

The Sanders Phenomenon: Its Origins and Prospects

(March, 2020)



Super Tuesday: The Democratic Party Marshalls its Forces to Stop Sanders

(3/5/20)

We begin with a brief assessment of the results of Super Tuesday.

On March 3, 2020, “Super Tuesday,” 14 state primaries and the American Samoa caucuses took place, awarding 1357 delegates – 33.8% of the nationwide total. More delegates are selected on Super Tuesday than on any other day. It is therefore usually a strong indicator of the likely eventual nominees.

California with 415 delegates, and Texas with 228 delegates, are two of the biggest primary contests. In the past, the California primary was held much later in the year. In 2016 it was held in June, and as a result, by the time Californians voted, the decision of who the Democratic Party presidential candidate would be was more or less decided. But this year is different and California will play a pivotal role. The delegates there are awarded in two categories – 144 statewide and another 271 by district. To qualify for delegates a candidate must receive 15% or more of the vote.

Nothing was clear going into Super Tuesday. The Sanders campaign appeared strong. He had come in second in Iowa, first in New Hampshire, and was the clear winner in Nevada. This was more of a psychological than numerical victory, as these are small states with few delegates. He was the front runner and leader in pledged delegates. Biden’s win in South Carolina, a bigger state with a large African-American voting population, challenged that. And Mike Bloomberg, the billionaire, was entering the race for the first time.

There was a dramatic shift in Biden’s campaign following the South Carolina election. After doing poorly in the South Carolina primary, billionaire Tom Steyer dropped his candidacy. On Monday, the day before Super Tuesday voting, he was followed by Pete Buttigieg, former

Mayor of South Bend, Indiana and winner of the Iowa caucuses, and Amy Klobuchar, Senator from Minnesota, both of whom dropped out. They went to a Biden campaign rally in Texas on Monday night, and were joined by former Texan presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke in endorsing Biden. Biden appeared once again to be the hope of the Democratic Party establishment in beating back the challenge from Bernie Sanders.

Going into Super Tuesday, Sanders was leading in the polls in the two biggest states, which was a major cause of worry for the Democratic Party establishment. They feared that if Sanders had a big win on Super Tuesday, he could go to the convention with a plurality of delegates, with a slim possibility of having a majority. The recent maneuvers by the Democratic Party candidates are not lost on Sanders supporters, who are seeing what many had feared – that they could be headed for a repeat of 2016 when Sanders was denied the nomination.

What Happened on Super Tuesday?

Some interesting statistics emerged from Super Tuesday voting that are significant. Voters 65 or older voted at a rate of 24% as compared to 18% in 2016, and they were likely Biden supporters. Biden also won 60% of the African American vote. In addition, Super Tuesday voters under 30, a main support for Sanders, did not turn out in record numbers as predicted, but instead as a group did not keep pace with the overall increase in voter turnout. Sanders received the majority of Latino votes, but he experienced a decline in the number of non-college white voters and independent voters as compared to the 2016 election.

Though he barely even campaigned in the Super Tuesday states, Biden won 10 out of the 14 state contests, including the state with the second largest delegate pool: Texas. He even beat Elizabeth Warren in her home state of Massachusetts. As of March 5, according to the *New York Times*, he has 469 delegates. Sanders won four contests and has 417 delegates. He has a significant lead in California, but the final delegate count will not be officially certified until April 10.

By Super Tuesday Bloomberg had spent half a billion dollars of his own money on his campaign. After a poor showing, he dropped out of the race on Wednesday and



quickly endorsed Joe Biden. Then on Thursday, March 5, Elizabeth Warren dropped out of the race. Both Biden and Sanders contacted her, but she said she is not ready to make an endorsement.

The Super Tuesday results are certainly a real turnaround from the way the election contest looked the week before. They are no doubt a big disappointment to the Sanders backers. Other primary contests are scheduled on March 10 and 17 and with their completion, 61% of all the available delegates will be decided. There will also be another televised debate on March 15. This is not a format where Biden excels, and the spotlight will be more focused on him this time with only Biden and Sanders on the stage.

The gap between Biden and Sanders is not huge. But the Democratic Party and the corporate media would make one think that Biden has practically sealed the nomination. And the maneuvers and their results show once again only too clearly that the Democratic Party establishment is not willing to have a candidate to the left of center. But it will use all the money and power at its disposal to put Biden in as its presidential nominee. What effect this will have on Sanders supporters will become clearer as the process continues. Will some be convinced to supporting Biden to try to defeat Trump? Or will they see that the hopes they had in the Democratic Party were taking them down a dead-end path? And will they then begin to look for alternatives?

2020: The Sanders Phenomenon, its Origins and Prospects

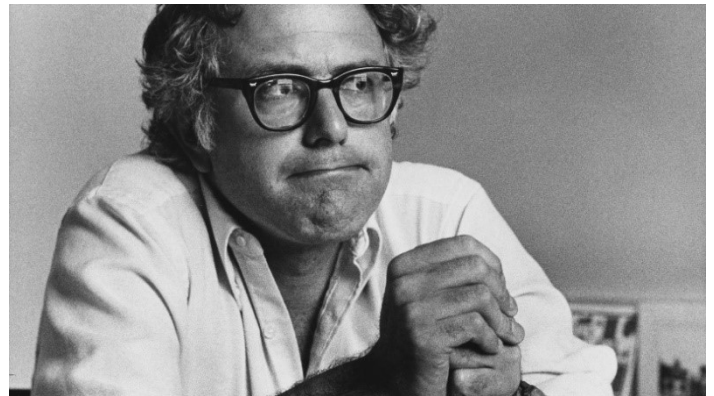
(3/2/20)

With his win in Nevada and successes in New Hampshire and Iowa, Bernie Sanders became the early front runner to be the Democratic Party's 2020 presidential nominee. This has made him a major focus of attacks from the Democratic Party establishment, the other presidential candidates, and their loyal supporters in the corporate media. The focus on Sanders, while certainly much greater than before, is not so new.

