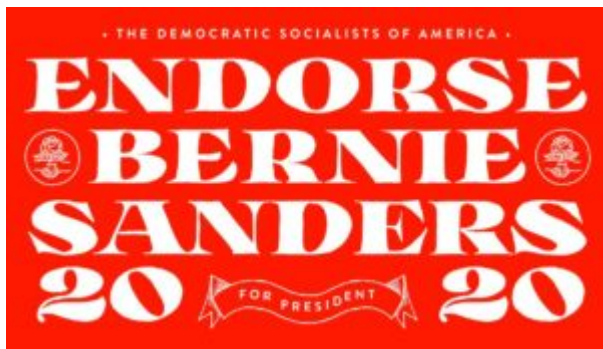


# Bern After Reading: Sanders and Socialist Strategy



In March of 2019, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) endorsed Bernie Sanders' bid for President of the United States. DSA members voted on an advisory referendum that simply asked if the Democratic Socialists of

America should endorse Bernie Sanders for President. 76% of the 13,324 members who participated (24% of the membership) voted YES. NO votes cited the particulars of the endorsement: the referendum only had members vote on whether to endorse, not whether to adopt the plan for an [Independent Expenditure \(IE\) campaign](#), which was adopted immediately following the endorsement.

The [formal endorsement debate](#) between then-NPC member Ella Mahony (for) and Dan La Botz (against) articulated the political positions at stake: the danger of the Democratic Party (La Botz) versus the potential of the Sanders campaign (Mahony). Mahony writes,

Bernie Sanders is running for president, and he might actually win. What we can do—what we must do—is use the organizing opportunity of the Sanders campaign to reach millions of people when they are most open to politics—and socialist politics particularly! We have to convert them into committed fighters for the democratic socialist program, and make sure they don't recede into pessimism or inactivity after the presidential election is over.

Mahony's argument embodied the perspective of many DSA members, who agreed that the Sanders campaign provided opportunities and that it would be a mistake not to take

advantage of them. The combination of Sanders' outsider status (a candidate running *against* the political establishment), a social democratic platform, and the sense of a historic opportunity clearly won the majority of DSA members to endorsement.

For those skeptical of the Democratic Party, a compromise was offered – the pro-Sanders argument was able to acknowledge the problems with electoralism<sup>[1]</sup> and chart a path forward that argued for conditional involvement for the purpose of movement-building, class consciousness and socialist organization.

The 2019 DSA Convention articulated these [conditions](#) in the electoral resolutions it passed. These stated, specifically in the [class struggle elections](#) strategy, that DSA will “commit to using campaigns and elected offices...independent of candidates' campaigns and the Democratic Party”; that it has a desire to break from the Democratic Party<sup>[2]</sup>; that it commit to [only endorse Bernie Sanders and no other Democrat](#) (disclaimer: I am the author of this resolution); and finally:

“that DSA will adopt a class-struggle approach to the Bernie Sanders campaign. This includes creating independent socialist political propaganda; building a strong DSA for Bernie campaign; supporting Labor for Bernie efforts to democratize union endorsement processes and win union backing for Sanders; and preparing to build working-class organization beyond the Sanders campaign, whether Sanders wins or loses.”

These discussions showed awareness of the issues that being involved with a presidential campaign would have and created qualifications for involvement. Campaigning for Sanders was presented as an instrumental relationship, leading from electoral politics as a site of politicization to labor and social movement activity. DSA would use the space opened by the campaign to create organizations that survive past

November, discuss socialism beyond our milieu, and move us closer to a place of establishing a viable workers' party (at some point in the future). These are the arguments that were presented by DSA leaders and adopted at Convention.

## **Are We Doing What We Said We'd Do?**

Following the August 2019 DSA Convention, campaigning for Sanders began in earnest. DSA invested into the [DSA for Bernie](#) Independent Expenditure, providing materials and direction. Members eager to organize were guided to [campaign activities](#) that mirrored Sanders' official volunteer program: canvass locally, enter data into ActionNetwork, and phonebank to voters beyond your locale. Based on [the campaign data](#), the centers of this activity in DSA are New York, Seattle, Philadelphia, Chicago, Phoenix, East Bay and Miami. Chicago DSA's [proposal to prioritize Sanders work](#) in their chapter, for example, interprets campaigning as consisting of four elements: canvassing, outreach to students, internal mobilization, and propaganda (local media outlets, literature and "a strong social media presence"). DSA is not officially coordinating with the Sanders campaign.

