "motor-voter" law, designed to remove obstacles to voter registration and to expand the electorate. State governments were required to start implementing the law in January 1995, a mandate upheld by the Supreme Court against the resistance of some Republican governors. Since poor and minority citizens have lower levels of voter registration and turnout than other groups, motor voter advocates assumed that increasing registration would expand political participation among these groups--thus helping to tilt the

political balance toward the poor and minorities and, thus, cities.

So far, more than 10 million people have been registered as a result of "motor voter." President Clinton, who helped push the bill through Congress, recognized its potential political benefits. His administration, for example, has encouraged local housing agencies and tenant organizations to register residents of HUD-subsidized housing projects.

But the real test of the motor voter law, especially for urban concerns, is whether these new voters vote--and for whom they vote. That will depend on whether the mayors, community and labor organizations, church groups, and the political parties seek to mobilize the potential urban voters around issues that give them reasons to go to the polls. In the November 1996 elections, unions and some community organizations mobilized members in a few key swing Congressional districts, helping to elect liberal Democrats. Overall, voter turnout was depressingly low, especially among those on the lower rungs of the economic and social ladder.

A second key mobilizing reform involves improving our nation's labor laws. Cities and inner-ring suburbs have increasingly become the location of low-wage service-sector employment, the vast majority of which is not unionized. A central goal of urban policy should be to increase the incomes of the growing sector of the working poor concentrated in central cities and inner suburbs. This requires a stronger labor movement, able to use its political clout to elect candidates favorable to office who will change our national priorities.

Since the Depression, the labor movement has been the backbone of progressive urban policy, including the original public housing program, public works and jobs, public education, and mass transit. But, especially during the last 15 years, working people have been disenfranchised by the federal government's cold war against labor unions, which has weakened the constituency for federal urban policy. The United States has some of the most regressive labor laws among advanced democracies--one pivotal reason that only 11 percent of the private-sector workforce (and 16 percent of all workers) are union members.

John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, has pledged to dramatically expand union organizing. But, as Richard Rothstein recently explained in *American Prospect* (May/June 1996), unions are not likely to win many victories unless the nation's one-sided labor laws are reformed. Labor law reform will help level the playing field between America's working people and businesses, and will help improve the political influence and standard of living of working people.

A third mobilizing reform involves Congressional redistricting. Since the Voting Rights Act in 1965, civil rights groups have understandably adopted a strategy based on Congressional redistricting. The main thrust of these efforts has been to reshape Congressional districts to give African-American (and, more recently, Latino) voters a stronger voice--and increase the odds of electing persons of color to legislative bodies. This typically means that more urban districts will be represented by minorities.

But consider this dilemma: After the 1994 elections, the number of Blacks and Latinos in Congress reached an all-time high, but the new Congress was more hostile than ever to the concerns of African Americans and Latinos. The reason is simple: The Congress had a majority of conservative Republicans, led by Newt Gingrich. Their agenda was diametrically opposed to the progressive agenda of the Black and Hispanic caucuses. In fact, one of Gingrich's first acts as Speaker was to eliminate funds for these causes.

As Princeton analyst Carol Swain has shown, this happened, in part, by concentrating Black and Latino voters in districts where they represent the majority of the population. This meant that the other districts in these states were overwhelmingly white and, in many cases, overwhelmingly affluent. The "majority minority" districts became "safe" for minority candidates, but the trade-off was a larger number of safe seats for conservative white members of Congress.

Recent Supreme Court decisions nullifying "racial redistricting" change the context significantly. But the dilemma will not simply disappear. Progressives need a redistricting strategy that gives poor and minority voters a strong voice without over concentrating them in so few districts that suburban politicians can ignore their concerns with impunity. In fact, one of the most hopeful signs in the recent elections was the victory of several African-American candidates in Southern Congressional districts that, following the Supreme Court rulings, had been redrawn to incorporate a majority of white voters. This suggests not only that many white voters, including suburbanites, will support African-American candidates, but that they will vote for progressives.

A fourth mobilizing reform involves campaign finance reform. Political demographics and Congressional redistricting alone don't explain the reluctance of our national leaders to push an urban agenda. Even those members of Congress who represent cities have weaker ties to organized voters. The skyrocketing cost of campaigns has profoundly shaped the way elected officials behave.

Starting in the 1970s, national corporate campaign contributors, and national political action committees, began to dominate campaign fundraising. Their financial backing increasingly influenced the priorities and votes of our elected officials in Washington. While big business has no single policy agenda, powerful sectors within the business community influence tax, spending, and regulatory policies that undermine healthy cities.

We need to remove the legalized bribery system that currently makes it impossible to deal constructively with urban problems. This involves placing limits on the amounts individuals and organizations can donate to candidates and parties. This will require public financing of campaigns and free access to broadcast media. And we need to appoint members of the Supreme Court who will vote to overturn *Buckley v. Valeo*, a 1976 Supreme Court decision that, by defining money as a form of "free speech," prohibits Congress from limiting the amount of money candidates can spend on their campaigns.

CONCLUSION

If our cities are in worse condition than they were 30 years ago, it's not because government policy has failed, but because it has been half-hearted and diverted by corporate priorities. We may be a suburban nation, but we cannot prosper if our cities are decaying.

Around the world—in South Africa, Germany, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East—walls that have long separated people are coming down. The invisible walls that separate cities and suburbs in the United States also need to come down. Our nation's future depends on how well, and how soon, it tears down these walls and replaces them with bridges of cooperation and solidarity.

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