

FEATURED: LOCAL HISTORY

The New Wave Party

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In 2008, Barack Obama won in a landslide election riding on a wave of fiery public support ending eight years of a Republican-held presidency. Two years later, the mid-term elections of 2010 presented a vastly different picture. The Republican Party was reborn and they rode a wave of strong public support back into power in the United States House of Representatives along with a number of wins in the Senate and other state races. Many political scientists have credited this resurgence to a large conservative movement called the Tea Party.¹ How did this movement evolve, and why did it have such a large effect? Equally thought provoking is the question: what happened to the movement that catapulted Barack Obama and many other Democrats into power?

This situation has happened more than once in the history of American politics. During the election of 1980, Ronald Reagan won the election in an eerily similar way to Obama's 2008 win. Just like the Tea Party, many liberal groups arose to fight against this new Republican leadership. One of these groups was the New Wave Party, a student group that formed on the University of Iowa campus in the spring of 1979. The group advocated for a number of social, economic, and political issues both on a university-wide and national scale until 1992 when they dissolved. They were also part of a larger national movement of progressive students called the Progressive Student Network. The New Wave Party and the Progressive Student Network show that in politics, anger and dissatisfaction create a perfect climate for action, whereas success breeds complacency.

America's political climate of the 1970s was as tumultuous as its economic conditions. America was torn between multiple issues: Vietnam, nuclear warfare, Watergate, an economic

¹ Alexander Burns, "GOP Seizes Control of House; Dems Retain Senate," *Politico* (November 2, 2010) <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1110/44561.html#ixzz17HOOEVUa> (accessed November 2, 2010).

recession, Iran, the Soviet Union and the draft all had Americans, especially young people, on edge². It was under these conditions that the New Wave Party was founded.

As extremely liberal and progressive young people, the founding members of the New Wave Party were fed up with the leadership both nationally and at the University of Iowa. On a national level, the founders were alienated by their own party, the Democrats, because they were not fond of President Jimmy Carter. They were also the ideological opposites of the Republican Party, whom they would fight against throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. The progressive students who founded the New Wave Party were dissatisfied on a local level as well. The students were unhappy with the University of Iowa and its involvement with a number of issues they found objectionable. One of these was the universities' involvement in weapons research for President Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" defense program. Other areas of disagreement with the university included educational rights in regards to tuition hikes and raising academic standards. The students also took issue with what they thought of as a serious lack of funding for affirmative action, minority student recruitment and retention, and African American Studies programs as well as the Student Senate, who used funds for purposes the founders thought had little merit.³

The party formed in spring of 1979. The group established a constitution which outlined its structure and mission. The mission was, "(The) New Wave is a multi-issue progressive student group working for peace and justice. We seek to educate students on social issues which are pertinent."⁴ The leader of the group was the Meeting Facilitator who acted as the president. It was this person's job to draw up the agenda for meeting, reserve the room, and publicize the

² Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 27.

³ Records of the New Wave Party. University of Iowa Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 1.

⁴ Records of the New Wave Party. Constitution. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 1.

meeting. Meetings were typically held on Wednesday night in the Iowa Memorial Union and were announced through *The Daily Iowan*. The group had no faculty advisor or staff member that would offer advice or help guide the group. This makes sense because the group intended to work against a variety of university-sponsored programs, so it would not seem likely that the members of the group would want a representative from the university to help advise them.

The New Wave Party stressed a very open and nonrestrictive membership. The original thought of the party was to connect all of the other progressive student organizations together under one banner. The party also worked with different minority groups including the black student union, women's rights groups, and lesbian/gay/bisexual groups, among others. The reasoning behind this was if all of these groups joined together, they had a better chance of reaching their intended goals. Also the groups were all fighting against a common enemy, the new right-wing. One flyer printed by the New Wave Party states, "Blacks, women, gays, Chicanos, children, Jews, Asians, poor, unemployed, Native Americans, elderly, handicapped: All of these people have suffered because of the right wing. You are Next!"⁵ This flyer did more than just voice the political leanings of the New Wave Party. It showed how they were a complex group of people from many different backgrounds.