The media campaign, what we're saying about Sanders, has been a central component of DSA's activity. A concerted campaign to boost the Sanders message by DSA authors and fellow travelers has been ongoing in various publications, particularly Jacobin and In These Times, which have posted dozens of articles and multiple print issues about Sanders. In 2019, Jacobin alone posted 340 articles with "Bernie" or "Sanders" in the title or summary on its website, typically arguing why Sanders can win or why he is the candidate for every issue.

As the official Bernie Sanders campaign has gotten off the ground, DSA members have been encouraged to attend the conference calls of the campaign and download and use the official *Bern* app. DSA members have taken staff jobs in the Bernie Sanders campaign, as field staff, advisers and running

campaign affiliates, and are encouraging DSA members to participate in official Bernie Sanders functions and “Barnstorms”.

## **Cause for Concern**

Based off this presentation of what is publicly available, we can begin to make some evaluations. First, this activity focuses nearly exclusively on individual voter turnout: canvassing, phone banking, tabling – these are routine activities for any electoral campaign, and though they may give purpose to DSA members looking for where to direct their efforts they do not in themselves contribute to a deepening politicization or activation into labor or social movements. If these efforts are directed at campuses and neighborhoods where Sanders already has support, campaigning would not extend our audience beyond the existing bounds.

Second, if the class struggle elections perspective is what guides us, we are to be “independent of candidates’ campaigns and the Democratic Party.” DSA has generally run its operations parallel to the Sanders infrastructure, which blurs the lines between DSA and Sanders, especially as our members become staff for his campaign. Whether you think that is good or bad, it is not politically independent. The danger is substituting the candidate’s electoral strategy (de-prioritizing local efforts in favor of phonebanking/canvassing in early primary/battleground states) in place of DSA’s efforts to build a lasting political force, as the Convention agreed.

Take the example of a debate at the end of 2019. [An article from the Atlantic](#) reported that DSA chapters in Iowa were not pursuing election campaigning – they weren’t “doing nothing”, but instead made a decision to focus on local organizing: “Individual members would be welcome to volunteer for Sanders on their own time...but campaigning for him as a chapter would distract from [Central Iowa’s] local efforts...”; “As much as

many of our members love Bernie, we see our importance more so in building class consciousness and working-class power in our communities, because that will ultimately last longer.” This was met with [a widely read rebuke](#) by a DSA member in New York: “Iowa DSA chapters’ failure to help energize the progressive Iowa voters and new caucus-goers is a giant mistake.”

An important part of the 2016 Sanders campaign was the emergence of Labor for Bernie, a grassroots effort of union members to support Sanders. In 2020, Labor for Bernie has been eclipsed by the official Bernie Sanders’ “Union Members for Bernie” initiative, directly affiliated to the campaign. What’s the difference? Jonah Fuhrman, DSA member and staff for Union Members’ for Bernie, writes, “L4B is more about activists trying to move their unions towards Bernie (which is awesome and which the official campaign cannot politically participate in!) and the official campaign is trying to do more conventional things like Voter ID, persuasion, and GOTV on the member level, engaging members who are in unions that are not going to endorse Bernie.” In theory there should be no conflict, but where L4B organizers have taken up with Union Members for Bernie, it diminishes the capacity of the independent initiative in favor of the campaign-driven one.<sup>[3]</sup>

### The Narrative of Sanders

Let’s consider the *de facto* analysis that seems to inform DSA’s campaign for Sanders. If we look at what’s being put out in publications like *Jacobin*, circulated articles about Sanders, and social media, then try to make some coherent sense of it, there is a narrative being advanced:

1. Bernie Sanders made a [historic bid](#)<sup>[4]</sup> for the presidency in 2016, bringing socialism into the national conversation. Just why he was able to do this isn’t entirely clear, but on the whole people were ready for an [alternative to politics as usual](#)<sup>[5]</sup>. While he found

popular support, he was either [cheated out of the nomination](#)<sup>[6]</sup> by [tricks of the Democratic Party](#), unable to mount a strong campaign because of the late start<sup>[7]</sup> he got and his own surprise at being so popular, or both.