Since declaring his candidacy, Bernie Sanders has greatly influenced the Democratic Party's 2020 presidential campaign. He speaks about the real problems and challenges that ordinary people face, and has gained a broad support in the population, especially among young people and the left of the Democratic Party. Even despite the fact that the Party apparatus is clearly against his candidacy. Sanders' policy proposals have dominated the debates and every candidate has felt a pressure to address Sanders' main issues – healthcare, income inequality, student loan debt, and global warming.

Sanders identifies as a democratic socialist. He has brought the idea of socialism back into the mainstream of U.S. politics. And no doubt as a result, significant sections of the U.S. population, especially young people, view socialism in a positive light. This after decades of Cold War reaction, when it was dangerously unpopular to hold such views. A 2019 Pew Research Center poll reported that 42% of those polled supported socialism compared to 31% in 2010. Half of those polled under 30 reported a "positive or very positive" opinion of socialism. While Sanders

remains a bourgeois candidate connected to a ruling class party, he is certainly a very different candidate than what we are used to on the U.S. political scene.



Who is Bernie Sanders?

Sanders began his political activism in the 1960s, as a member of the YPSL (Young People's Socialist League), affiliated with the Socialist Party of America. The YPSL was led by Max Shachtman, formerly a Trotskyist leader of the SWP (Socialist Workers Party). Shachtman gave some young activists a Marxist formation, and a familiarity with Trotskyism. Sanders became involved in the Civil Rights Movement as a student activist in CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), and helped organize sit-ins against segregation in Chicago. He later moved to Vermont and entered politics, joining the Liberty Union Party, an electoral outgrowth of the anti-Vietnam War movement.

In 1981, Sanders was elected mayor of Burlington, Vermont, ousting the incumbent Democratic Party

mayor. He supported the construction of youth centers, parks, and housing, and opposed large-scale commercial developments. He openly expressed opposition to the U.S. wars in Latin America, and a resistance to the anti-Soviet politics of the Cold War. He hung a picture of Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs in his office. He served three terms as mayor.

In 1990, he won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, running as an independent. He was a representative until 2007, when he was elected to the U.S. Senate. He became known as the “amendment king,” bargaining his vote to both parties in return for allowing minor reforms to be added to bills they were fighting to pass. In spite of his independent status, he participates in the Democratic Party Congressional caucus meetings. His goal has been to push the Democratic Party to the left, and his presidential campaigns are the culmination of this effort.

Sanders says his “socialism” is a return to the policies inaugurated by the Democratic Party under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt was elected in the wake of the Great Depression of 1929, when 25% of the adult workforce was officially unemployed, including one third of industrial workers. The reforms of the New Deal were shaped by a decade of profound class struggle in which workers established industrial unions using sit-down strikes and factory occupations. The CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations), established in 1934, organized nine million workers by 1939. Communist Party and Socialist Workers Party militants played an active and important role in these labor struggles. The New Deal policies were enacted due to the great pressure from these movements.

The New Deal legislation created minimum wage laws, the Social Security pension system, works projects to employ the jobless, a ban on child labor, and lending programs, which allowed some people to keep their homes and their farms. But its other goal was to head off the possibility of a revolutionary workers movement and focus the workers’ attention on electoral politics and political reforms, under the leadership of the Democratic Party. Today Sanders’ proposals to redirect the federal budget to prioritize solving the impending climate catastrophe and improve peoples’ lives seem radical and promising. But while he talks about the need for an ongoing movement, his campaign in practice reinforces the perspective that

The Economic Crisis – Impact on the 99%

The U.S. economy has lost seven million industrial manufacturing jobs over the last 45 years, as manufacturing was reorganized and moved to cheaper labor markets in other countries. These better-paying, often union jobs, were replaced with 33 million low-paid, mainly non-union service sector jobs. The 2008 recession resulted in 1.8 million small businesses closing by 2010. Total household debt in the United States, including mortgages, auto loans, credit card, and student debt, climbed to \$13.95 trillion in the third quarter of 2019.

The richest 10% of U.S. households currently own 70% of the wealth, an increase of 10% from the previous 30 years. Over the preceding decades, a series of tax cuts have transferred an enormous amount of wealth into the hands of the super-rich. The Republicans have enacted the worst cuts, but the Democrats never repealed them even when they have had a majority in Congress and control of the presidency, as with the first two years of the Obama administration. The 1981 Reagan tax cuts amounted to \$111 billion over four years. George W. Bush’s administration enacted tax cuts of \$3 trillion over ten years. U.S. military spending has almost doubled in the past 20 years. The resulting budget deficit, currently \$1.1 trillion, has provided an excuse to cut social services, education, and nutrition programs.

Americans pay twice as much for healthcare as people in other major industrial countries, 30 million Americans lack health insurance, and 62% of personal bankruptcies are due to medical bills. A college education costs tens of thousands of dollars per year, and is often financed by debt.

significant changes can come through elections and through the Democratic Party.