The first act of the New Wave Party was to run for office in the Student Senate at the University of Iowa. The group was upset that the \$120,000 allocated to the Student Senate was used for what party members thought were frivolous ventures by representatives who were labeled as "socially unconscious politicians."⁶ In its first contest, the party led a successful campaign and captured five seats and a large influence in the University's Senate.

⁵ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 1.

⁶ Records of the New Wave Party. The Green Papers. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 1.

In its second year of existence in 1980, the New Wave Party changed its focus from the Student Senate elections to more wide-reaching community activism. The main means of community activism the group participated in were protests of various issues.

Protesting was a large part of the New Wave Party's activism because it was the best way to reach the public. The party created a manual they used in order to hold a good protest. The group sought endorsements for a protest from outside groups. They felt that this made their cause more legitimate. Endorsements often times provided the foundation for newspaper stories which created more attention for the group, and more importantly their issue of concern.

Protests were advertised in a variety of fashions. The most common form was handing out flyers. Many flyers were hand-drawn and contained eye catching designs or pictures. A flyer for a counter protest of a right to life rally showed a picture of a female gender sign with a crossed out coat hanger in the middle. The message read, "Keep abortion safe and legal! Rally on the pentacrest!"⁷ The pictures on the flyers, along with the protests themselves, were meant to convey strong messages. The New Wave Party staged sit-ins at university offices, candle light vigils at a rally for then Vice-President George H.W. Bush, and boycotts of the business college. The group also held less traditional functions such as the "Night against the right," a dance party, fundraiser, and protest against the right-wing, which was billed as a "Wild party, super music, Beer!"⁸

The New Wave Party was ready to spring into action at any moment. An emergency response plan was put in place in case of the outbreak of war. The plan was to gather at the

⁷ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 10.

⁸ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 10.

federal building one hour after the war broke out. The mission of these premeditated protests was simple: “Bring the war home.”⁹

Protests led by the New Wave Party did not always end peacefully. Many protests resulted in conflicts with the police and led to the protestors being charged with a variety of crimes. Like the manual for how to successfully stage a protest, the group also had a manual for what would likely happen in the case of a protestor being arrested. The manual documented the various charges a protestor could be charged with and a detailed description of court room and trial procedures. The New Wave Party protestors took proactive measures to reduce the risk of being arrested, such as only bringing necessary items like leaflets, flyers, and identification and not unnecessary or illegal items like alcohol, drugs, or anything resembling a weapon. The group specifically singled out the Cedar Rapids Police Department as being specifically unwelcoming to their protests. In the manual that listed charges and trial procedure there was a page with helpful tips for dealing with the Cedar Rapid Police like “Be cautious, they can be rough,” “Watch for having your head banged into the squad car door,” and “Do not talk back to the police or insult them unless you are prepared to be hurt.”¹⁰ What New Wave Party protests show, is that they were a well organized force to be reckoned with.

The origins of the New Wave Party coincided with a very important time in American political history. 1980 was important because it was a presidential election year, and pitted the incumbent, Democrat Jimmy Carter, against his challenger, Republican Ronald Reagan, and Independent, John Anderson. Even though President Carter was a Democrat, liberal progressives, like the members of the New Wave Party, were not very fond of Carter and his policies. One flyer handed out by the New Wave Party during the 1980 election campaign categorized the

⁹ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 10.

¹⁰ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 10

choice between the three candidates, Carter, Anderson, and Reagan, as “the difference between a slip, a slide, and a jump down a hill.”¹¹ The reason for this was that Carter simply was not liberal and progressive enough. Carter himself was elected because of a backlash towards the Republican Party after Watergate and the subsequent pardoning of the indicted former President Nixon by then President Gerald Ford. What really seemed to alienate Carter from the far left was his suggestion to reinstate the draft which consistently created a large base of opposition, especially in the younger demographic.

