

The American Prospect

Looking Over the Horizon

A series about ideas that can sprout into progress in the coming decades

BY DAVID DAYEN JULY 25, 2022

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It's fair to say that those who lean left politically in America are experiencing a summer of despair. A hopeful legislative path at the start of Joe Biden's term has narrowed down to a slightly larger infrastructure bill, a micro-sized gun safety measure, and other bits and pieces that fall well short of the early ambitions. High inflation in food and fuel has spawned an angry populace at home, when it's not triggering mass starvation and social unrest abroad. Contractionary fiscal and monetary policy are combining to make a recession nearly unavoidable. The hot war still raging in Europe threatens democracy worldwide. The Supreme Court has abrogated the constitutional right for women to dictate their own medical care, the most consequential in a flood of right-

wing Court rulings that don't have a foreseeable end. The president is deeply unpopular and Democrats are about to lose at least one chamber of Congress. Looming is a 2024 election that could easily trigger a constitutional crisis, if it doesn't just hand over power to a Republican Party that would be far more unrestrained and Trumpified than it was after 2016. Practically everyone in America who isn't rich or white, preferably both, would be at risk.

Oh, and there's still a pandemic, lingering and mutating. And the world is burning up.

Historian Adam Tooze has called all this the "polycrisis," with the calamities mutually reinforcing one another and pulling the world into disorder and risk. The despondency is self-generating, a by-product of the mountains that have sprung up in the way of progress.

That makes it a perfect time to think forward, to stretch beyond the current moment and imagine the society we want a decade, two decades, five decades from now. Not just because it's comforting to escape the dread of the moment, but because it's the only way to, eventually, defeat it.

Back in April 2018, I wrote a piece for *The New Republic* titled "Ban Targeted Advertising." I had a problem with monopolized digital platforms making a fortune off tracking people across the internet and bombarding them with messages. It violated user privacy, and furthered

financial scams, discrimination, and the disinformation and hate speech that have polarized our politics. It also made it nearly impossible for most news organizations to survive, damaging our democracy in yet another way. Just as we regulate cigarette ads and marketing to children, we can prevent personalized data from dictating what messages confront you online.

At the time, I was a coalition of one. There was no movement to ban targeted ads, no buy-in from progressive organizations or political leaders. The adtech industry was formidable and ready to squash any attempt at weakening their power. But I thought it was a good idea that could be built upon, as a way to think about transforming our economy by altering the business model of the most harm-inducing sectors. It was a vision of what one small aspect of society could look like in the future

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Fast-forward to today. The growing movement to rein in the power of Big Tech has increasingly identified business-model solutions to solve the problem. There's a Ban Surveillance Advertising coalition of over 50 organizations. A poll from last year found that 81 percent of the public supported keeping their personal data out of the hands of advertisers. And House and Senate

Democrats have introduced the Banning Surveillance Advertising Act.

This movement is poised to grow. One of the first fears articulated in the post-Roe era is the role of surveillance, through period apps or tracking search data, as a means to criminalize pregnancy loss. That terrifying prospect reified the importance of this reform: It wasn't just about getting rid of annoying sneaker ads on my feeds, it was about bodily autonomy and personal freedom and a hundred other things.

The road to change starts out with a plan, maybe even just an idea. The idea may take years to gestate, to find support, to move the landscape from the point where it's impossible to the point where it's urgent. A left politics needs ideas, a signal on the horizon, a goal to work toward. It needs to be able to fight the immediate spasms of crisis and attack while keeping an eye toward concrete accomplishments. And it needs to climb the obstacles in the path of that accomplishment deliberately, finding each toehold until it settles at the top.

We have a signature example of this on the political right, distasteful but useful all the same. The modern movement to end abortions in America began before *Roe v. Wade* was even decided in 1973. Its adherents went forward with their idea to engage new audiences in politics, particularly evangelicals. They built numerous groups with varying levels of radicalism to write policy,

persuade legislators, and intimidate patients. They took aim at federal funding of abortions and state access regulations, while agitating for legal victories.

The imbalance of our political system allowed the anti-abortion movement to win its big triumph without ever forging a popular majority. But it suffered decades of losses before reaching that stage, and kept right on organizing, with increasing incremental success: The right to choose was already functionally eliminated in most of the states where it will now be literally so.

Conservatives do not have a monopoly on playing the long game. From the gay rights to the civil rights movements, progressives have labored long to make ideas reality. Even today we see those gears turn: After decades of frustration, anti-monopolists went from the fringes of academia to the heart of the key federal agencies policing mergers.

For progressives, the hurdles are often higher, including from a Democratic Party that, once the '60s were over, has shown discomfort with transformational change. But we have no alternative to keep pressing for a more equal, more just, more prosperous nation. And before reaching a goal, we have to set a course to it.

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emerging, rounding into shape, with coalitions being born and organizing being initiated. They are the ideas we think everyone will be talking about in 2032 rather than 2022.

There are already robust movements for Black Lives, for Medicare for All, and for a Green New Deal. We wanted to go out a little further on the ledge, finding new concepts to rally around. These ideas aren't a part of any candidate litmus test, at least not yet. Some of them have already sprouted in other countries; some even have gained some purchase here. We can say one thing about all of them: Mass adoption will be incredibly difficult. But that's no reason not to try. In fact, it's the main reason to start now.

The last thing many of us might want to do in this dark moment is to think about how the country can be better many years from now, through tireless effort. But that's the kind of commitment it actually takes to move our stubborn ship of state. And sometimes it just takes a voice to give expression to an idea to start the perilous journey to bring it to life.

A political movement needs big ideas, needs North Stars, needs a sense of what it is actually working to achieve. We don't know whether this series will spur that necessary work to its beginning. Come back in ten years and find out.

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