As far as his foreign policy is concerned, like all the other candidates he has nothing but praise for the U.S. military, recently stating that, “We have the best military in the world.” If elected, he would be the Commander in Chief of the world’s largest military power with 800 bases spanning the globe. His supporters point to some of his votes against military assaults in Nicaragua and other countries in Latin America. But he has generally aligned himself with the policies of the Democratic Party

including the so-called “humanitarian” bombing of Yugoslavia and the 2001 “Global War on Terror” among others. He has voted for military budgets, funds for the occupation of Iraq, support for Israel and drone warfare, saying that drones have “done some good things.”

The 2016 Elections

The 2016 election took place in the context of increasing wealth inequality and attacks on the standard of living for the U.S. majority. (See the box on the next page - *Economic Crisis*.) The Democratic Party faced a crisis as voters looked for a change from politics as usual. The Democratic Party’s choice of Hillary Clinton for president certainly did not resonate with this desire. Nonetheless she was clearly the Party apparatus favorite, a big advantage for her.

Clinton’s first presidential attempt was in 2008 against Barack Obama. Obama ran a campaign offering the vague slogans of “hope” and “change,” referencing the Civil Rights Movement. As the first Black presidential candidate, his very attempt to run for president represented a change. He had the backing of some powerful Democrats like Edward Kennedy. He won a bitterly fought primary campaign against Clinton who was



the candidate of the DLC (Democratic Leadership Council), founded in 1985 by the Clintons. Its goal was to shift the Democratic Party away from what they viewed as the leftward turn it had taken in the late 1960s through 1980s. They wanted to get away from the “welfare state” policies and win more support from corporate donors. They also wanted to win back white middle class voters they had lost to the Republicans. The election of Bill Clinton inaugurated these policies, and Hillary Clinton has continued to defend them.

What looked like a strong disagreement before the election was short-lived. The Obama administration’s vague promises were just that. Hillary Clinton joined his cabinet and very quickly the conflict between Obama and the DLC was buried. The Obama administration continued the same “business-friendly” orientation of the Bill Clinton era, inviting pharmaceutical and health insurance companies to draft the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare. His administration extended the Bush administration’s economic bailouts to corporations and financial institutions. When General Motors went bankrupt in 2009, the Obama administration committed \$40 billion to buy its shares and keep the company afloat while it was restructured, as it cut workers’ wages and pensions. Some voters, who had placed their hopes in Obama’s talk of change, now discovered that it was the same old Democratic Party beneath the surface.

In the 2016 elections Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party insider, invoked her experience as Obama’s Secretary of State, and touted her important role in formulating the policies of Bill Clinton’s administration. She emphasized the need for continued U.S. policing of the world and defended trade deals like NAFTA (the North American

Electoral College and Popular Vote

Another undemocratic aspect of these presidential elections is that the popular vote is subordinated to the Electoral College vote. The Electoral College is a body formed every four years to elect the president and vice president. It consists of 538 electors, and an absolute majority of at least 270 electoral votes is required to win an election. Each state legislature determines how its state’s electors are chosen, and the number of electors is equal to the combined total of the state’s membership in Congress. All states have the same number of senators and thus two votes from the Senate, no matter how big or small the state population is. The House of Representatives is based on proportional representation.

Following the presidential election, each state designates its presidential electors. Nearly all states allot all their electoral votes to the winning candidate in that state. And there have been plenty of maneuvers in the form of redistricting, allowing politicians to change the party majority in a district and therefore skew the vote in their favor. This has been a successful tactic by the Republican Party over the last period.

Free Trade Act), which established an anti-worker trade agreement between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.

Sanders, on the other hand, called for a “political revolution” and a movement to “defeat the billionaire class.” He placed the blame for the plight of U.S. workers squarely on the shoulders of the wealthy. He was deeply critical of NAFTA and the anti-welfare policies of the Clintons. He refused to accept corporate contributions and large sums of money from wealthy donors. Instead he built his campaign on volunteers and small donations from individuals. His meetings and rallies drew thousands of people. He engaged younger people in politics who normally didn’t participate or vote.

The Role of the Unions

The unions are an important support to the Democratic Party. In 2016 most of the union leaderships supported Hillary Clinton. However, a number of national or international unions, and more than 100 union locals or districts, bucked this trend and endorsed Sanders. These included: APWU (American Postal Workers Union), representing 250,000 workers; ATU (Amalgamated Transit Union), representing 190,000 workers; CWA (Communication Workers of America), representing 700,000 workers; ILWU (International Longshore and Warehouse Union), representing 50,000 workers; NNU (National Nurses United) with about 150,000 members nationwide but concentrated in California; NUHW (National Union of Healthcare Workers), representing 11,000 workers; UE (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America), representing 36,000 workers. For the most part, this support remained on paper and was not backed by union money and staff. In some local and regional unions, officials could do whatever they wanted and took advantage of this to support Sanders.



In 2016 Sanders was able to win 23 state primaries and in the Democratic Party convention, received the vote of 46% of the delegates compared to 54% for Clinton, whose vote included 15% that was based on super delegates. Despite his disagreements, Sanders was loyal to the Democratic Party and supported Clinton’s candidacy. But then the Democratic Party had to face another challenge, that of Donald Trump.

Trump and the Republican Right

Early during the Obama Administration, a reactionary right-wing populist wave with roots from decades before, began to take over the Republican Party. It identified itself mostly as the Tea Party (named after the anti-tax protest in Boston against the British during the American Revolutionary period). It was formed in 2009 partly in reaction to the way the government had handled the 2008 recession, but also in response to the election of Obama, the first Black president.