2. The [political landscape](#) was [transformed](#)<sup>[8]</sup> by this campaign. The evidence we have for that is the [growth of DSA](#)<sup>[9]</sup> to become the largest socialist organization in over 50 years, and polls that show people's [preference for "socialism" over "capitalism"](#).
3. A Sanders campaign with more time, money, and support would be able to expand these the radicalization and reach more people, which would be a major gain for the left<sup>[10]</sup>.
4. Sanders' popularity, especially when [matched up against Trump](#), show that he should win the nomination in a democratic contest; even those who may not like Sanders should accept his nomination as the [best chance to defeat Trump](#), who they hate.
5. The viability of democratic socialism at the polls is demonstrated by the election of socialist candidates at local, state and federal offices.
  - [Young people prefer Sanders](#), as do [many people of color](#). If these people are [mobilized to vote specifically](#), Sanders should win the nomination.
6. The major problem is that the political establishment attempts to suppress Sanders by [ignoring him](#), [demonizing him](#) and [his supporters](#), or [refusing to acknowledge](#) his popularity and standing
7. Therefore, a central task for the left is to counteract [this media campaign](#) and [boost Sanders](#) to increase confidence among voters in the Democratic Primary.
  - The way to do this is through [canvassing](#), phone banking, social media, union resolutions and donations. Every effort should be made to link issues back to Sanders

- Special attention should be paid to early primaries, like Iowa, to signal to voters Sanders' viability and popularity. Socialists can be the difference between winning or losing a primary with efforts to talk directly to voters.
8. After mobilizing this vote, Sanders will win the Democratic Party nomination and go on to defeat Trump in November 2020. He will then [preside](#) as "[organizer-in-chief](#)" and [oversee](#) a "workers' government."

This is an entirely different orientation to the Sanders campaign. The goal posts have moved from "converting the electoral energy of 2020 into a durable labor and social movement organization" (Mahony) to building a movement *for* Bernie, "[Why Chicago Should Go All In For Bernie](#)" (Sean Duffy); parenthetically, going "all in" is a gambling term that means you either win big or leave with nothing.

Taking this presentation seriously, there are holes in the argument and leaps over important problems. Let me just consider three items. First, the narrative completely sidesteps the nomination process, which is designed to prevent unwanted candidates from becoming the nominee. The Sanders campaign made that reality painfully evident in 2016 by shining light on the workings of the Democratic Party that are normally hidden from sight – and that public confrontation, laying bare the operation of the Democratic Party, was one of the most important things that Sanders was able to accomplish in 2016.

This reality has not changed. The Democratic Party nomination is not a democratic contest – it is an orchestrated event that is constructed to ensure that the neoliberal candidate always surfaces. Like the rest of capitalist democracy, this operates on multiple levels that reinforce each other: first there is the contest for campaign money to even be able to stand for election; then there is the "invisible primary" of the media to siphon support away from any undesirables; [pledged support](#)

[from sitting Democrats](#); then the state primaries with their arcane rules; and finally the Democratic National Convention and the superdelegate system.<sup>[11]</sup> And that's just the structural stuff.

A major reason this works is because it rests on an illusion of democracy, and the process creates a sense of affinity with the eventual candidate ("our guy"). The superdelegate system, which in 2016 pledged to Clinton before the primaries even began, is still intact – remember that this was introduced [after George McGovern to fend off "outlier candidates,"](#) and no remotely left candidate has taken the Democratic nomination since. This is not spoken of in the Sanders narrative because it interrupts the story – how can Sanders win in this environment?

Similar issues exist when we consider what might happen *after* the primary if Sanders is awarded the Democratic nomination. The corporate backers of the Democratic Party are unlikely to accept Sanders<sup>[12]</sup> as a presidential candidate. Sanders of course [leads](#) among voters [making less than \\$50,000](#), though he also has the least support among wealthier voters. This is significant in the United States where the more money you have, [the more likely you are to vote.](#)<sup>[13]</sup> Sanders' response is that he has attempted to turn out new voters by giving them a reason to vote, but this is notoriously difficult.

The *New York Times* [reported](#), "The matter of What To Do About Bernie and the larger imperative of party unity has, for example, hovered over a series of previously undisclosed Democratic dinners in New York and Washington organized by the longtime party financier Bernard Schwartz." Bret Stephens, [writing more recently in an NYT op-ed](#), adds: "What [the Democrats] can't do is nominate a reckless candidate of their own and insist it's the only moral choice. For some of us, none-of-the-above is a viable option. For far too many others, it'll be the devil they know [Trump]." All this is to say it



is not a given that Sanders will command the support of all Democratic voters if he were to win the nomination, and there is a real possibility that the class differences will be too much for wealthier Democrats.

Finally, DSA's approach to winning the election for Sanders is essentially the same as Momentum's plan for Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: use social media, door-knock, canvass and phonebank like a motherfucker and win the election through the inhuman effort of a small army of volunteers. Target young voters, since they're most interested in a left program, and appeal to the old bastions of the industrial working class to defect from establishment candidates and see the left as the best way out of the present situation.

