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Progressives shouldn't party just yet

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TWO DAYS AFTER the election, the New York Times published the news that "Victorious Democrats Vow Cooperative Approach on Taxes and the Economy." Well . . . bollocks.

My friends and family keep asking me if I'm excited, celebrating, partying up a storm. I'm not.

Everyone assumes that inclusionist economic policies stand a chance of implementation in the next Congress. Well, maybe some of those ideas. But is it a new day for equitable economic policy? I think not . . . not just yet.

Of course it's good news that so many of the president's worst ideas are now buried deep and going nowhere. Plans to further reduce taxes on the wealthy (by eliminating the estate tax) and kill the universal retirement system (by privatizing Social Security) are not likely to move in the 110th Congress.

But I know we aren't likely to see true progress on economic fairness and inclusion just because both houses have new leadership.

Why not? It's our own fault.

We progressives haven't given Congress a clear signal for years about what we really want. Instead, the message on economic and social policy from the think-tank and advocacy crowd has been: "Get the best deal you can!" and "Take the crumbs, if that's all you can get from your seat at the table."

Even more important, we in the liberal policy world have in no way prepared the public to demand or support steps to improve our national economy by increasing economic and social mobility. We've barely touched on the need to strengthen the 30 percent of the labor market that is made up of jobs paying less than \$10 an hour. Fact is, we hardly ever focus our advocacy and media work on the damage to our economy stemming from the large and growing percentage of jobs no one could call "decent work."

And until voters demand equitable economic policy, we should not expect members of Congress to take the lead.

We can expect incremental changes, like the very belated minimum-wage hike on the "to-do" list of our Madam Speaker-Elect. But, will Congress take the next logical step adopted by many successful state initiative campaigns: ensuring that wages increase automatically with the cost of living?

Will Congress pursue some of the new ideas developing at the state and local level to strengthen economic mobility by making bad jobs into better jobs? Will we see policy movement toward the delinking of health coverage from employment, like steps taken in a few states and one locality (San Francisco, natch)?

How about ensuring that all employees are offered a limited number of paid sick days as one city (yeah, yeah - San Francisco again) did on Nov. 8?

Will Congress take action to clarify that employees are free to organize and negotiate for better jobs?

And sure, it's not necessarily wrong for incoming leadership to signal a desire to cooperate with the administration and other conservatives. That's all the voters are ready to accept at this point. But it's our job to start demanding better policy in the future.

We've already heard "progressives" advising the new leadership to "resist the impulse to pursue big ambitions." This might be the right political advice for today, but it is also strong evidence that another kind of institution is required - one that has the freedom to focus on long-term goals and a mission specific to policy outcomes, uncolored by campaign goals.

It's no good thinking that we can hold our fire now and turn to the bigger stuff in 2008, when many hope that progressives will still be surfing the wave of voter discontent with conservatives. We have to start sharing our most ambitious goals now, if we want them to be adopted by future candidates, members of Congress and presidential administrations.

The thing about the new Congress is not so much what its members choose to do, as what we share with them about our expectations. If our stated goals are limited, then the outcomes will be small-bore and we shouldn't be disappointed.

It's not about them - it's about what we want. *

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