The Tea Party supporters were angry and said the government didn’t represent them. Most of them were white and over 45 years old, and had not been politically active before. The largest group came from the south and after that the mid-west. They opposed big government, welfare programs, and the taxes that paid for these programs. They were strongly nationalist. They were well-funded, by the right-wing billionaire Koch brothers among others. They followed Fox news and voted Republican. They had conservative Christian social values and were strongly anti-abortion, and anti- gun control. Some ran in local, state, and congressional elections in 2010 with some real success. By the time Trump’s presidential campaign started in 2015, Tea Party supporters formed an important part of what would become his electoral base.

Trump, a business tycoon and reality TV personality, portrayed himself as being independent from Washington D.C. politics. In the televised debates, Trump belittled and attacked the other Republican candidates as being part of the problem. He called for “draining the swamp” of the Washington D.C political establishment and overturning the policies of the past. He promised to turn the Republican Party into a “workers’ party” and bring back the jobs lost as a result of the capitalists’ disinvestment in the U.S. He attacked NAFTA and made economic nationalism a central axis of his campaign. His attacks were consistently filled with racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and

The Democratic Party Candidate Selection Process

The process of selecting a candidate is a lot less democratic than what many believe. The DNC (Democratic National Committee) is the governing body of the Democratic Party. It consists of over 200 members from each state. The DNC organizes the Party conventions, sets the rules for state caucuses and primary elections, and raises money to support electoral campaigns of its candidates – a large part coming from corporate donors.

The 2020 presidential primaries and caucuses take place between February and June. Statewide primary elections or caucuses are organized to select the 3,979 delegates to the Democratic Party national convention, who choose the Democratic presidential nominee. The delegates, whose numbers are set by the DNC and correspond roughly to the population of the state, are pledged to vote for a specific candidate. If there isn't a winner at the first round, the pledged delegates can change their votes if their candidate was defeated in the first round.

The Democratic Party, from its group of party leaders and elected officials, also appoints 771 un-pledged or "super delegates." In 2020, the super delegates will no longer have the right to cast decisive votes at the convention's first ballot for the presidential nomination. They will be allowed to cast non-decisive votes if a candidate has clinched the nomination before the first ballot, or decisive votes on subsequent ballots in the case of a contested convention.

anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic allusions, sometimes echoing extreme-right groups.

He was a consummate user of Twitter. His rants resonated strongly, especially with some white middle class and working-class people who felt disregarded and left out by the political structure. Fox News provided him with a more mainstream and "legitimate" platform. He held big rallies promoting himself. Despite the efforts of the Republican Party apparatus to oppose him, Trump became their candidate.

The 2016 presidential election was a referendum on the status quo, and many discontented voters chose Trump. Though Clinton won the popular vote by 2.6 million votes, Trump succeeded in winning the vote in the Electoral College 304 to 227. While Sanders was loyal to the Democratic Party, clearly part of his electorate was not,

and refused to follow his call for a vote for Clinton. Sanders and Trump both presented themselves as political outsiders. Both faced scorn and criticism from their party's insiders. So it is not that surprising that some of the same voters who chose Sanders in the Democratic primaries, then chose Trump in the general election. Others didn't vote or voted for the Green Party candidate Jill Stein.

The 2016 Sanders campaign revealed the anti-democratic functioning of the Democratic Party. But it also was an inspiration for many young people, and for those searching for a new way to be politically active. This has been reflected in the growth of the DSA (Democratic Socialists of America). The DSA grew out of a faction that left the Socialist Party in 1973 and merged with some others to form the DSA in 1982. It had the perspective of entering the Democratic Party to reshape it into a social democratic party on the European model. It has grown from 8,000 relatively old and inactive members in 2015, to a membership of about 60,000 today.

After the 2016 election, in September 2017, Sanders introduced a bill in the Senate for a single-payer health plan, Medicare for All. This plan would make the current government-funded Medicare program for seniors available to all citizens. It would replace privately insured healthcare. DSA actively canvassed for it and has supported his proposal ever since.

The Trump Presidency and the Democratic Party Response

The Republican Party's domination of both the executive and legislative branches of the government after the 2016 election meant the Democrats were pretty much powerless to pass any legislation during this term. While they attempted either to oppose Republican legislative proposals or to put forward their own proposals, they had almost no success on either front. Trump showed himself quickly as a master of distraction. Whenever he was criticized or challenged, he quickly switched to another subject or launched an attack to take peoples' minds off of these criticisms.

Trump moved quickly to act on some of his campaign promises. He used executive orders, and cut staff in government agencies to dismantle much of what previous administrations had put in place. His cabinet members have little or no relevant experience and come predominantly from the corporate sector. For some their main qualification is that they gave money and were big supporters of Trump's campaign.



His administration has attacked civil rights, civil liberties, women's rights, and reproductive health. He also launched an attack on immigrants and Muslims with his travel bans, border wall, and the militarization of the border. He has appointed more judges than any president before him, and the majority of them are conservative and reactionary. This has had severe consequences on the limitation of voting rights, elimination of legalized abortion, and the gutting of environmental regulations.

His foreign policy appears impulsive, confusing, and sometimes terrifying. He has disrupted the international role played by the U.S. since World War II, criticizing longtime allies and taking a distance from NATO. Meanwhile he demonstrates admiration and compatibility with the world's best-known dictators, from Putin to Erdogan to Duterte, and from Modi to Kim Jong Un. One minute he is advocating withdrawing U.S. military forces from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and the next he is threatening to launch a war against Syria or with Iran. He praises Xi Jinping and soon thereafter threatens a trade war with China.