Although the liberal progressives did not like President Carter, they feared the possibility of a conservative Republican president like Ronald Reagan. The view of the progressives is well summarized in *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution* by Steven Hayward. Hayward says that to liberal progressives, Ronald Reagan was the equivalent of Hitler.¹² Many newspapers held the view that his election was similar to the reaction of Germany when they elected the Nazi party into power amid their own economic turmoil in the early 1930s. In his book, Hayward sums up the left’s position on Reagan by saying, “to the far left, Reagan’s election meant only one thing: the dark night of American fascism was about to descend.”¹³

Ronald Reagan won in a landslide election capturing 489 Electoral College votes.¹⁴ According to Hayward, the election of 1980 was different from the past because the Republicans not only captured the presidency but also the United States Senate which had previously been controlled by the Democrats for a number of years.¹⁵ Hayward also points out that just because Reagan won in a landslide in the Electoral College, it did not mean that he had the overwhelming approval of the nation. Hayward writes “Many Democrats and political analysts said that

¹¹ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 1.

¹² Hayward, 23.

¹³ Hayward, 23.

¹⁴ Hayward, 33.

¹⁵ Hayward, 33.

Reagan's massive win reflected less support for his ideas than a rejection of Jimmy Carter."¹⁶
Historically Reagan had the lowest approval rating of any incoming president at 51 percent.

What really scared progressive Americans was the ideology of the "New Right." Reagan and the rest of the Republican Party stood against, and could act against, many things the New Wave Party advocated for. For example, the president has the power to nominate justices to the Supreme Court. In 1973, the Supreme Court decided on *Roe v. Wade* which allowed women the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy. A women's right to choose is an issue of great importance to the New Wave Party. Because of the presidential power to nominate future justices, it created the possibility that *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned if enough pro-life justices were nominated. This possibility was a scary thought for progressives. Out of the three justices appointed by Reagan, two, Justice Antonin Scalia and Justice Anthony Kennedy, were pro-life and the third, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, was in favor of more restrictions on a women's right to choose.

This enormous power wielded by the President is just one of many ways liberal progressives felt threatened by a powerful new-right. The threat to progressives' key issues made groups like the New Wave Party form reactionary stances towards conservatives and the new-right. This is because Reagan and other conservatives created an immediate threat rather than a possible conflict.

Reactionary is a strong adjective when describing a political group. Because the New Wave Party focused on protests, this characteristic fits quite well. Each protest came from a common source: anger, whether it be because of an action or the lack of an action. The group often led counter-protests like the "die-in" at a right to life rally. During this, groups of two would go out into the audience and perform mock "coat-hanger" abortions where the girl

¹⁶ Hayward, 33.

receiving the abortion would die. This theatric highlighted the group's belief that safe and legal abortions were needed, but more importantly created an instant response to the protest of the opposite group.¹⁷

The New Wave Party's reactionary stance also helped it become a strong group. This evolution is similar to what happened to the Tea Party when it was first started in late 2008, early 2009. In 2008, the Republican Party had just come off a thumping in two consecutive national elections, and many far-right conservatives were appalled by the massive debt the Bush and Obama administrations were piling up. In 2010, this led them to successfully challenge many of the incumbent, established Republican candidates. There is no evidence to suggest the New Wave Party had this large of a say in determining the candidates for a national election, but the idea of organizing together to form a new group out of dissent is the same. What the Tea Party can tell about the New Wave Party is that the dissenting attitude that the members of the party held made them especially prone to creating a strong, effective group.

The New Wave Party operated in Iowa City until 1992 when it dissolved. The reason the party ended was ironically because of the success of the group. There is little evidence specific to the New Wave Party that supports this claim, but the actions of the national organization, The Progressive Student Network, the party belonged to holds the answer.

