

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Summer 2026

On the ground in Maine

I first heard of Graham Platner, an oyster farmer from Sullivan and a Marine veteran of three deployments in Afghanistan, from my former partner, Betsy, who was excited about his bold ideas. I heard Graham speak to my union. Powerful, but gruff and so male. Could women find a place in the campaign? "I hope he has a kitty."

When I heard Platner was recruited by a small group of labor-oriented democrats searching for a candidate who could beat Susan Collins, I rolled my eyes. Women's issues aren't front of mind of the guys in my local of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. In fact, the International just did away with *Sisters in the Brotherhood*, an organization of women carpenters within the UBC.

I did like his proposals: Medicare for All, affordable childcare and housing, billionaires paying their fair share, and ending mass deportation. They have been the pillars of my life's work. "Medicare for all" differs only in detail from the "Free Healthcare" we demanded in 1971 on the front page of *Ain't I A Woman*, an underground newspaper I hawked on the streets of Iowa City.

In October 2025 Maine Governor Janet Mills, the handpicked candidate of Democratic Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, entered the US Senate race. She was already behind by 20 points. I shook my head

– I wouldn't have done it. Mills had waited too long to jump in. Platner's campaign had momentum. In 1996, when I decided to run in the Democratic primary for Congressional District 1, I knew I had a real shot, even though everyone knew I was a lesbian. (I only lost by 1200 votes).

Within two weeks the drip, drip of incidents in Platner's stormy past began: the tattoo, sexist and racist posts on Reddit, opinions from old girl friends.

I felt like a
bad feminist.

Platner explained on the stump he had been in the throes of PTSD and black-out drinking as a result of his time in Afghanistan but after years of therapy has changed. "I'm not that man anymore."

Women friends challenged me, "How can you support him?" I felt like a bad feminist and a poor ally, trying to reconcile Platner's offensive Reddit posts versus my belief that people can change. I finally realized that both can be true. I certainly wouldn't look like the evolved woman I am today if I had to answer for the good trouble I got into in the sixties.

In March Janet Mills' fundraising numbers had slowed. She aired a hard-hitting ad featuring women fuming at Platner for his Reddit posts. Rank and file Dems were furious that she would go so negative on another Democrat. Mills' numbers didn't move.

Two days before the primary on June 9, news broke that one of Graham's old girl friends had called him "a toxic boyfriend." Many Mainers increasingly felt that the timing of the drip of scurrilous information about Platner's past was suspect and that Schumer had his hand on the faucet. One astute political commentator observed, "This is not a scandal, it's a strategy."

On primary day 175,000 voters turned out, breaking all records. Graham Platner won with 77% of the vote. 75% of independents, who could vote in Maine primaries for the first time, voted for Platner, a statistic that should have elated the Party. Platner's campaign had attracted veterans, independents, some Republicans, and 15,000 volunteers!

The accusation of sexual assault, which Platner said wasn't true, came days before the deadline for the Maine Democratic Party to submit a ballot with the name of its candidate

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An Iowa titan

A chance encounter with the book “Unseen Mendieta” on a video conference threw me back to a spring day fifty-two years ago at Henry Sabin Elementary School in Iowa City. On that day, it was warm and the school’s windows were open. A trace of rain in the air promised renewal and warned of storms to come.

Our teacher, Ana Mendieta, inhaled the light and basked in the air but seemed unsettled at the window’s edge, moving away to mind her charges. We were all little experiments in experiential learning, learning art from a visiting teacher who herself was a locomotive force of art.

The kids were busy with their projects and knee-deep in art supplies. I remember Ana moving around the class helping each of us realize our separate creative pursuits, such as they were for a class of tweens. Some of us had paint, some had paper, some had clay, and some worked with found objects. We were chaos, shaped by an effusive spirit we really never got to know. We ended up wearing our art, intentionally or not.

Our chaotic energy was precisely Ana’s medium. On one of those warm afternoons, she took us outside to run like mad under a giant multi-colored parachute beneath the sheltering Iowa sky. We didn’t know we were part of art history; we only knew we had escaped fractions. Decades later, I remember exactly where I stood that day. She told us to lift the parachute, get under, run to the middle, let the parachute fall.