He has increased the military budget, inaugurated a new branch of military service called the "Space Force," and wants to expand production and deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons. His foreign policy proclamations have kept the Democrats and some Republicans and career government officials off balance, and much of the U.S. public confused and anxious.

Trump's election was met with revulsion by a part of the U.S. population. This translated quickly into demonstrations organized against his inauguration. Seeing the initiative and the organizing that came from the grass roots activists, including the turnout at airports to oppose the so-called Muslim ban, the Democratic Party began organizing, mobilizing, and leading social protests around the country on multiple issues. Much of their participation was behind the scenes and not openly as the Democratic

Party. It was done through groups like the Indivisibles and other front groups.

They attempted to and often succeeded in taking the lead of events like the Women's March, the Science March, the anti-gun violence protests after the Parkland shooting, and the mobilization to defend Muslims and immigrants. Almost every weekend there were large protests organized in Washington D.C., New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and other cities and small towns around the country.

The Mueller Investigation

As the demonstrations slowed, the Democrats shifted their focus towards mounting an ineffectual attack on Trump's slurs, lies, and fake news. They painted him as incompetent and corrupt, out for his own economic and political gain, and even as a traitor. They criticized his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords and the nuclear pact with Iran, as well as his cozying up to enemies while turning his back on long time U.S. allies. But their major attempt to discredit Trump's foreign relations connections came through the Mueller investigation.

Robert Mueller is a lawyer and former government official who served as the Director of the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) from 2001 to 2013, under both Democratic and Republican administrations. He was appointed as special council by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, and headed up a team of 18 prosecutors and lawyers. The Mueller investigation, which began in May of 2017 and lasted until March of 2019, accused Trump of using Russian connections to interfere in the 2016 elections to help him win. It also charged him with obstructing this investigation and with U.S. campaign finance violations.

After much talk and fanfare, and days of televised hearings, the investigation didn't result in Trump's indictment. It did however expose his many misdeeds and his links to criminals and unsavory characters. For most people the Mueller investigation was hard to understand. In the polarized political atmosphere created by Trump, it had little effect in changing anyone's mind. The Democrats believed they had proved Trump was guilty and that the Russians had interfered in the election, while the Republicans continued to back Trump.

The Campaign That Never Ends

Starting in 2018 the Democrats began to focus on the next round of elections. This was most clearly illustrated by the

change in the slogan for the Women's March from "Hear My Voice" in 2017 to "Hear My Vote." This marked the beginning of what some call "the campaign that never ends." Instead of mass mobilizations, there were voter registration drives, ballot propositions, and candidate selections. The Democrats were preparing for the 2018 mid-term elections to defeat Trump by electing a majority of Democrats to Congress and to state offices. The Democratic Party was successful, gaining 41 seats in the House of Representatives, giving it a total of 235 seats out of 435.

In some elections, DSA-endorsed candidates challenged incumbents from the Democratic Party, and some of these candidates would mention their membership or affiliation with DSA. DSA members campaigned for candidates and propositions in many cities. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, then a 29-year old in New York City, was elected to the House of Representatives with a campaign message that echoed the Sanders campaign. She defeated the long-time incumbent Democrat Joseph Crowley, and created a major upset for the Democratic Party elite.



Ocasio-Cortez, or AOC as she is known, has become a prominent figure in Washington D.C., especially with her introduction of the proposed Green , which Sanders has backed. She has endorsed Sanders and he has promised that she would play an important role in his administration. Ocasio-Cortez was joined in the House of Representatives by other DSA-endorsed candidates: Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts. These representatives, all young women of color, collectively known as "the Squad," have been the focus of a great deal of attention, especially due to Trump's attacks against them.

The 2018 election victory was followed by the formation of exploratory committees for the presidential hopefuls. Over 20 Democrats proposed themselves as presidential candidates, something we have never seen before in the Democratic Party. Sanders soon appeared as the dominant candidate. Sanders' issues became the focus of the many televised candidate debates. His proposals have found an echo in many of the other Democratic Party candidate's platforms, even if they argued for modified versions of his proposals. His rallies have been huge. As of January 2020, over five million people had contributed an average of \$18 to his campaign, more than any other candidate. Then Sanders raised \$46 million in February 2020 alone, setting another record.

The big national unions have refrained from endorsements so far, probably waiting to see how the primaries play out or maybe waiting until the Democratic Party nominates its candidate at its summer convention. The only national unions to endorse Sanders so far are the UE (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America), the NNU (National Nurses United), and the APWU (American Postal Workers Union). The NUHW (National Union of Healthcare Workers) has endorsed both Sanders and Warren. In total he has the support of 15 unions, more than the other candidates, but most are local, state, or regional organizations. Sanders' centerpiece proposal for Medicare for All has both support and opposition from the unions.

The two million member SEIU (Service Employees International Union), which didn't support Sanders in 2016, announced on February 28 that it would contribute \$150 million to help defeat Trump, running a campaign that will span 40 states.

Initially there was a field of over 20 candidates, including Latinos, African Americans, one Asian American, several women and one openly gay candidate. But by February the majority had dropped out. Initially, Elizabeth Warren and Joe Biden were seen as Sanders' biggest competitors. Warren is a former law professor. She was deeply critical of the deregulation of banks in the 1990s and 2000s and has since become a proponent of Keynesian welfare economics. She stood with Sanders on most key issues, up until January 2020 when she started to make some public criticisms of him.

