

By David Moberg

CHICAGO

FED UP WITH BOTH THE DEMOCRATS AND THE Republicans as hopelessly mired in past mistakes, the National Organization for Women (NOW) officially endorsed the formation of a new political party, the 21st Century Party, at its June convention here. Yet at the same gathering, the emotional high point was the appearance by Carol Moseley Braun, the liberal black woman who won an upset victory in the Illinois March Democratic primary for U.S. Senate.

Therein lies an old debate on the American left, resurrected with new vigor in the year

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of Ross Perot and voter disgust: Should the left work to elect progressive Democrats or launch a new party with political principles of its own and accountability to active members?

For many, the answer increasingly appears to be the latter. In addition to the strongly feminist 21st Century Party, which will hold a founding conference in August, the following other new party efforts are bubbling up.

- The New Party wants to be a broad-based social-democratic party that is built by first running candidates in local and state races around the country. Yet it also wants to support strongly liberal Democrats, making cross-endorsements wherever possible (now limited to seven or eight states, although the party is challenging laws that prohibit such "fusion" campaigns). It hopes to field some candidates under its name this year. Practical, oriented toward winning and willing to work with Democrats, the New Party hopes to transcend the old inside outside debate.

- The Green Party, which is permanently on the ballot in five states and claims about 40 small-town elected officials, may run as many as 100 candidates in races this fall. Inspired by European Greens, the party's main appeal is ecology, but it also stresses social justice, non-violence and grass-roots democracy.

- Tony Mazzocchi, a longtime leader in the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, has been promoting Labor Party Advocates. He hopes to recruit more supporters, now numbering "in the thousands," according to one organizer, then have a founding convention within the next two years. Mazzocchi envisions a party that will define political alternatives based on the needs of working people and unions but may not recruit, endorse or run candidates for office, especially early on.

- Veteran African-American organizer Ron Daniels, who formerly directed Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, is running for president under the banner of Campaign for a New Tomorrow. He has called a Progressive People's Convention for August in Ypsilanti, Mich., but so far has made few waves even within his principal black community base.

Organizers of all efforts are talking to each other and cooperating locally, although political and personality tensions are already evident at the top.

The Perot example: Alternative party advocates cite Perot as evidence that the public is ready to abandon the two party system. But most Perot enthusiasts are cheering for a strong leader they think can make things right and booing a corrupt, ineffective sys-

2 parties or not 2 parties? That is the question

tem. There is even a tension between the organizational and ideological impulse behind the new parties and politics derived from strong leaders. But without such strong personalities—Jesse Jackson, Ralph Nader, Bernie Sanders or others—the new parties have no chance.

Public opinion polls, however, do show a massive potential interest in a new party. Pollster Gordon S. Black recently released a study that asked a large sample of likely voters in four different ways whether they wanted a new national political party. From 47 to 65 percent of those polled answered affirmatively to at least one of the questions; 30 percent answered yes to all four, making support for a new party higher than that for either the Democrats or the Republicans.

Yet 51 percent of those new party supporters in Black's survey saw themselves as middle of the road, 28 percent as conservative and only 19 percent as liberal. Black's polling showed a strong distrust of politicians of all types and a desire for both direct democracy (national referendum on tax increases, federal ballot initiatives) and restraints on politicians (term limits, balanced budget amendment, right to recall). These results point to a U.S. electorate that looks more and more like California writ large.

So despite the measurable discontent, there is no majority electorate for a feminist, labor, social-democratic, environmental or minority-oriented party modeled on European political parties. At the same time, opinion polls suggest a substantial majority has much more liberal opinions on many domestic economic and social issues than many elected Democrats. This suggests there is an opening—a very wide one.

Advocates of alternative parties argue that the Democrats are brain-dead, corrupt and totally lacking in principle—so do many Democrats. Both sides argue that the party

is just a hollow shell. But they reach contradictory conclusions. One side says it's easy for anyone to take advantage of the residual party loyalty. The other argues that running as a Democrat means little anymore, so why not use a new label that can come to mean something? Alternative party advocates, however, are more likely to argue that the Democrats are dominated by an elite that will inevitably stifle change. Progressive Democrats argue that the party elite is largely irrelevant.

There is truth to both sides. Third party efforts (there have been more than 1,000 over the past two centuries) have been overwhelming failures, especially in recent decades. Yet Democratic "reform" efforts have made little progress. With some justification, both sides in the debate can maintain that their approach—working inside or going outside—hasn't really been tried.

Recent public opinion polls show massive potential interest in a new party.