Ana was then a gifted student in Hans Breder’s revolutionary Intermedia program at the University of Iowa. A decade before Karen Finley poured chocolate, before Laurie Anderson hit the big time with *O Superman* or Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* shocked

right-wing sensibilities, Ana Mendieta was literally throwing herself into her art. Art would never be the same.

Born in Cuba and sent with her fifteen-year-old sister to live in a Dubuque reform school at the ripe age of twelve after the fall of Batista, Ana Mendieta is an Iowa titan. She blazed a path in the art world like the Chelyabinsk meteor. Windows were broken. Walls collapsed. A lot of it was caught on video.

She bared all to the
viewer, yet remained
completely camouflaged.

Ana’s experience as a refugee shaped her art, an art that speaks to a life standing between belonging and not belonging. Her “earth-body” art, as she called it, pushes the shocking—her naked body, blood, feathers, bones, into the muck of mud, dirt, sand. It challenges us to see her as a totem of rebirth, emerging from the womb of nature, a displaced person seeking to be grounded.

Ana produced a prodigious amount of performative art. Her *Siluetas Series* (Tree of Life) captures the essence of simultaneous belonging and exile. She stands naked, covered with mud, in front of a silver maple on Old Man’s Creek in Iowa, a living statue. Her arms are outstretched, embracing celluloid for posterity. Would a passerby know she was naked? Would they even notice her at all? She bared all to the viewer, yet remained completely camouflaged, baked into the scenery. It was an affirmation, in her own words and body, of those who are free and those who refuse to be colonized.

From Iowa and the passing of many warm spring days, Ana broke into the New York art scene in the 1980s just as the right-wing pathos of Phyllis Schlafly sparked a revanchist movement to tell women who they should be. Patriarchy would cut Ana down there, murdered by her husband many say, never living to see her place in what was to come—the radical transformation of American society, with art in the vanguard.

Art decolonizes the mind and gives meaning to freedom. Ana stood for that. She lived it. We who remain free today owe her a debt of gratitude.

Now, decades later, the Tate Modern in London is hosting a massive retrospective of her work, hanging those intimate Iowa memories on the walls of a global art powerhouse. Meanwhile, there’s a mural on a wall near my home in Woodland, California, that celebrates the struggle for freedom with a quote that contains the living essence of the universe. “They Tried to Bury Us; They Did Not Know We Were Seeds.” Originally, the quote was written by a Greek LGBTQ poet named Dinos Christianopoulos.

Ana would have loved that. I wish I could have had the chance in adulthood to get to know her and show her some of the art she inspired me to create.

—Craig Perrin learned the power of political organizing in 1974 when parents and students mobilized to stop the Iowa City School Board from closing the groundbreaking experiential education program at Henry Sabin School. Ana Mendieta’s work can be seen at <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/ana-mendieta>.

I'm voting NO!

This year's November 3rd ballot will offer Iowa voters the choice of accepting or rejecting an Iowa constitutional amendment that is similar to an amendment proposal proffered to voters over twenty-five years ago.

Greenfield If the amendment is approved by voters this fall, it will require a supermajority of vote in each chamber of the Iowa Legislature if a bill increases the individual income tax rate or corporate income tax rate, or the rate of any other type of tax based upon income or legal and special reserves. This poses several questions. Is this necessary? Or is it another attempt by Republicans to control the business of future Iowa legislatures when Democrats are the majority party? What is "legal and special reserves?" Why did those who introduced this not consider sales tax, excise tax, real estate tax, etc.? Sales tax was a consideration in 1999, but legal and special reserves was not. What changed?

This similar scheme came before Iowa voters way back in June of 1999. There were two constitutional amendments to consider in 1999. Amendment 1 would have required the governor and general assembly to approve budgets for general fund expenditures that were no more than 99 percent of estimated revenues.