The candidate of the DNC, Joe Biden, is a long-time politician and was Obama's Vice President and has run a campaign much like Clinton did in 2016. He is a centrist

and defender of the status quo, who celebrates the Obama administration's record, trying to paint Sanders' and Warren's proposals as "pie in the sky." But Biden is well known for embarrassing gaffes that have caused some concern about his candidacy.

Impeachment – a Distraction from December to February

In December, as the campaigns were getting under way, and despite the almost complete failure of the Mueller investigation to make a dent in Trump's support or really galvanize its own base, the Democratic Party establishment launched a similar, but more serious effort, with their attempt to impeach Trump. A whistleblower filed a complaint in August of 2019, claiming that Trump was trying to pressure the Ukrainian government to carry out an investigation of possible corruption by Hunter Biden, Joe Biden's son, to discredit Biden and thus help boost Trump's 2020 re-election. As this story leaked out and other witnesses came forward, the Democrats in the House of Representatives moved towards an impeachment trial.

Trump was charged with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. This was based on Trump's soliciting interference in a U.S. election by a foreign power and with obstructing the investigation of his actions. Trump ordered his staff to refuse to cooperate with the investigation and told House Republicans to vote against his impeachment. The House, with its Democratic majority, voted to impeach Trump and sent the charges to the Senate for an impeachment trial. The Republican dominated Senate collaborated with the Trump White House in carrying out the trial, refused to call any witnesses, and did not vote to impeach him.

The news media was totally focused on the impeachment process, with Fox as the Trump mouthpiece and CNN and MSNBC as the voice of the Democrats. The presidential campaign, which had been focused on issues that ordinary people actually cared about, suddenly went back to being just a nasty fight between the politicians of the two parties. The impeachment of Trump, if anything, pushed him slightly up in the polls. It was just another distraction without much interest from the general population.

The Democratic Party establishment used the impeachment fiasco to take attention off of Sanders and the policy questions that had become central to the campaign. The goal was to focus instead on selecting a

candidate that the polls indicated could defeat Trump. Sanders was portrayed as being too far to the left, with Biden put forward as the best middle of the road choice. This was reinforced by endorsements for Biden and other candidates from prominent politicians, celebrities, and newspapers like the *New York Times*.

As the impeachment process ended, the primary election contests began. Sanders did well in Iowa and New Hampshire, and won in Nevada – all relatively small states without very diverse populations. Neither Biden nor Warren had good outcomes. On the other hand, Pete Buttigieg, former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and a 38-year-old, openly gay man, narrowly won the pledged delegate count in the Iowa caucuses. This gave him much more publicity and media attention, though he was never really considered to be a real contender for the presidential nomination. He is a centrist in the Biden tradition but younger and more articulate. He also came in second after Sanders in the New Hampshire primary.

The results caused a lot of handwringing among the Democrats who were concerned that the Biden candidacy might be over. An additional factor was the candidacies of two billionaires. The first, Tom Steyer, a former hedge fund manager, has been identified with the movement against climate change. He spent \$200 million on his campaign but failed to get any real traction in any of the electoral contests. The other, Michael Bloomberg, a former New York City mayor and media mogul, is the 12th

The Cost of Elections

The elections are not a working person's game. Democratic Party fundraising plays a big role in who will be chosen as a candidate. And much of the money raised is from corporations and the super-rich, who expect a return for the money they invest in the party if their candidate is elected. Candidates seek endorsements from major newspapers, well-known politicians, entertainers, movie stars, and sports figures. Their ad campaigns and use of social media play a major role in selling their candidate to the electorate.

The 2016 election, including congressional races, cost an estimated \$2.4 billion! As of Super Tuesday, billions have already been spent and this will only increase as we get closer to the November election. The less money you have and the fewer media connections, the less chance you have to ever run, let alone win, political office in the U.S.

richest man on the planet, worth an estimated \$60 billion. As of February he had spent an estimated \$464 million on his campaign.

Bloomberg's endorsements and media attention definitely seemed to be positioning him as a possible alternative to Biden as the candidate of the Democratic Party establishment who could oppose Sanders. The DNC even changed its criteria to allow Bloomberg to participate in its televised debates. He chose not to participate in any of the contests until Super Tuesday on March 3.

South Carolina Gives Biden a Reprieve

On Saturday, February 29th, the primary elections moved south. The South Carolina primary is important because it is the first election with a large African American vote. Biden received a last-minute endorsement from Representative James Clyburn, the highest ranking African American member of Congress from South Carolina and a major player in the Democratic Party. Biden won 40% of the vote and 35 delegates. The vote, reflecting an older population who saw Biden as a continuator of President Obama, seemed to rebalance the electoral contest back in the favor of the DNC.

After weeks of a campaign on life support, the Democratic Party leaders and the media were again proclaiming Biden as the moderate antidote to the socialist Sanders, and the most likely to beat Trump. There was then a lot of talk that the other moderate candidates should immediately drop out to give Biden the best chance of beating Sanders on Super Tuesday. Steyer dropped out that night. And on the following Monday, both Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar dropped out, proclaiming that they would go to a Biden campaign rally in Texas to endorse him. Clearly the candidates and the DNC hoped that this would cut into Sanders' results and improve Biden's chances.

