

A Progressive, and Persuasive, Case for a Politics of Persuasion

Anand Giridharadas's 'The Persuaders' profiles activists, organizers, and change-makers charting a path to power through changing minds and 'calling in.'

BY ADAM M. LOWENSTEIN OCTOBER 11, 2022





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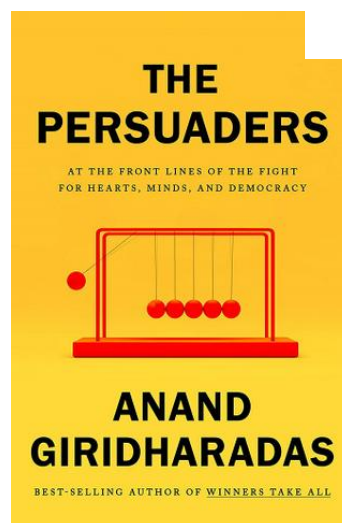
The Persuaders: At the Front Lines of the Fight for Hearts, Minds, and Democracy

By Anand Giridharadas

Knopf

Last fall, in an early instance of a pattern that would come to characterize the first two years of the Biden presidency, progressives' second-least-favorite Democratic senator refused to make up her mind. In this case, Kyrsten Sinema, whose state of Arizona is home to nearly 275,000 people living in the United States without documentation, was unwilling to commit to pushing for a pathway to citizenship in Congress's Build Back Better bill.

Suddenly, and perhaps unexpectedly for someone in a position to perpetually sequester herself from people affected by her decisions, Sinema found herself sharing an Arizona State University restroom with a group of protesters organized by Living United for Change in Arizona, or LUCHA.



“We knocked on doors for you to get you elected,” one protester told her. “We can get you out of office if you don’t support what you promised us.”



The protest drew the headlines, but as Anand Giridharadas recounts in his new book, *The Persuaders: At the Front Lines of the Fight for Hearts, Minds, and Democracy*, bathrooms were not the only battleground in LUCHA's fight for human rights.

The group also practiced another form of politics, one that was less likely to make the news, and one that might sound less confrontational. The approach, known as “deep canvassing,” is about seeking out time-intensive, often uncomfortable, conversations with people who may not even hint that they're open to hearing what you have to say—let alone supporting your cause—and trying to change their minds.

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Deep canvassing isn't confrontational in the way that following a U.S. senator into a bathroom is. But it *is* confrontational in that spending untold hours with people who might seem unlikely ever to back your candidate or campaign rejects some of the foundational assumptions that have guided Democratic politics for years: namely, that people's beliefs are fixed and unchanging, and the way to win elections is simply to get the people who already agree with you to the polls.

“On one front,” Giridharadas writes, the LUCHA organizers in Arizona “were attracting attention to a form of protest that very visibly and confrontationally called Sinema out, while on another front they engaged in ... a promising experiment in persuasion by door knocking, grounded in increasingly hard-to-muster behaviors of empathy, curiosity, and nonjudgment, fueled by an almost mystifying faith that people can change.”

Can people change?

That question is the project of *The Persuaders*, a



that question is the project of the persuaders, a meandering, humanizing, and thoroughly hopeful exploration of the tension between calling out and calling in, between confronting and coaxing, between welcoming and writing off.

There is, Giridharadas writes, “an idea at the heart of democratic theory: that you change things by changing minds—by persuading.” While the idea has fallen out of favor with many on the left, from the beginning of the book Giridharadas’s view seems clear: Persuasion is essential, both for achieving progressive victories and for preserving American democracy.

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Persuasion is not necessarily about telling people who you are; it is a process of helping people see themselves differently.

The question, however, is whether persuasion is still *possible*.

Giridharadas approaches his task through reported profiles of people and groups pursuing the work of persuasion: activists and organizers like Linda Sarsour and Alicia Garza, hosts of diversity and inclusion workshops, the progressive messaging guru Anat Shenker-Orsorio, elected officials like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders.