The guiding perspective boils down to the "left populism" [articulated by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau](#). Left populism suggests that the absence of organizations of civil society mean that the left must shift to a populist orientation. Neoliberalism rules a "void" without consent, so a populist appeal can defeat establishment politics. To create a base for the future, [Anton Jager writes](#), "A disorganized society simply might need an organizational stir from above." Groups like Momentum and DSA can substitute for activity of the class, which can work because a little organization in a disorganized world has an outsized effect. It's like throwing a political Hail Mary and hoping that completing that pass quickly creates organizations of the working class.

This is backwards. Left parties have historically come to power in periods of social struggle with strong class organizations, where workers have organizations that can act, see that it is necessary to fight, believe that fighting can win, and they raise their expectations. Presenting an alternative by itself can rally opposition votes, but many workers will evaluate the balance of forces and think that the left is unrealistic. Elections will play a role in advancing struggle, but they cannot leap over history.

We don't have an issue like Brexit in the U.S., but Labour's loss gives us a glimpse of a possible future: there was no "Youthquake" to shift the voter demographics, many Labour voters abstained or voted out of party, and the popularity of the Labour Manifesto didn't translate into support that could overcome the hurdles. The Tories didn't have to "win"; they only picked up 360,000 votes since 2017 – Labour just had to lose, dropping 2.6 million votes. [Kim Moody writes](#), "The election season activists need to become perennial participants in branches, constituencies, unions, and workplaces who go beyond electoral mode to on-going grassroots organization, support for union struggles, and mass direct action... *If*, that is, the project Jeremy Corbyn...launched in 2015 and thousands picked up is to outlive his formal leadership."

## **A Different Formulation**

There's no doubt that the Bernie Sanders campaign has been a landmark for left politics. The problem that I'm posing here is that we haven't been particularly clear on what it means for the left. We can agree that there is an opportunity, but exactly what that opportunity is or how best to take advantage of it has been largely undefined. In this ambiguous space, we can easily slide into being uncritical surrogates for the official Sanders campaign.

DSA's criteria for how to engage with the Sanders campaign was useful and convincing – I'm just not sure that it's being observed. DSA members may be using the Sanders space to create something beyond the election, but this isn't apparent when we look at the message socialists are putting forward.

The primacy put on the obstacles for mass movements and the value of reform flips our understanding of how society changes, with a view that without a Sanders victory, we're finished. This is exemplified in the title of a recent *Jacobin* article: "[The Long Shot of Democratic Socialism is Our Only](#)

[Shot.](#)” There’s a sense of desperation here, and that appears to be born of a lack of confidence in workers and social movements to develop as a force beyond this election.

Let me present a different formulation: Bernie Sanders was able to break through in 2016 because of the weakness of the neoliberal political establishment, not the strength of the left.<sup>[14]</sup> While Sanders might have generally had more support than Clinton, there is no doubt that the Democratic primary was rigged in her favor.

The issue we face is that the political crisis that allowed for Sanders will not continue forever – it is still at play in 2020, but the Democratic Party is quickly attempting to [recompose itself](#) to prevent future contests. Sanders offers a genuine alternative to neoliberalism, though the barriers to winning the nomination and then the presidency are formidable.

While he might have articulated the political moment, the depth of the politicization around Sanders is at best uneven and directs towards more electoral activity unless there is a conscious effort to send it elsewhere. Noam Chomsky has been [arguing for years](#) that public opinion is consistently to the left of policy; the Sanders effect arguably has not changed class consciousness but provided an avenue for existing grievances that have not had political expression for decades at a time when establishment politics are the most troubled. If our goal is to develop class consciousness, this will be through mass movements and confrontation with employers. Our message should explicitly create a path from Sanders to on the ground organizing; as it stands, the formulation is inverted where organizing flows to Sanders.

Essential to the campaign is that we must remain rooted and self-critical. If DSA follows Sanders’ lead on campaigning, deprioritizing local campaigning in favor of early primaries and battleground states, not only are we not creating anything lasting, we’d be parachuting in door knockers to [questionable](#)

[effect](#). This is one of the major concerns with staff positions, which by their nature preclude serious criticism of Sanders because their paid job is to win votes, not build a left.

Raising these issues is not a radical departure – I've tried to demonstrate that this was the view put forward by DSA as recently as six months ago, and it should continue to guide us. This comes down to four things: 1) that election campaigning explicitly should lead to labor and social movement organizing, and not the other way around; 2) that our first priorities should be moving existing organizations towards democratic endorsements to strengthen collective bodies and create the infrastructure that can move more people; 3) that we not refrain from criticizing Sanders and that we inoculate against the potential of Sanders losing and the counterattacks that will come; 4) that we favor local activity and organization building over national contacts. This does not preclude canvassing but is intended to shift the center of activity.