The New Wave Party was not the only progressive student movement during the 1980s. They were part of a larger movement called the Progressive Student Network which linked together multiple progressive student organizations at different colleges. It acted almost like a larger version of what the New Wave Party was trying to accomplish at the University of Iowa when they connected all the liberal student groups under their banner.

¹⁷ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 10.

The Progressive Student Network was started in 1980 and consisted of four regional networks of student groups with the mission to better coordinate their progressive efforts. The core area of support for the group was found in the Northeast and Midwest, but the South and West were also represented by a few groups. The network united a variety of liberal groups including women's, anti-war, anti-draft, minority, and other progressive groups together. What this network seemed to create was a national party system for these independent student groups. Each student organization would send one representative to vote at regional meetings that were held at least once a semester. In addition to the regional meetings, an annual national meeting was also required. The first national meeting took place at Kent State University and coincided with the ten year anniversary of the Kent State Massacre, when National Guard troops fired upon a group of protestors wounding and killing some students. The meetings were held at different college campuses including the University of Iowa in 1986.¹⁸

The Progressive Student Network stressed communication and required the circulation of a newsletter. The newsletter was titled *The Progressive Student News* and published a variety of different articles, many of which were submitted by different organizations that belonged to the Progressive Student Network. The newsletter was the voice by which the network communicated with each other as well as the way they expressed many of their views.

After the first conference in 1980, the newsletter talked about the progress made at the event and the goals that the network should have for the future. It first started off by addressing some technical issues with the conference and the network itself. The letter then went on to state the theme of the next conference which would be anti-right wing. The group also stressed the urgency of what was happening. The members of the progressive group were very concerned

¹⁸ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 18.

with the direction the new right wing and the Reagan administration was turning the country toward. Finally the newsletter stressed the need for a unified front against the conservative movement. Through the newsletters, the parallels between the New Wave Party and the Progressive Student Network become apparent. Both are reactionary groups that have deep ideological differences with the right-wing.

The Progressive Student Network advocated and protested a number of issues during the 1980s and early 90s. The last major issue the network fought against was the Gulf War in 1991. After this the network started to dwindle until the group faded away in 1994.¹⁹

To explain why this happened, it is important to analyze what was also happening in American Politics around this time. The most important event of the early 1990s for liberals was the election of Democrat Bill Clinton to the White House, which ended 12 years of Republican rule in Washington. Also the Persian Gulf War was a relatively swift undertaking lasting a little more than six months rather than the drawn out occupation feared by many liberals. These events, although seemingly positive outcomes for the progressive groups like the Progressive Student Network and the New Wave Party, spelled the end for the groups. The reason is these groups were reactionary toward the right-wing and its policies that would have had a negative effect on the issues the progressive groups were advocating for. The groups existed to fight an immediate attack by the right wing rather than a possible conflict. Once there was little left to fight against, there was little reason to continue to go on.

This may also explain the question proposed in the beginning of this paper. Like the New Wave Party and the Progressive Student Network, the group that elected Barack Obama also appears to have been reactionary. The group of people who voted Obama into office were also

¹⁹ Records of the New Wave Party. University Archives, Iowa City, IA. RG 02.06.03, Box 19.

rejecting then President George W. Bush and the rest of the Republican Party who had led America into two wars and took the country from balanced budgets under the Clinton Administration to gigantic budget deficits. The president's approval ratings were some of the worst in history, much like that of Jimmy Carter's in 1980. Two years after Obama's win in 2008 that political landscape had changed. The enthusiasm the Democrats had just two years prior shifted to the Republicans who found themselves in a position of anger and a reactionary stance.

In the brief span of twelve years, the New Wave Party advocated for a number of social, economic, and political issues centering on their anger and disagreement with the election of Ronald Reagan, the new conservative movement, and a lack of adequate leadership within their own party. The great irony to the story of the progressive group is that its success led to the end of the movement. What can the story of the New Wave Party tell us about similar reactionary groups like the Tea Party? Simply put, success will likely be their downfall.

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