Amendment 2 would have required a three-fifths supermajority vote of all members of the state legislature to approve a bill that would increase income or sales taxes, or establish a new state tax. Voters rejected the measure with 52.0% voting no. The vote was held in the summer when proponents thought teachers, union members, government workers, and other voters who normally vote with the Democratic Party would be on vacation and miss the election. It didn't work. The 1999 vote

on Amendment 1 was much closer to passing (49.3% to 50.7%), but was defeated, as well.

Besides this year's amendment reaching for two-thirds of a vote by both chambers rather than the 1999 version of three-fifths, there is also an ominous phrase in the middle of the proposal that requires voters to be knowledgeable of current law regulating credit unions.

Iowa attorney and former Legislative Fiscal Bureau analyst Jon Neiderbach explained that "Iowa has a money and credit tax on the legal and special reserves a credit union is required to maintain. The credit union pays this tax to the Iowa Department of Revenue. There are a number of credits that reduce this tax. Federally-chartered CUs and State chartered CUs that convert to federally chartered CUs do not pay this state tax." A federally-chartered CU is one that crosses state lines.

Legal reserves are funds required to be set aside as a safety net for an institution, serving as a safeguard against a future unforeseen calamity. Iowa banks are required to maintain legal reserves as mandated by federal regulations, but there is no specific requirement for special reserves. The management of reserves is primarily governed by the bank's policies and the applicable laws. Banks are immune from the proposed amendment.

"A special reserve is set aside for a 'special' purpose and can be only used for that purpose in the future." So, when was the last time a tax rate was imposed or increased on a credit union? Currently, Iowa law requires one-half cent on a dollar. And according to Neiderbach, "total revenues from this tax are significant (most recently it was \$2.8 million in FY 2020)."

Most Iowans belong to a state-chartered credit union. According to the Iowa Credit Unions Online, there are over seventy-two credit unions in Iowa.

Similarly, Iowa does not require community associations to conduct reserve studies or to fund reserves at any particular level. Will this constitutional amendment affect HOAs, condominiums, or other community boards if a law is enacted to secure special reserves for those entities? Yes!

There are other provisions in the Iowa Constitution that require a two-thirds supermajority. Calling a special session by the legislature requires a two-thirds vote of each chamber. It requires a two-thirds vote of each chamber to override a governor's veto. Impeachment requires a supermajority vote of both chambers as well as appropriating extra compensation for local or private purposes, whatever that means.

Section Twelve of Article VII (Corporations) requires a "vote of two thirds of each branch of the general assembly" when amending or repealing "all laws for the organization or creation of corporations, or granting of special or exclusive privileges or immunities." To my knowledge, this provision has never been used nor challenged in court.

According to the Iowa Department of Revenue, Iowa's tax rates have not increased since the 1970s. Contrarily, rates have decreased in 1987, 1996, 1999, 2019, and 2023.

To answer the question of whether this constitutional amendment is necessary, I'm voting "NO!"

—Marty Ryan is a recovering lobbyist.

Ideological drivel

You wouldn't think something called a Center for Intellectual Freedom would end up being a safe harbor for shoddy evaluative and critical thinking. Nor would you think its birthing would be attended by shoddy market assessments on which to chart its structure and course offerings. Here in Iowa, you would be wrong. The Iowa General Assembly saddled the University of Iowa with the burden to create and house just such a center, carrying that precise name. Already, it is every thinking person's nightmare. How could this be?

First, its very inception was a canard. It was born of the myth that conservative youth, exclusively, had somehow been denied a voice for years. That their brave and lonely intellectual strivings, while meritorious, had been repeatedly met with disdain and diminishment by a bunch of peel-me-a-grape elitist liberal professors with tenure. I have a different idea. It's got at least as much factual backing as the notion just described. I know, not much. But hear me out.

For decades, we've watched students grow increasingly obsessive and defensive over course grades. Everyone decided grades were the predictors of bright futures in business, computer programming, and project management. But what if, in many instances, the brainpower of said students fell short of their big dreams? What if there were some solid C-student types who simply could not face their C-student natures? What if the parents got involved, and what if pressure increased exponentially to elevate grades beyond all prior meaning and understanding? What if the professoriate, concerned for actual objective academic standards and meaning, resisted this pressure?