“When fighting for justice and change,” Giridharadas writes, “how do you bring others along—those who are not there yet, and those who are actively complicit? In the movement to end oppression, is there space for imperfect allies? How imperfect is too imperfect? Do people who are part of a problem have a place in the



search for solutions?”

Early in the book, Giridharadas tells the story of Loretta Ross, an activist, executive, professor, and intellectual who has spent decades wrestling with some of the fundamental questions facing the left today. Her story shows such questions are not new. What makes *The Persuaders* so unique, and so compelling, is not the questions themselves, but how Giridharadas explores them. He doesn't purport to deliver *the* answers—refreshing in itself—but explores how to ask the questions in a new way, and offers structure and context to help the reader understand how some of the left's most effective persuaders are trying to answer them.

The book's lack of stridency brings in people who might otherwise find themselves exhausted by debates about “cancel culture” and righteous punditry about what Democrats need to do to win. Giridharadas is determinedly willing to let the subjects of his reporting speak for themselves. It's a style characterized by description, rather than prescription. Giridharadas deployed a similar approach in his 2018 bestseller, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, which skewered the executives and elites who insist that they can make money and make the world a better place without making any sacrifices.

Persuaders takes the style of *Winners* and amplifies it. The book focuses almost entirely on the subjects of his reporting, leaving mostly unstated what appears to be Giridharadas's thesis: that the organizers, activists, and change-makers advocating and agitating for justice will win policy fights and real power only if they persuade more people to join their fight.

The journey of the activist, author, and organizer Alicia Garza illuminates one of the key dilemmas of the politics of persuasion: Is bringing different groups into



your movement a savvy tool for building “durable power,” or an act of yielding to existing power?

For decades, Democrats have promised that the road to victory is paved with centrism. This thinking argues that you get power by building a big coalition, and you build a big coalition by accommodating existing power.

What emerges from Giridharadas’s conversations with Garza, a co-creator of the Black Lives Matter movement, is something different. You still have to build a big coalition; you still have to make “room for the waking among the woke,” as Garza puts it. But from the beginning, you also make clear that you’re building that big coalition *in order* to challenge power, not to capitulate to it.

Consider the phrase “white supremacy.” White supremacy is about power, and the conventional Democratic wisdom says not to challenge the power of those who already have it.

Garza says otherwise. “I might not use the term ‘white supremacy’ with somebody who I’m quite sure has never heard those words before,” she tells Giridharadas. “But I would not *not* talk about white supremacy to white people because it makes them uncomfortable. Not using the term ‘white supremacy’ with white people because it turns them off defeats the whole fucking purpose of fighting this shit in the first place.”





KELVIN KUO/AP PHOTO

Giridharadas profiles Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as they attempt to persuade voters and policymakers.

Giridharadas describes it as “the art of seeking radical outcomes by working with those who are not radical”: You can find new ways to acquire power, but without compromising why you fight for power or what you do once you have it. Or, as another organizer puts it, “It’s not about giving up your principles, and it’s not about changing your positions, but it is about opening up your posture.”

That journey of that organizer, now Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, reflects both the possibilities and challenges of persuasion. Years before she defeated a member of the House Democratic leadership in a congressional primary that catapulted her to prominence and political office, Ocasio-Cortez felt defeated—by her job, by health insurance, by life. The 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign changed how she saw herself.

“I used to, frankly, abuse myself mentally about how I’m nothing,” Ocasio-Cortez said. Watching the Sanders campaign, “I realized that I need to choose myself because if I don’t, I’m just going to waste away. I’m just going to give up.” As Giridharadas describes it, Ocasio-Cortez “wasn’t saying Bernie had persuaded her into an ideology—at least not at the beginning. She wasn’t saying he had enlisted her in the battle for a particular policy. He had persuaded her that she was human, fully human.”