As in 2016, the Democratic Party apparatus and its corporate backers appear ready to take the risk of refusing to accept Sanders' candidacy. If the DNC crushes the Sanders campaign, it risks losing the support of a significant number of voters, especially those under 30 who support Sanders by a 51% majority. There is an even greater chance in 2020 of what took place in 2016, when Sanders supporters did not follow his request to back Clinton.

Elections: A Barometer of Popular Consciousness, Not an Instrument for Real Change

So far, this election campaign has reinforced the existing polarization and divisions in U.S. society. And political hopes, for most people who oppose Trump, still rest on the elections and voting him out. There is also a growing impatience and sense of urgency felt by many young people, women, immigrants, African Americans, and Latinos, who have been the objects of Trump's attacks. These attacks can't be taken lightly, but the elections can serve as a dangerous diversion.

Trump's noxious personality and blatant stupidity has served as a cover for those who really benefit from government policies. As distasteful and dangerous as he may seem at times to the capitalist class, they have done well under his presidency. So, as much as most would breathe a deep sigh of relief with his disappearance from the political scene, we can't afford to ignore the reality that many of the same policies that benefit the 1% will continue to operate, regardless of who is elected. They will just be packaged differently.

The Trump presidency has politicized many younger people who were not active before. This is exemplified by those who have recently joined DSA, which is working for Sanders in the Democratic primaries. Of course, there are some regional variations in the form this support takes. In the first place, only a small fraction of the DSA membership is active in DSA work. In Baltimore, for example, only about 10% to 15% of the 600 dues-paying members regularly attend meetings and/or participate in chapter activities. In some chapters, there has been concern that the presidential campaign will drain time and energy from ongoing local projects on housing, the environment, and other issues. In addition, the several DSA national caucuses have different approaches toward the Democratic Party.

Some believe that supporting Sanders will move the Democratic Party to the left and eventually to a social democratic victory on healthcare, climate change, housing, education, and other issues. Others believe that the working class will eventually need its own political party and that engaging in the Democratic Party now is a temporary strategic move in the right direction. Regardless of the internal politics, most active DSA members say that the Sanders campaign and other campaigns within the Democratic Party give them an opportunity to talk about socialism with people they otherwise wouldn't engage with



– but with a focus on the elections. Many believe that they might actually win, whether it’s a city council seat or the presidency, and that this would be an important accomplishment. This approach sows illusions in the power of electoral politics, and the need to orient toward the Democratic Party.

The Challenge for Revolutionaries

We also need to acknowledge the challenges the current situation poses for revolutionary groups. The lack of an active mobilization and fight by the U.S. working class in the last period, in addition to its demoralization, certainly contributes to our problems. Beyond this and linked to this fact, the impact of the 2016 Sanders campaign, competition with the various immigration rights, environmental, and other NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), and especially the growth of DSA, have disoriented sections of the U.S. revolutionary left.

These organizations have generally lacked independent initiatives, especially in the working class, where their activity was limited to the unions or campaigns like “Fight for \$15.” Their recruitment strategy has been based almost exclusively on their participation in the varied popular responses to social questions – attacks on education, defending women’s access to abortion, opposing police violence, defending prisoner rights, confronting the growth of the extreme right, and other issues. This strategy was primarily directed toward college campuses. As a consequence, their membership, along with many middle class and union activists, felt the gravitational pull of the Sanders campaign and the seemingly more dynamic DSA.

The ISO (International Socialist Organization), a state-capitalist organization within the Trotskyist left, recently counted a thousand members. For the ISO, electoral activity meant gradually moving away from the bourgeois parties in the direction of “the left.” This meant that any leftwing or reformist electoral effort would be a step in the “right direction.” This orientation was demonstrated in the ISO’s substantial activity in the Green Party campaign of Ralph Nader in 2000, and in Nader’s independent presidential campaign in 2004. The ISO wrote favorably in 2016 about the role of Bernie Sanders in introducing a sort of socialist verbiage into the campaign. But they refused to support his campaign and characterized it as a diversion so long as it remained within the Democratic Party.

Under pressure from competition with DSA and the rise of the Sanders phenomenon, and with no other independent movements to engage in, when the ISO suffered major internal problems, the combination of these factors led to its dissolution in 2019. Many leading members and activists have since joined DSA and now support the Sanders campaign.

SA (Socialist Alternative), the U.S. section of the CWI (Communist Workers International), made a name for itself nationally with the election of Kshama Sawant, as a socialist, to the 2014 Seattle City Council. They campaigned for Bernie Sanders during the 2016 Democratic Party primaries. They launched a campaign called #movementforBernie. They built committees, gathered signatures, and promoted Sanders’ efforts while calling on Sanders to break with the Democrats if he failed to win the nomination. While they supported Sanders, they did not enter the Democratic Party, and only voted in primaries where a party affiliation was not required. Their tactic in the 2016 election seems to have backfired as they suffered a major split in 2018, with a substantial number of their leading militants entering DSA. SA is again actively supporting and campaigning for Sanders in the 2020 election.

The disappearance of the ISO and the weakening of Socialist Alternative has marked a significant shift in the U.S. revolutionary left. It means a shift to active engagement with the Democratic Party in support of a reformist program. It is a loss. In their own ways, these groups had maintained and defended some revolutionary principles, including the political independence of the working class.

We Can't Dismiss the Effects of the 2020 Elections

The elections provide a partial measure of the political climate and the attitude and engagement of different sections of the U.S. population. As revolutionaries, we need to recognize and embrace the deep concerns of those who are disillusioned and revolted by the current political scene. But while elections may serve as a barometer of changing attitudes, we have to be clear that elections are not an instrument for real social change. In fact elections can be an obstacle to real change.