What NOW? Even new party advocates like NOW President Patricia Ireland exhibit a profound ambivalence, if not confusion, about what to do. NOW's political action committee won't endorse Bill Clinton for president, but Ireland said "Clinton in the White House would be far superior to Bush." She argued that the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings showed that women couldn't rely on the major parties but also that Braun's victory "symbolized very clearly that when we fight back we can win."

NOW delegates—reflecting sentiments of

the organization's leaders as much as the rank and file—strongly endorsed the 21st Century Party. But the Chicago chapter, with one of the best, if not an impeccable, track record in electoral politics, opposed the new party. In the end, however, the convention affirmed its intentions to work for good candidates in all parties.

Ultimately some alternative party advocates may see their vehicles as mainly a stick with which to beat the Democrats (giving disgruntled liberals a more visible exit than simply dropping out) or as another way to raise issues or money, as some NOW organizers suggested for their party. One NOW leader said she would be happy if the 21st Century Party shifted the terms of debate, much as George Wallace's American Independent Party did on the right, even if it elected no candidates.

None of these new parties has a popular base or a history of mass organizing. NOW, with 280,000 members and success in organizing large rallies like the March pro-choice demonstration, has the biggest constituency. The New Party is starting with the most inclusive conception, rather than departing from one issue or interest group and hoping to tack on others. But it also has the most diffuse image and the limitation, in the American political context, of being primarily an ideological party, albeit a very general, non-threatening one.

A matter of principle: While Americans seem to be drifting away from direct—or even indirect—involvement in politics, the new parties want active members who will hold elected officials accountable, stick to principles and fight for their ideas between elections. They believe that even if good Democrats could be elected, the Democratic Party could never be transformed. Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN), however, is trying to organize the Minnesota Alliance as a caucus within the state Democratic Party that will educate citizens about issues and pressure elected officials between elections—all with the hope of gaining control of the state party.

Across the country Citizen Action affiliates have run and won offices as Democrats with candidates from their own ranks of staff or members in as many as 100 elections. They've largely concluded that running as a Democrat is a help, not a hindrance. In a few states, such as Illinois, they've tried to influence the party apparatus, but mainly they simply run their own candidates or endorse progressive Democrats while ignoring party officialdom. Yet even with their large base—about 3 million nominal supporters and \$40 million in total budgets—they've had a small impact. How do the much tinier, poorer new parties hope to succeed against greater odds?

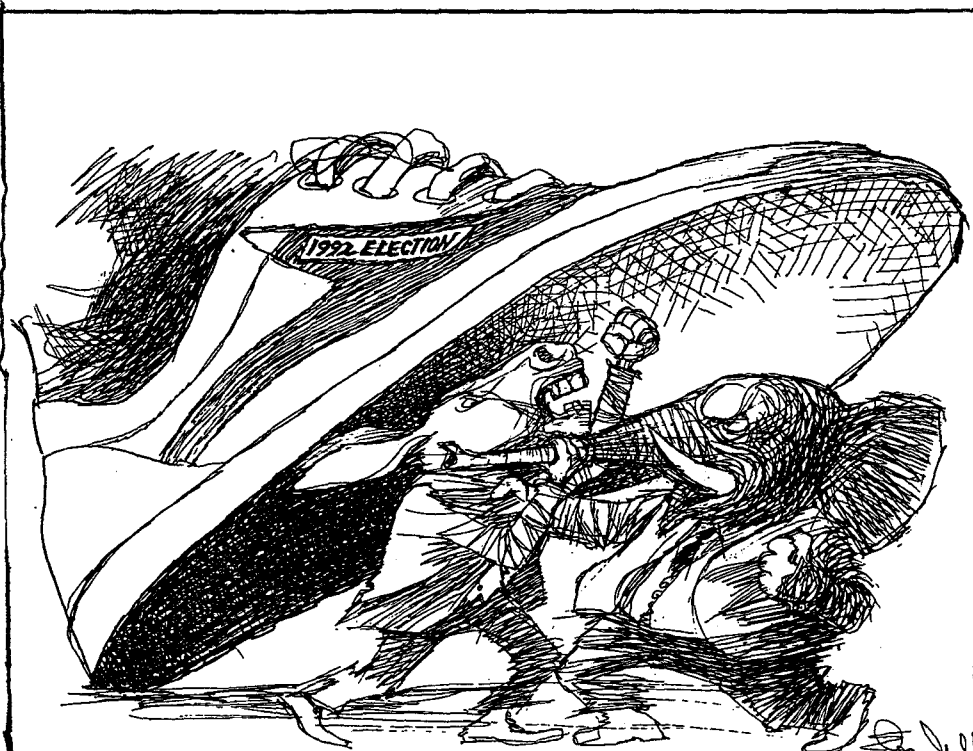
"I hope they're right and I'm wrong," one progressive still working within the Democratic Party says.