Persuasion, in this telling, is not necessarily about telling people who you are, or convincing them to join your side. It is a process of helping people see *themselves* differently, helping them understand how they might fit in the world, helping them feel that they are seen and heard, that they have agency, that they matter.

In the book's longest chapter, Giridharadas chronicles Ocasio-Cortez's journey from persuadee to persuader, revealing how that journey shaped her politics and her approach to changing minds. Ocasio-Cortez's "opening argument" in her first campaign for Congress, she tells Giridharadas, was not about the Green New Deal or Medicare for All. It was something more fundamental: "I want you to know that you matter to me."

Like Garza, Ocasio-Cortez refuses to change her ultimate destination. She is, as Giridharadas puts it, "playing the game to overturn it; being human and personal for the sake of dismantling structures." But, also like Garza, she is more than willing to consider new ways to get there.

For those who depend on Democratic victories for their well-being and even survival, the task of persuasion is an existential one. Some can afford to be fatalistic about the project of changing minds; they can simply retreat if the democratic project fails and public services crumble or disappear. But they are few in number.

It's easy to be cynical about persuasion, particularly given how extreme Republican politicians have become. In many ways, this cynicism echoes the *just let them secede* discourse in which some progressives in safely blue states respond to anti-democratic, even fascist, victories in Texas or Florida or Idaho with some version of *we're better off without them*.

But to "just let them secede," to give up on persuasion, is



to abandon the millions of Americans who believe in the progressive agenda or depend on the policies and protections that Democrats fight to provide for the whole country. It is also to discard the egalitarian notion that we take care of other people whether or not they have “earned” it—the notion that other people *matter*.

Here you find the foundational aim of Giridharadas’s book: to persuade the persuaders. To convince the pundits and politicians, power brokers and party elites, activists and organizers, volunteers and voters—everyone who might be in a position to shape the left’s political approach—not to give up on *people*.

That’s a major undertaking, and, inevitably, *Persuaders* leaves some important topics largely untouched.

While Giridharadas acknowledges the difficult and time-intensive nature of changing minds, the book leaves the reader wondering how to surmount not just misinformation but completely disconnected information ecosystems that create stark disagreement about how the world *is*. Even if you do manage to break into a different silo, how do you overcome the economic and algorithmic incentives that drive media and technology platforms to cash in on conflict, anger, and outrage?

Giridharadas, moreover, is a member of the progressive elite he’s trying to persuade. While he makes appearances throughout the book, I wanted more insight into *his* journey. Did Giridharadas have to be persuaded to believe in persuasion, as he’s seeking to do for others, or was he always a believer? How did spending years on the “front lines” of these fights change how he thinks about persuasion?

While those looking for a “solutions” section will be disappointed, Giridharadas is right not to outline some ten-step plan for securing permanent progressive



majorities or promise a clear path toward saving democracy. The reason is that at the end of the day, persuasion is not a science. There is certainly some art to it, and the book introduces the reader to some of its most effective artists.

Mostly, though, there is trial and error. What *The Persuaders* does best is bring these trials and errors to life, and provide proof that they can succeed. People *can* change. Persuasion *is* possible.

Through story and anecdote and human experience, the book injects nuance and humanity into debates and dilemmas that are all too often fatalistic and cynical. *The Persuaders* brings its subjects to life, portraying their successes and struggles in a way that manages to leave the reader with a sense of solidarity and hopefulness, a conviction that the project of democracy is not lost, and an inspiration to get to work.

“No matter where you are on the political spectrum, the moral of coalition building is this idea that we need each other, especially when it comes to organizing around social change,” Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tells Giridharadas. “The thing I keep coming back to is that it really isn’t one or the other. It’s that we need each other.”

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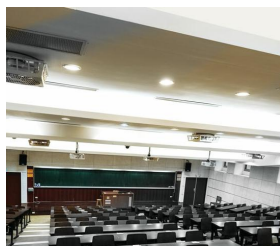
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