This isn't to say that revolutionaries should never participate in elections. Elections can be used as an effective tool, if they are linked to social movements or workers' struggles. They can allow us to gain visibility, let our ideas reach a much wider audience, and express our class interests. They can be a way to show that ordinary people can represent ourselves.

There are plenty of examples in the past history of the workers' and revolutionary movements, including in the U.S., where such candidates and such election campaigns were carried out. Not with the goal of saying "Vote for me, I'll set you free," but instead by making it very clear that elections, under the capitalist system, will not change our conditions – only our own organized activity can bring about the changes we need.

Our task is not to shrink from discussing the problems Sanders has addressed, far from it. They are the real day-to-day problems that people confront. The challenge is to address the hopes expressed in the Sanders phenomenon without stoking illusions in the Democratic Party and electoral solutions. For Sanders the obstacle to his so-called revolution is the corporate control of the Democratic Party, not the capitalist system. He holds out the hope that if he and other social democrats become the leadership of the Democratic Party, and his base is ready to act as a pressure group after the election, then his victory could lead to solutions to the many problems ordinary people face. But this is a fantasy.

The Green New Deal, while it may sound like a hopeful proposal, ignores reality. The fact of the disruptive impact of carbon emissions has been known for 50 years (or more). Each year mounting scientific evidence has pointed to a crisis that those in power are quite aware of. How will the passing of legislation, if successful, contend with the centrality of oil and its by-products to the global economy? The U.S. is the largest producer and consumer of oil and

natural gas in the world, and has increased production over the last period. The U.S. military has torn apart the Middle East to impose the control of U.S. corporations over the oil fields of the region. And with its 800 bases, the U.S. military dominates the world, defending U.S. corporate interests. An election will not alter this reality. To entertain the hope that Sanders or any other politician could enact the reforms he has campaigned on is to ignore the realities of the system we live under.

Sanders' campaign provides hope that there could be an alternative to the prospect of what four more years of Trump could bring, and for good reason. Certainly if Trump is re-elected we could expect an increased political polarization that would continue to strip away our basic rights. We could expect an increase in his vicious verbal and state-level attacks on immigrants (undocumented or not), on African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities, as well as against the right of women to access healthcare and abortion. We could see his administration make more cuts to the few remaining supports for the poorest and often unhoused members of society and more. We could expect them to continue to overturn environmental protections, workplace safety legislation, and other rights and protections that were won by past struggles. And Trump's ultra-nationalistic approach could bring the world closer to major wars.

Trump's policies and his callous attitude has exposed much of the way the system has always functioned, but usually it is not so openly exposed. The difference we see today is that Trump takes a perverse pleasure in enacting these policies, while other politicians are much more prudent and prefer to cover them up, keeping the greed and corruption of this system out of public view. So, it is easy for people to believe that Trump is the problem, when really the problems we face have existed and will continue to exist as long as this system does.

Voting is Not the Real Issue

Our focus shouldn't be on whether people vote for Sanders or not. As the historian and activist Howard Zinn used to point out – it only takes a few minutes to vote, but what are you going to do with the rest of your time?

We have to discuss with those who have been attracted to the Sanders campaign and could become disillusioned when they see the attacks on Sanders by the Democratic Party establishment and corporate media. As they see the electoral process play out, they might be more ready to look for other solutions. This will give us a good

opportunity to discuss a revolutionary perspective with them.

We have to discuss with these activists today how to take the steps to defend ourselves, not just from Trump, but from the system that he and the Democrats represent. This means discussing the nature of the capitalist system. We need to challenge the view that people's energies should be focused on the upcoming elections instead of engaging and organizing around the daily and ongoing problems we confront – on the job, in our neighborhoods, at our schools or beyond. Often this begins just by having conversations with people who are deeply concerned about the problems of this society. The fact that they are Sanders supporters at this moment, or have been active in the Sanders campaign or other electoral activity should not be an obstacle to talking with them. We have to be honest about our assessment of electoral activity, without diminishing people's enthusiasm and desire for deep change.

We have to remind people of the lessons of our history. The rights and programs that are under attack were not gained through electoral campaigns – whether it was the right to vote, free access to abortion, the right to join or organize a union, the fight for civil rights, or environmental protections. These rights and other gains were made by people mobilizing their power and forcing the system to make some reforms. Today, we are faced with the specter of massive climate disruption. The greed of this capitalist system is plunging increasing millions into poverty. It threatens to widen the wars that are already raging today into even larger massacres. We don't have the time to focus our energy appealing to this system to reform itself.



Protests in Santiago, Chile (October 2019)

We can explain that if we organize our considerable potential forces, we will be ready to fight for what we need both before and after the elections. This is true whether Trump or Sanders or another Democrat wins the presidency. But more importantly we can be ready for the upsurges that could lie ahead.

When we look around the world, we see many mass movements that have emerged quickly out of the deep discontent in the populations. But in country after country these struggles have simply led to new elections, and new government formations that are made up of the same ruling elite responsible for the exploitation and oppression that these movements fought to end. Without a revolutionary perspective, no matter how deep-seated the feelings are, or how determined and courageous the movements are, they will be unable to go beyond demanding reforms from the existing system.

This is why our primary task as revolutionaries today remains to construct a revolutionary organization rooted in the working class on a global scale. The task today has an urgency never faced before. We are living in a time when we have everything to lose but also the possibility of a world to win for the future of all humanity.



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