

# Assessing the Sanders Campaign



How are we to assess the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign?

There are three reasons that one runs a candidate for president. One is the hope of winning, second is to influence other candidates to modify their views, and third is to use the campaign to build for the future, either educationally or organizationally.

Though there are some who do not rule out the possibility that [Sanders could win](#), I consider that chance to be remote and so for me the question is what the Sanders campaign might accomplish assuming he doesn't win. I will first consider possible educational benefits.

The educational value of a campaign depends on several factors. One relates to the positions that the candidate takes. The better the candidate's positions, the more the American people come to understand what's wrong with current policy and what better policies could be. Sanders has many admirable positions, on inequality, campaign financing, the environment, and much more. However, quite a few of his [foreign policy](#) stances, especially on [Israel-Palestine](#), have been poor (on the liberal end of Senate opinion, but still poor). He doesn't even list foreign policy on the issues page of his [presidential website](#). His position on [gun control](#) (no doubt a result of his representing rural Vermont) is weak. And while he takes the right nominal positions on racial and gender issues, he downplays these and has often been content

to rely on [economic justice](#) as the cure-all (race and gender are also absent from the issues page of his [website](#)). And his connection to African-American movements [has been rather limited](#). So any leftist support for Sanders, if it's to have a positive educational impact, will need to push him and criticize him on these issues.

Another aspect of what people might learn from a Sanders campaign is the exposure that left ideas will get in the mainstream. Of course, socialists of one kind or another have run in every U.S. election for more than a hundred years. But as minor party candidates, these socialists have rarely been able to reach many Americans with their messages. Because Sanders is running as a Democrat, he is assured a degree of coverage that far exceeds what third party candidates have generally been able to receive. The media attention [draws crowds](#) which attracts more media attention and drives up polls (he's now in a [dead heat](#) with Clinton in New Hampshire), which attracts still more media attention. When Sanders can go on Late Night with Seth Meyers and explain why [socialism is not a dirty word](#) and get his host to more or less accept his argument, this is a real boon for the left.

One indication of how the Sanders campaign has broadened the conversation for the general public was a [remarkable editorial](#) in the largest circulation newspaper in New Jersey. The *Star Ledger* of Newark is a liberal paper: it takes progressive positions on most issues (with the usual exception of Palestine) and with the glaring exception of its hatred of public employee unions, which led it to its horrendous endorsement (to its eternal embarrassment) of Chris Christie for governor in 2013. But here is what they said in a June 15 editorial – not an op-ed, but an editorial – titled [Like it or not, Sanders' socialism is mainstream](#):

On Thursday, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), said that "in virtually every instance, what I'm saying is supported by a significant majority of the American people," which is a

bold claim for someone who has been broadly labeled a "socialist" candidate in Democratic camouflage.

But it makes this a good time to consider whether that term is being applied accurately in the early innings of this 2016 campaign, rather than as a pejorative to dismiss Sanders' ideas.

Because so far, the Senator is showing the electorate that a rejection of this "socialism" – the concept, not the brainless epithet – is something that most voters would probably find unthinkable.

And if you consult the polls, Sanders' claim is not only right, he is positively mainstream.

And then the editors listed Sanders' positions that were supported by the majority of the American people: raise taxes on the rich, take money out of politics, reducing student debt, fighting global warming, a \$15 federal minimum wage, and shrinking Wall Street banks.

A lot of Americans realize, said the *Star Ledger*, that "socialist precepts, in large part, represent the civic and cultural foundation of our nation." In fact, "[m]any things we take for granted today were conceived by leftist coalitions that included Socialists and other Progressives, such as the eight-hour workday, women's suffrage, Medicare, and Social Security."

Now of course many of us socialists consider socialism to mean something far more radical than these valuable reforms. But where neoliberalism and unregulated capitalism have seemed for so long as the only political options in mainstream discourse in the United States, Sanders has been able to deliver an alternative message to more people than has been the case in many years. And he is likely to have greater access to televised debates than any socialist in U.S. history.

Allowing the public to hear a debate on the real questions before us cannot fail to push politics in a favorable direction.

There is said to be one other educational outcome of the Sanders campaign – a negative one. Because Sanders is running as a Democrat, some argue, people will learn the false lesson that the Democratic Party offers us hope, that real social change is possible through this party that in fact represents the liberal wing of capital. As [Jason Schulman has argued](#), there are good reasons to think that the Democratic Party is not the same sort of ideologically-determined organization as political parties are in most other countries of the world. Voting for one of the two dominant parties in the United States doesn't commit you to anything; indeed, running as the candidate of one of these parties doesn't commit you to anything. ([Recall](#) those Republican presidential candidates who explicitly disagree with their own party's platform.) But in any event, the concern expressed here – that the experience of supporting Bernie in the primaries and losing will convince people that Hillary should be supported – doesn't seem very realistic.