We should have the larger view of how our forces can come out of this election stronger rather than employ a get-rich-quick scheme of going all-in for Sanders. The opportunity is to use the campaign of a politician who is favorable to a view of changing society through mass movements – connecting Sanders supporters back into labor union organizing, community groups, local campaigns and other efforts that are recognized by Sanders as being important. We should prioritize grassroots efforts like Labor for Bernie over campaign-affiliated ones precisely because it is self-organization, it is directed at power-holders, and it prepares the basis for more longstanding activity.

[\[1\]](#) “Second, electoralism misunderstands the primary source of socialists’ power: organized, militant workers. Elections can

be a vehicle for class struggle, and redistributing power and resources to workers will indeed require an ambitious legislative agenda and ultimately a socialist political party taking state power and initiating a formal transition to democratic socialism. But the power to achieve and defend these gains rests primarily in organized workers and their capacity to mobilize a mass social base to win these demands.”  
[The Call, 1/30/2019.](#)

[2] “In the longer term, our goal is to form an independent working-class party, but for now this does not rule out DSA-endorsed candidates running tactically on the Democratic Party ballot line.”

[3] The Democratic Party relies on unions to endorse neoliberal candidates, often undemocratically, and unions are a major pillar of its support. Opening the endorsement process can have an outsized effect on democratizing the electoral process because of the role labor continues to play in the Democratic Party coalition.

[4] “Bernie Sanders’s campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination was historic. The expectations were, to say the least, modest...But, against all odds, within months Sanders would raise over \$200 million in small contributions, and win more than thirteen million votes (43 percent of the total) and twenty-three states. Though he fell short of the nomination, Sanders left an impact on a generation of new voters and the political discourse in the country.”

[5] “It turned out that many people were tired of having to choose between conservative pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps individualism and liberal meritocratic elitism to explain the economic inequality and hardship they experience every day. They heard what Bernie had to say: that the economy is rigged, and that aggressive action to democratize it is necessary and achievable. And they agreed.”

[6]

<https://observer.com/2017/08/court-admits-dnc-and-debbie-wasserman-schulz-rigged-primaries-against-sanders/>

[7] “Sanders and many of those in his inner circle didn’t believe he could win until very late in the campaign, instead intent on running as a protest candidate who would drag Hillary Clinton to the left.”

<https://theintercept.com/2020/01/03/bernie-sanders-democratic-party-2020-presidential-election/>

[8] “Without the electoral revolt on the Left inspired by Bernie Sanders in 2016 and carried forward by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, among others, the socialist movement in the United States would likely be stuck in the same rut it has been in for decades.”

[9] “DSA’s explosive growth is inextricably linked to Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign. Bernie popularized the concept of democratic socialism, and his call for a “political revolution” against the billionaire class resonated with millions of Americans.”

[10] Heather Gautney, *Crashing the Party* (Verso, 2018), pp. 134-135.

[11] “Should no bargain be struck by the time of the first roll call vote at the 2020 convention in Milwaukee – such as a unity ticket between a pair of the leading delegate-winners – the nomination battle would move to a second ballot. And under the new rules crafted after the 2016 race, that is when the party insiders and elected officials known as superdelegates would be able to cast a binding vote.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/us/politics/bernie-sanders-democratic-party.html>

[12] “Bernie Sanders is the Democratic Party’s version of Donald Trump. Thank god we are smart enough to stop him,” said Democratic strategist Michael Trujillo, who served as an aide

to

Clinton

(<https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/477721-democrats-voice-concerns-over-sanders>).

See

also

<https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/464048-why-small-business-owners-should-fear-the-sanders-and-warren-tax-plans>

and <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-wall-street.html>. More telling quotes:

“Trump may be a loose cannon on international stuff, but domestically Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders are loose cannons on restricting business,” Mr. Gimbel said. “Giving things away for free is a slap in the face for people who played by the rules. Where does it stop? Are we going to start paying off mortgage debt?”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/business/economy/economy-democrats-business.html>

“‘If Bernie Sanders becomes president, I think stock prices should be 30 percent to 40 percent lower than they are now,’ Stanley Druckenmiller told CNBC last year...’The biggest risk for 2020 is the presidential election,’ the *New York Times* quotes a JPMorgan researcher, Nikolaos Panigirtzoglou.” <https://reason.com/2020/01/13/wall-street-seems-worried-by-potential-sanders-warren-presidencies/>

[13] <https://www.demos.org/blog/how-reduce-voting-gap> and <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/low-voter-turnout-increasing-household-income-may-help>.

[14] Richard Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (Verso, 2017), p. 10.

*An earlier version of this article misstated the amount of money invested in the DSA for Bernie campaign.*