In that scenario, many college students got the impression elites were trolling them academically, to the detriment of their future livelihoods. It followed that ideologue legislators and persons of wealth in Iowa tried to forge a new institution within the university setting to put an imprimatur of academic accomplishment on thoughts that otherwise could find no reward. Not due to their nature as conservative or liberal thoughts, but due to the rickety architecture crafted by the C-students hoping to get A grades for proposing them. And here we are, now, in the midst of a donnybrook over the hurt feelings of proponents of the CIF and those at the UI who must both set it up and guarantee it meets the minimal academic standards required of all other departments and divisions.

The latest imbroglio has proponents of the CIF assailing UI administration for attempted infanticide. They are laying blame for the absence of life-saving equipment in the birthing room of this misbegotten creation squarely on the University. And they are demanding things to resuscitate the CIF. Massive things.

Interim CIF Director Luciano de Castro recently said, "CIF should be afforded the same prerogatives as a college, including independent control over its curriculum, academic identity, and administrative operations." A college! So, after having been created out of whole cloth on a foundation of specious assertions and ideological drivel, they now propose CIF be on a par with the College of Liberal Arts, Business Administration, Medicine or the Graduate College? This, my friends, is preposterous. The hubris is astonishing.

There is also supporter outrage over the non-release of an "assessment" of the

CIF concept at the UI by something called The Common Sense Institute. Let that name sink in. It was this think tank that led the Iowa legislature to pass the law making course offerings from the CIF mandatory.

Here is some prose from the Common Sense assessment. The Cedar Rapids Gazette characterizes this as "its central finding:"

"Centers do not start with demand; they create it."

Yes, that's right. This great 'free market' think tank says centers such as the CIF do not come into being because they are wanted; i.e., because the free market is clamoring for their existence. Rather, they exist only because they are manufactured, even required if need be. How's that for a sweet synopsis of Stalinism? Seize control of the means of academic production and go from there. Christ on a bike!

The most insulting thing about this whole mess is how everyone involved is forgetting one principle that brooks no questioning: College is hard. It's meant to challenge the brain to maximal exertion. It is meant to be disheartening on occasion, as professors clobber your cherished hypotheses as insufficient, and call you out for lax or lame reasoning. That's not liberal or conservative – it's academic. It's higher education. It is not for the faint of heart and it was never meant to be. We need to kick out the high-roller donors and parents, the lame-brained politicians, and leave this scrum to our energetic and feisty students and their professors. Nothing was ever broken in academe; it just needs to be allowed to save and sustain itself.

—Kim Painter has a BA degree in English.

The stab-in-the-back myth

In 2026, the United States finds itself teetering over the edge of a disaster that may define our nation for the next century. Like the doomed Weimar Republic before us—whose leadership’s role in ending the first World War allowed reactionary forces within Germany to delegitimize it in the eyes of the German populace and clearing the path for future authoritarians—military humiliation and incipient domestic turmoil gives Republicans that chance to pin the Democratic Party for the consequences of Trump’s costly war with Iran, should they return to power next January.

In the Spring of 1918, amid a last-ditch offensive on the Western front, growing organized strikes led by the anti-war elements of Germany’s Social Democratic parties, and the threat of imminent invasion by the Allies, the German military leaders made a calculated ploy: by allowing civilian leaders to sit at the peace table in lieu of the war’s architects, they could shift blame for military failure onto the new Weimar Republic.

Through a concerted media strategy, conservative forces were then extremely successful in shaping the narrative behind Germany’s defeat as one of domestic betrayal; the *dolchstosslegende*, or “stab-in-the-back myth,” took root. Even before the punishing terms of the Versailles treaty, common knowledge in Germany was now that internal spies, socialists, and Jews had been behind Germany’s defeat. It was an explanation that struck a chord with a German people crushed by economic uncertainty and nourished the rising right-wing backlash that culminated in the Weimar’s final death at the hands of Hitler in 1933.