Some who support and vote for Sanders in the primaries will vote for the Democratic nominee – presumably Clinton – in November. But they won't be doing so because Sanders told them to. They will be following their own inclinations to support the lesser evil. (To be sure, some exaggerate the difference between the Democrats and Republicans. But it's also true that many leftists minimize these differences – claiming, for example, that Obama turned out to be "[Bush on steroids](#)" – which leads many of those who benefit from those differences to become alienated from the left.) Others will vote for Clinton because their original reason for voting for Sanders in the primary was to push Clinton to the left. But the question is whether there are very many people who were originally inclined to support a third party candidate in the

general election but who will vote for Hillary because Sanders challenged her in the primaries. I can't imagine why this would be so. Why would anyone who voted for a Ralph Nader in 2000 or a Jill Stein in 2012 vote for Clinton in 2016 just because Sanders ran and lost in the Democratic primaries? On the contrary, the opposite seems rather more likely. Someone who considers themselves a good Democrat might be convinced by the Sanders campaign that the times call for significant change, and when the Democratic Party, by nominating Clinton, precludes that change, they might feel bitter and betrayed and seek some other outlet for their desire for change.

The exception would be if the dynamics of the primary campaign forced Clinton sufficiently to the left that dissident Democrats were won over to her new positions. This might strengthen the Democrats among progressive voters. But if Clinton did adopt some significant aspect of Sanders' program, that would represent a victory for the left – influencing other candidates in a positive direction is one of the reasons one runs a campaign. Obviously she would be doing this as a way to defeat the threat from her left, but the left can't very well object to this. Hoping that the major parties offer the most reactionary candidates so that voters will have no choice but to cast votes for a socialist is not something that strengthens the left in the long run.

Note that if one's sole goal is to push Clinton to the left, a Sanders challenge in the Democratic primary is likely to be more effective than a Sanders third party challenge. Why? Because in an electoral system (like that of the United States) that uses a first-past-the-post plurality voting system a third party challenge in the general election will always be plagued by the "spoiler" problem; voting for the third party could really end up helping the Republican candidate. So Clinton can safely ignore the threat from the third party. On the other hand, in the Democratic primary there is far less risk that voting for your preferred

candidate will benefit the worst candidate. If the preferred candidate wins, great. But if not, you haven't ended up helping the Republican. So the primary challenger is likely to be a greater threat to Clinton, and hence one that puts greater pressure on her to move left. I think this is what explains a good deal of the labor support for Sanders (such as the endorsement by the [South Carolina AFL-CIO](#)): not that Sanders has brought them into the Democratic Party, but that Sanders' presence in the Democratic primary allows them to try to pressure the frontrunner to take more pro-labor positions.

A close election campaign will raise tough problems for progressive voters in swing states. But I would expect a failed Sanders campaign to lead to more third party votes than we've seen in comparably competitive elections – regardless of whether Sanders ultimately endorses Clinton.

Consider what happened in New York State in 2014. There was a left challenge to Andrew Cuomo in the Democratic primary for governor by Zephyr Teachout. After she lost, many of her supporters voted for Howie Hawkins of the Greens, more than tripling Hawkins' vote total over 2010. (Teachout did not endorse Cuomo, but nor did she endorse Hawkins.) Hawkins on the Green line got 50 percent more votes than Cuomo did on the Working Families line.

Obviously if the Greens or other leftists denounce those who support Sanders as dupes of the Democratic National Committee, this may disincline the Sanders voters from moving left after Sanders' defeat. But absent such sectarianism, I think the Sanders campaign will help propel more radical electoral movements in the future.

Had Sanders opted to run as an independent from the beginning, he would have given up certain advantages. In addition to losing support from those who are interested exclusively in pushing Clinton to the left, he would also have given up his much greater access to debates. (Obviously, justice demands

that third party candidates be given access to debates. But as a practical matter, it's far easier to secure access to the Democratic primary debates when you are polling 20 percent plus among Democrats, than it is to secure access to the general election debates when you are polling around 5 percent nationally as a third party candidate.) But in return for these advantages, the advantage in Sanders' running as an independent is that he could have had a more positive impact organizationally, helping to build a party that could continue on after 2016, something that won't happen given his current course. This would by no means have been assured; many third party efforts have been one-off affairs that have left nothing in their wake. And of course many current Sanders supporters would not have offered their time and money to support a third party effort, since a considerable fraction of his volunteers and money come from folks who have not yet given up on the Democrats; it will take the defeat of Sanders in the primaries to convince some of them to jump ship. Nevertheless, some of the money and time invested in Sanders today could have directly contributed to building third party efforts for the future, more than will be the case with a Sanders primary run.

So should Sanders have run as an independent? I'm not sure. I think his current campaign will greatly advance the prospects for the left. It's also possible that had he run as an independent, his positive impact would have been greater. But it's also possible that an independent run would have resulted in less benefit. Like [Michael Albert](#), I think modesty is required here. ("Before the fact, all outcomes are conceivable, and no outcome after the fact should be treated as having been inevitable, nor should those on the wrong side of the prediction be deemed less worthy than those on the right side.") The impact is hard to measure and we should not be denouncing those whose assessments (i.e., guesses) are different from our own.

Given that Sanders is running, I think it makes sense to

critically support him. That means we continue to speak out on issues where his positions are problematic and that we push for the building of lasting organizational structures and activism during and after the primaries. It's those things that in the long run will be crucial for achieving real change.