"If this moves people, it's better than having them sitting around despairing," another comments, "but it's completely unrealistic."

Assuming a continuation of politics as it has been in recent years, the new party proposals are probably unrealistic, even though some—like the New Party—demonstrate a degree of political sophistication.

Yet New Party co-founder Joel Rogers, who teaches politics at the University of Wisconsin, argues that the country is undergoing a wrenching transformation—such as

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The distinction boggles everyone. For example, I am the co-editor of a forthcoming anthology of memoirs and stories. Its original title was *Growing Up Hispanic*, but some of the writers refused to participate unless the title was changed to *Growing up Latino*. Others, however, objected to the use of the masculine adjective “Latino” to refer to both men and women, as it commonly does in Spanish. They wanted *Growing up Latina and Latino*. Still another group hoped to drop both “Hispanic” and “Latino” from the title and call the book *Growing Up Mestizo*—a term used to describe the ethnic mix of Spaniards and aborigines in the Americas. Of course, we editors wondered whether someone would soon insist that the book be called *Growing up Mestiza and Mestizo*.

Conservatives vs. liberals: Often preferred by conservatives, "Hispanic" is usually used when the subject is demographics, education, urban development, drugs or health. "Latino," on the other hand, is a choice of liberals, frequently used to refer to artists, musicians and Hollywood stars. Thus, Sandra Cisneros, the Chicana author of *Woman Hollering Creek*, is Latina, as is the Cuban-born singer Gloria Estefan. New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez, however, is usually called Hispanic, just like Rep. José Serrano (D-NY) and Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer. The distinction, of course, is superficial and recalls the fashion in which both "black" and "Negro" were terms used in the late '60s, until the latter largely vanished from common parlance. (See accompanying story.)

A sharper difference is that "Hispanic" is generally accepted as a term used by the federal government to describe the heterogeneous ethnic minority with ancestors across the Rio Grande and in the Caribbean archipelago. But the citizens of that

region, the Latin Americans, often prefer the term "Latino."

"Spanish" banished: Before either one of these terms was in vogue, "Spanish" was a favorite among English-speakers to describe those from across the border. Ricardo Montalban, Dezi Arnaz and Celia Cruz were all "Spanish," even if one was Mexican and the others Cuban. In Anglo eyes, they were Latin lovers, mambo kings and spitfires, homogenized by their mother tongue. The use of "Spanish" to describe people who inhabit lands thousands of miles from Spain, of course, proves again that history is written by the conquerors. One must remember that for centuries the part of the "New World" known today as "Latin America" was called "Spanish America."

But in the '60s, with waves of legal and undocumented immigrants pouring in from Mexico, Cuba and other developing countries of the hemisphere, the term "Hispanic" captured the spotlight. "Spanish" lost value in good part because of its inescapable reference to Spain, the long-hated foreign invader. "Hispanic," one should nevertheless note, means citizen of Hispania, the name the Romans gave to Spain.

Then, as Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Chicanos became an important political force in the U.S. and were beginning to be noticed by Congress and the White House, the term "Hispanic" was appropriated by the government in documents and statistics. The media also adopted the term.

But the word's ambiguity was immediately noticed: Placed alongside other ethnic categories, such as Caucasian, Asian and black, "Hispanic" is inaccurate simply because one can be Hispanic and Caucasian, Hispanic and black and so on. In other words, its reference is to language, not to race. Nonetheless, many Anglos have used the term as a weapon, a stereotype. As with

And indeed, many Latin Americans now regard "Hispanic" as nothing but a category that comes from those beyond the community, a term coined by others. (Interestingly, while technically an adjective, people use it as a noun: We don't say "Hispanico," like "Latino," but "Hispanic.") The truth is, the many Americas have a link to Portugal, Spain and France, but also to Africa, the Arab and

Jewish worlds and the Mediterranean. Consequently, Brazil is not a Hispanic country, and neither is French Guiana, Suriname and a large segment of the population in the River Plate.

With "Hispanic" out of favor, Spanish speakers in the U.S. have adopted "Latino." Among intellectuals and artists, this word is quickly becoming the norm largely because it emerges from within its ethnic group, not from the outside world.

"Latino" also has the advantage of being explicitly associated with a denunciation of

the Anglo and Iberian oppression. The terms roots go back to the mid-19th century, when a group of educated Chileans in Paris suggested the name *l’Amérique latine*, instead of “Spanish America.” The sense of homogeneity that came from a global embrace of Roman constitutional law, and the identity shared through the Romance languages (mainly Spanish but also Portuguese

But historians such as the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña have long protested the use of "Latin America." What is Latin in the region? Nothing. If anything, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and other nations in the Americas are closer to peninsular and even Anglo-Saxon cultures than to Latin. So the debate rages on.