Though we are fortunately nowhere near the economic depression experienced in 1920’s Germany, any sustained economic pressure felt by Americans from this conflict can only further deepen its unpopularity, particularly given the compounding weight of the pre-existing affordability crisis. Nearly 7 in 10 Americans favor an end to the war “as quickly as possible,” per the Hill’s June 23 polling.

A key aspect of Trump’s political survival to date has been his instinctive proficiency in finding scapegoats for scandal and unpopular policy decisions. Most recently he has ousted top administration officials like Pam Bondi and Kristi Noem as scapegoats for the Epstein Files and ICE, respectively. He is keenly sensitive to the conflict’s impact on his approval rating, not the plight of the American consumer, and has sought a train of fall-guys on which to dump responsibility.

In the best-case scenario where Democrats gain control over both the House and Senate, settling the issue of American involvement in the Strait of Hormuz will look like low-hanging fruit; reasserting Congressional authority over war powers and ending an unpopular war are worthy goals. However, just as Hitler found ample support among the media magnates to propagate his ideology, the right’s current capture of the media has set the stage for Trump to build a legend of his own.

If America finds itself militarily exhausted by Iran’s asymmetrical warfare, then – according to Trump – it was the Democrats’ refusal to properly support the war effort. If a ceasefire remains elusive, the Democrats’ desire for peace emboldened Iran to demand more concessions. If the resulting armistice

leaves the United States embarrassed, isolated, and achieving none of its nebulous objectives, it was Democrats who sabotaged our armed forces in the 11th hour, before the Iranian regime could be toppled.

This is not to argue that Democrats shouldn’t pursue peace with Iran; a swift conclusion to this illegal war is both moral and pragmatic. But the reasons for America’s withdrawal from the conflict must be made transparent to the public. Crucially, this includes exposing of all the reasons why we will have been forced into a peace deal to begin with: Incompetence by Trump and his staff; sidelining military experts that severely disrupted the chain of command; and outdated military doctrine against an unconventional foe. By demonstrating that this was a military defeat, not a result of domestic political interference by the Democratic party, we can hope to at least partially deflate the inevitable story Trump and his party will try to build.

Should Democrats fare well in the midterms, and the 2028 presidential election, they will face the long-term project of Trump’s successors looking to fashion the shadow of this war into the foundations of the next wave of conservatism. As much as we would like to hope that Trump and his supporters cannot escape the consequences of his actions, any heir able to harness his movement will undoubtedly prove just as adept at making a political fortune out of national catastrophe.

—Andy Stewart is a library science student at the University of Iowa.

Why Democrats don't win

Think about it. The last time Iowa had a Democratic trifecta, the Governor and both houses of the legislature, was in the election of 2006. All four of our current Congressional Representatives and both U.S. Senators are Republicans. Although Barak Obama carried Iowa in 2008 and 2012, Donald Trump has carried Iowa in all three elections since then.

It is hard to understand why this has happened. Donald Trump and his willing executioners in Congress and his administration have destroyed what was left of our republican form of government. In Iowa the Republicans have turned Iowa, where I have lived for 79 years, into a state I don't recognize. How could voters have voted for this?

Over the last thirty to forty years, Republicans have created a false narrative about Democrats and progressive issues. And Democrats, rather than aggressively and fearlessly countering this narrative, have accepted it and conducted their campaigns within the context of that narrative. In other words, if a Democratic candidate does not accept the Republican narrative, he or she is considered by the Democratic Party to not be electable.

But what does it mean to be "electable?" To the Democratic establishment it means accepting that Republican narrative I mentioned. But why does that view assume that a majority of voters would not want universal health care, good public schools, clean water, or an economic system that works for everyone? In fact, opinion polling finds that a majority of voters do support progressive policies when those policies are presented to them without the reference to party politics.

It is also true that Republicans will do whatever it takes to obtain and use power. Democrats need to be just as aggressive in obtaining and using power, by legal and ethical means. Strongly worded letters and trying to "reach across the aisle" will not do. When voters see Democrats fighting for them, they will respond favorably.

