

Review: Daniel Soyer, *Left in the Center: The Liberal Party of New York and the Rise and Fall of American Social Democracy*, Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2021, 421pp., ISBN: 978-1-5017-5987-1

When Andrew Yang announced the formation of a new third party, the Forward Party, in July 2022 the response from many was a mix of bafflement and derision. The *New York Times*'s Jamelle Bouie predicted that Forward would 'wither on the vine as the latest in a long history of vanity political parties.' Bouie argued that Forward's founders, in seeking to reach 'the moderate, common-sense majority' had misunderstood the historical formula for third-party success. Citing the Free Soilers, the Populists, and George Wallace's American Independent Party, Bouie noted that successful third parties had 'galvanized a narrow slice of the public over a specific set of issues.'¹

At the national level, third parties have tended to be a short-lived prospect. At the state level, however, third parties have often proved more durable. Daniel Soyer's new history of New York's Liberal Party traces its fortunes over six decades as it became an established force in state and city politics. Soyer, a professor at Fordham University, who has written extensively on New York and particularly the city's Jewish communities, has produced a richly detailed and highly readable new history that offers a fresh perspective on Empire State politics in the postwar era.

Founded in 1944 as a force for pro-Roosevelt, pro-civil rights, anti-communist labour-liberalism, the Liberal Party sought to create 'a far-reaching social democratic polity in one municipality.' (86) Although at one time it harboured ambitions to become a national party, the Liberal Party remained essentially a player in city politics, often struggling to maintain a consistent presence in the rest of the state. Rooted in the labour movement, particularly the garment unions, and the Jewish working class, the party had emerged from a split in the American Labor Party, a Popular Front rival that the Liberals ultimately supplanted.

From shaky beginnings, the Liberal Party gained a secure foothold in New York politics. It exploited a quirk in New York state electoral law that allowed candidates to appear on more than one party line. Having secured a place on the third row of the state ballot – Row C – it guarded it jealously. Through fusion voting (or more often its denial), this gave the Liberals some opportunities to become 'a minor-party tail wagging a major-party dog' (78), pushing the larger parties to embrace their policy priorities. By 1949, it had elected its first congressman (Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., who turned out to be a disappointment to his erstwhile patrons) as well as a smattering of local officials. They had, as the *Herald-Tribune* put it, 'out-organized and out-campaigned Tammany.' (71) From here it proved instrumental in the election of governors, mayors, senators, and presidents.

The electoral contests in which the Liberal Party engaged are central to Soyer's account, but the party aspired to be a 'year-round party' (85) that would push for New Deal/Fair Deal-style social welfare programmes, civil rights, and even a liberal internationalist foreign policy. It did this by steadfastly refusing a permanent relationship with either party. Though it was most frequently allied with the Democrats, it maintained an ongoing flirtation with Republican senator Jacob Javits and embraced opportunities to endorse liberal Republicans, as well as reserving the right to run its own candidates, either as bargaining chips or out of dissatisfaction with the major party nominees.

Though the party aspired to represent a mass movement, it remained an essentially top-down entity, dependent for much of its life on the political acumen of Alex Rose, the tall, hawk-like former president of the hatters' union who became the party's effective 'boss,' notwithstanding its commitment to good government reformism and opposition to the Tammany Hall machine. Rose

¹ Jamelle Bouie, 'Why Andrew Yang's New Third Party Is Bound to Fail,' *New York Times*, July 29, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/29/opinion/why-andrew-yangs-new-third-party-is-bound-to-fail.html>>

was reputed to have once complained that he was 'trying to conduct a symphony with just a harmonica for an orchestra.' (211) Feted by many Liberals, and courted by city power brokers, Rose became a hate figure for others. When Conservative James Buckley ran for Senate in 1970, he claimed his goal was to 'liberate' the New York Republican Party from its 'obsessive concern for the good opinion of Alex Rose.' (221) Soyer brings figures like Rose to vivid life in his narrative.

The Liberal Party's high point came in the 1950s and 1960s. It enjoyed close relations with John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and was assiduously courted by both in advance of the 1960 and 1964 presidential elections, an indication of how seriously was taken its boast that no politician could win a statewide election without Liberal backing. The turmoil of the 1960s proved as destructive to the Liberal Party as it did to liberalism itself, however. The Vietnam War contorted the party's internal politics and strained its relations with the national Democratic Party. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy, which pit black families against teachers' unions, was a torment for a party that sought to be pro-labor and pro-civil rights.

Nonetheless, despite the incipient signs of the party's decline, the Liberals scored an astonishing political success at the end of the decade when, in 1969, it effectively elected a mayor. The liberal Republican John Lindsay – who had received the party's backing in his first run in 1965, to the dismay of some supporters – lost his party's nomination in a primary challenge that year. Picking up the Liberal Party's nomination instead, and its all-important ballot line, Lindsay ran as the liberal against a law-and-order Democrat and a conservative Republican. For some in the Liberal Party, the Lindsay campaign was a last stand against the forces of reaction. New York had to become, said Rose hyperbolically, 'a political Stalingrad, like the city where the forces of Hitlerism were turned back ... [T]he backlash had to be turned back.' (232) When Lindsay won the race with a comfortably plurality (42 percent, eight points clear of the Democrat and 20 points clear of the Republican) it seemed like a vindication.

However, this was a false dawn for the party. As New York's politics turned rightward amidst the economic crisis of the 1970s, the Liberals suffered the effects of realignment and shifting demographics that shrank the party's traditional base. Following Rose's death in 1976, 'the paper clips and rubber bands that held the party together' (269) began to give way. The party's executive director remarked that they could 'organize a Liberal Party in Florida and California on the basis of our retirees.' (188) The final years of the party were sad ones, snarled up in factional struggles and a growing dependence on patronage for party funds that drew accusations of corruption. Its final success (increasingly dubious in retrospect) was the Republican-Liberal ticket in support of Rudy Giuliani's mayoral bids. By the 1990s it was, critics charged, 'a law firm with a ballot line.' (291) Soon it didn't even have that. After the 1978 gubernatorial race, it had lost its prized ballot line C to 'the fledgling and amateurish antiabortion Right to Life Party.' (275) By 2002, it lost its place on the ballot entirely and dissolved. In more recent years, its role as 'a left-leaning labor party' (297) has been taken over by the Working Families Party.

Soyer's narrative joins the work of Jonathan Bell and Jennifer Delton in exploring how Cold War liberalism emerged as a counterpoint to Communist and Popular Front movements as much as conservative and reactionary forces.² Contrary to conventional wisdom, and as Soyer shows, this liberalism was an affirmative choice made by its champions, not the simply the consequence of postwar radicalism chastened by Red Scare politics. If the party sought to chart a careful course, they were still 'fighting liberals' on behalf of a cause they believed in.

² Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Jennifer Delton, *Making Minnesota Liberal: Civil Rights and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

Soyer's narrative ends on a downbeat note, with the Liberal Party extinct and its final leader, Raymond Harding, jailed on corruption charges. Nonetheless, it was arguably a victim of its own success. It emerged in the 1940s as a self-appointed ally in FDR's quest to refashion the Democratic Party as a vehicle for liberalism. Though the Liberals asserted their independence, Soyer demonstrates that they played a small but meaningful role in the realignment of the U.S. party system on ideological lines. Not just of significance for scholars of New York, this deeply-researched book is an important addition to the burgeoning literature on transformations and agonies of post-war liberalism itself.