Read all about it: How does the Spanish-speaking media in this country address its constituency? In mammoth urban centers like Los Angeles, Miami and New York, newspapers and television channels hardly use the word *latino*; instead, *hispano* is preferred. (The deformation of the adjective *hispano*, is used, and not *hispánico*, which is the correct Spanish word but one silently dismissed as too pedantic, too academic, too Iberian.) When referring to salsa, merengue and other authentic music rhythms, *latino* is called upon. Yet the distinction, artificial and difficult to sustain, is not always clear. The New York City daily *El Diario*, for instance, calls itself the champion of Hispanics, while *Impacto*, a national publication proud of its sensationalism, has as its subtitle "The Latin News." In Spanish and among ourselves, we either are *hispanos* or *latinos*, but we definitely like the Anglos to use the second term to refer to us.

Will "Latino" prevail in English and "Hispanic" vanish? Perhaps. Language tends to reject the needs of the government and respond to those of the people. Meanwhile, I can't help but hear a twist of that famous song in my mind: You say "Hispanic" and I say "Latino." I say "Latanic" and you say "Hispanic." "Hispanic." "Latino." "Latanic." "Hispanic"...

Ilan Stavans, a Mexican novelist and critic, is finishing *The Stranger Within*, a volume of reflections on Hispanic culture in the U.S. Author of *Imagining Columbus: The Literary Voyage* (Twayne) and co-editor, along with Harold Augenbraum, of the forthcoming anthology *Growing Up Latino* (Houghton Mifflin), he lives in Manhattan.

LAST SPRING, WHILE TEACHING A COLLEGE class, I found myself mediating an argument between a white and black student provoked by the word "nigger." The white student, an avid fan of rap music, referred to one of his black friends as "my nigga"—an increasingly popular term of endearment in rap. The black student strenuously objected to his classmate's use of the controversial word and a heated argument ensued.

The white student, it turned out, was being deliberately provocative, but his mock defense—"That's what a lot of black youth call themselves"—could not be denied. The rap (or hip-hop) culture seemingly has become enamored with the word "nigger." Rap performers spanning the genre's stylistic spectrum—from the "gangsta" rap of groups like Niggers With Attitude (NWA) and the party-time "goof" rap of new artists like Das Efx to the black nationalist-influenced material of groups like X-Clan—are peppering their lyrics with nigger references.

The hip-hop connection: And since hip-

hop has become such an influential feature of African-American youth culture—as recent events demonstrate—what rap artists say and do tends to trickle down to the boys in the 'hood and eventually out into the mainstream. The prospect that the word nigger, or “nigga” in its hip-hop incarnation, will become popular unsettles many African-Americans for whom the word is an indelible symbol of degradation and racism.

"I don't use the term [nigga] personally, but it is becoming very prevalent in the world of rap music," said Kierna Mayo, associate editor of *The Source*, a magazine devoted to hip-hop culture. "I think the growing use of the word is a dangerous trend, in terms of our own problems with self-hatred."

"But despite that, I'd have to say that I'm a bit ambivalent about the use of the word. There really hasn't been much dialogue

going on about the subject," Mayo added. "Many rappers probably never give a thought about the implication of using the word, and those conscious rappers who really care about the condition of the African-American

community are probably too busy dealing with issues they think are more important." One exception is the group Public Enemy, who have included a cut on their recent album, *Apocalypse 91: The Enemy Strikes Black*, called "I Don't Wanna Be Called Yo Niga."

But for many African-Americans, not much else is more important than liberation from the historical pain provoked by that one two-syllable word. "Being called a nigger reaches the baser level of my nature. It causes an

internal loathing that is difficult to cleanse," wrote Larry Meeks in a recent op-ed piece in the *Chicago Tribune*, headlined, "I am not a nigger."

Denuding nigga's impact: Meeks told a tale about his feelings when his 4-year-old daughter was called a nigger by a white man. "What does one do when he or she is called that name? In the case of my daughter, it was a good opportunity to explain very tenderly about good names and bad names and how words can cut deeper than a knife."

While most rappers who use the term have no extra-commercial agenda, some are trying to make a larger point. Through frequent use they are attempting to denude the word of its symbolic wallop and subvert European culture's seemingly omnipotent power of definition. "If we can redefine the word nigger and transform it into something positive, we would take away white folks' most powerful verbal weapon," said Robert Vaughters, owner of Freedom Found bookstore in Chicago's Hyde Park. Vaughters, whose store specializes in Afrocentric works, remains a bit wary of the effort to reclaim the dreaded epithet, but he said he's willing to give the