So why don't Democrats seek and use power in support of progressive policies that benefit people? I can't say I know for sure. One idea I hear is that Democrats get money from big donors who allegedly would not give to progressive candidates. So, Democrats are afraid to pursue

What does it mean
to be "electable?"

policies that would displease those donors. Another thought in Iowa is that the rural voters who a candidate needs to win will not vote for a Democrat who does not sound like a Republican. But that attitude buys into the Republican narrative.

Democrats keep chasing the elusive independent and moderate Republican voter. Some Democrats say that we are not going to turn those independent and moderate Republican voters into Democrats so we have to campaign like Republicans. But why? Republicans have turned many former Democrats into Republicans. This goes back to my earlier statement that Democrats are afraid to stand up for their values. Republicans, on the other hand, are aggressive in making their views become the mainstream.

When Democrats go to the voters – all voters, not just Democrats – and tell those voters how progressive policies will benefit them and convince the voters that Democratic candidates will work for them, the voters will respond favorably. Voters just want someone who will not be afraid to fight for them. It strikes me that voters in every election, no matter who is in office, want change. The reason they want change and that change never happens is that corporations and special interests that do not have the common good in mind are running the country and this state. When Democrats convince voters that the Democrats will run things on behalf of the people and the public good, voters will vote for them. But Democrats have to have the courage and confidence to make that effort.

Changing the current political dynamics will not happen quickly. After all, the Republicans have been at this for many years. But the Republicans have taken us so close to the bottom, that voters may be receptive to a strong Democratic message, if Democrats are just willing to give it to the voters.

It is also up to us, as citizens and political activists, to force Democratic candidates to be more aggressive in championing progressive issues and persuading voters to vote for Democrats. The Democratic Party establishment may be too cautious to take this position, but their strategy has not worked. It is time to really work for what we believe in for the good of the country and our state.

—Wally Taylor is a native Iowan practicing law in Linn County.

On the ground in Maine (cont'd from Page 1)

for US Senate. National Democrats immediately withdrew their endorsements.

Drop Site revealed that both CNN and Politico had omitted from their stories about the assault that the woman making the charges had initially texted Graham, "I need my glute massaged." By that time, the media and political frenzy left no room for nuance. The National Democratic Party said Platner would not get funds from them. Platner dropped out.

I believe all the women in this story. I also believe that they were used 1) by political actors in an

environment rigged to favor vanilla candidates, and 2) by a split-second news cycle that elevates accusations for headlines and clicks, and leaves no time for investigation and fairness. The impact in Maine will be lasting. Thousands of Maine Dems have left the party and more are discouraged. Worst for me personally, I may have lost what my mother called my "goddamn Pollyanna outlook."

—Dale McCormick grew up in Sigourney, Iowa; she served as Treasurer of the state of Maine from 1998 to 2006.

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Thank you for your generous support!

A note from the editor:

Marty Ryan's deep dive on the Republican proposed constitutional amendment (see Page 3) follows up on Pam Mackey Taylor's article calling on voters to defeat this misbegotten attack on lower income and working families. *The Prairie Progressive* will continue to alert our readers to the real purpose of this amendment—*screw the poor*. "Gosh, we're out of money, guess we'll have to raise the sales tax." Don't let this happen in Iowa!



Aug 1, 1956

Sauk polio vaccine distributed

Aug 9, 1936

Jesse Owens won 4 Olympic gold medals in Berlin

Aug 14, 1846

Thoreau jailed for tax resistance

Aug 20, 1996

Minimum wage raised to \$5.15

Aug 22, 1971

George Jackson killed during alleged jail break at San Quentin

Aug 30, 2021

US withdrew final armed forces from Afghanistan

Sept 3, 1916

Railroad workers won 8-hour day

Sept 6

Iowa Labor History Society
free showing of *Grapes of Wrath*
4:00, FilmScene, Iowa City
Info: wm.gerhard@gmail.com

Sept 11, 2001

World Trade Center
buildings destroyed

Sept 13, 1971

1,500 troopers murdered
43 prisoners at Attica prison

Sept 16, 1976

Congress passed Hyde amendment

Sept 21, 1981

First woman appointed
to SCOTUS

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