Imagining a Socialist Presidential Candidate Winning the African American Vote

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If the activists that Bernie Sanders inspired are to continue to consider winning the presidency as a pivotal condition for transforming democratic power and the state, that achievement entails winning the African American vote in the Democratic primary (which Sanders lost handily in 2016 and in 2020). And it involves emphasizing a politics wherein all racial identities share freedom, and struggles for freedom, in empathetic and egalitarian ways.

As to winning the presidency, taking the past two primary contests as indicators that a popular socialist could actually become president, those chances should not be sold short of one in three. That was what the race boiled down to, when either Sanders or Hillary Clinton, or Sanders or Joe Biden were poised to face Donald Trump. This political calculus also seems plausible, because polls consistently showed Sanders and Biden beating Trump in the general election.

What does this have to do with the African American vote, freedom sharing struggles, and socialist presidential aspirations?

It's not just Sanders, but the groundswell he inspired, that came to a reckoning in the primaries. This reckoning concerns the relationship between engaging a vitalizing anti-racist politics and losing the African American vote. And it concerns a type of multiracial politics that was crowded out of his campaign.

In moving forward in the vein of the Sanders revolution – which is also about ending encroaching authoritarian governance and de-fanging ultra-nationalist tactics of racial polarization – a pertinent reflective question can be offered.

If overcoming the political pummeling – by Biden via the Black vote – was not about going negative on Biden on race, could it have been about focusing on a racial justice politics where people extended freedom, heart, and hand between all large-scale identities?

When the African American Vote became Sanders' Achilles Heel

This exploration begins in South Carolina.

While the lead up to that primary was the wake–up call for the Democratic elites. After the defeat of Sanders in Carolina, they consolidated behind Biden.

They did this, in no small measure, by crafting variants of a left-impugning, waiting-in-lying argument: 'How could a socialist expect to create Party unity by losing the African American vote by those numbers?'

As to Biden versus Sanders and some of the exit poll numbers of the African American vote: 61% to 17% in South Carolina; 56% to 17% in the Super Tuesday states combined; 72% to 10% in Alabama; and 87% to 10% in Mississippi.

From then on, a chain of race-anchored, Democratic-elite supported propositions, led to the conclusion that Biden was exclusively electable; this, despite larger majorities favoring Sanders' policies. The chain of logic went something like this:

African Americans are the most steadfast Democratic voters. When Sanders lost the black vote by such numbers, he lost the heart of the Party (if there were a brokered convention, for instance, the numerical and moral politics behind these propositions, would ignite a formidable multiracial force against him). Because Biden won hands down – only he can restore party unity. Without Party unity, Trump cannot be defeated.

Crowding Out Sanders Empathetic Multiracial Message

Sanders' explanations for his poor showing included his acknowledgment to Rachel Maddow, that, "Biden is running, you know, with his – with his ties to Obama, and that's working well." (links added)

This observation, plus his refusal to go negative on Biden on race were predated by his announcement that his previous effort was "too white."

To address these concerns, he expanded his anti-racist politics. Among other positives, it attracted young voters and activists.

However, the way Sanders articulated these politics (e.g., with stentorian certitude), gave the press the telegenic raw–materials to crowd out or minimize the multi-racial freedom sharing parts of his message.

As to those parts: they could be heard in the conclusion of his Nevada victory speech. It was embodied in the Green New Deal, which focuses on racial and environmental justice for all distressed communities, and ecological restoration for all of humanity. And it could be heard in his critique of identity politics unity-appeals that included the 1%.

As to crowding out this message: Before his appearance at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, hundreds of news outlets parroted his statement against Trump without saying a peep – that it was also about disempowering the ruling elite. What people read in that newsprint, also summarized in the leads, was: "It's hard to believe that we have a president of the United States who is, in fact, a racist."

At the North Charleston Coliseum and Performing Arts Center, another compartmentalized Trump-impugning quote hit the media echo-chamber. '"He's a "pathological liar," a "racist," a "sexist" a "homophobe and a xenophobe."'

This reductionist–biased reportage was also connected to a portrayal of Biden, as anything but strident. The spider web of Sanders-as-the-grand-divider messages was also spun with titles such as this one by *NBC News*: "Sanders divided Democrats and handed Biden the lion's share."

Tensions Between Anti-Racism and Winning the African American Vote

A related challenge for the Sanders campaign, as well as for future efforts, is that Sanders did not clearly account for a catch-22 dilemma, regarding race and Democratic voters.

According to University of California professor Ian Haney López:

> It's incredibly important that we not get bogged down in questions of whether Trump is a bigot or not, and that we really focus on this question: …Is [Trump] strategically, intentionally, purposely and with calculation manipulating racial division in the broader public?
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> …When we ask it that way, then it makes sense when we come up against some really startling results.
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> Ninety percent of Republicans reject the idea that Donald Trump is a racist. Even more startling than that, when we tested dog-whistle messages that talk about terrorist countries and undocumented immigrants in sanctuary cities, and all that sort of rhetoric that commonly comes from Trump's mouth, the majority of Democrats found those phrases, those messages convincing.
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> A majority of African Americans found those messages convincing. A majority of the Latinx community found those messages convincing.

In one way of looking at these findings, the Democrats that López and his colleagues polled could be called racist. Alternatively, Obama-supporting Democrats, like these respondents, don't think they're racists.

On the one hand, these matters could be seen as indicators of conservative tendencies in African American voting communities. On the other hand, if that view becomes the preeminent strategy-guiding nostrum, it can shift the focus away from the appeal of sharing good will and freedom – rather than enmity – between large-scale identities. This speaks of a strategy wherein hate speech is detested as much as political correctness. 82% and 80% respectively, support these positions, according to the 8,000-person survey by More in Common.

This is to observe that running a successful socialist presidential campaign, anytime soon, also redounds to the reasons why López says that it's "incredibly important that we not get bogged down in questions of whether Trump is a bigot or not."

Whether it's described pejoratively as being politically correct or it's called hate speech, public accusations that brand a group as racist (e.g., deplorable) – or as channeling the thought police, are impossible to prove across the board. Nor is this mode of redress fruitful – for reducing identity-group polarization, or as per López, tagging it to dog-whistling presidential figures who have tens of millions of voting supporters. What's more, huge majorities across the races don't like it.

The Challenges of (de)Polarizing Freedom in Identity Politics

Former press secretary of the Sanders campaign, Briahna Joy Gray, adds to López's insights by examining identity shaming in relation to defusing large-scale identity-group polarization. Gray observes that,

> Applying shame to an entire category of people, rather than conducting a more nuanced assessment of why people feel the way they do and did what they did, means we might miss those among the blameworthy who might be identified as something more mutable, more persuadable than a "deplorable"—someone who might be convinced to join our side next time.

Shame-insinuating impacts *and* freedom-sharing depolarizing possibilities of these identity-oriented politics can be further considered along the lines of Gray's insights. Consequently, there's the moral-political question:

> How many people who claim to be oppressed in respect to their identity, and want to end their oppression, want to end it, only to be widely labeled as privileged beneficiaries of supremacy, rather than free?

If people, across all large-scale identities, who consider themselves oppressed by identity, would not want to move into that freedom-constricting condition – and, evocatively speaking, if one group does not want to be the other, i.e., free, *and* privileged – how, then, would it be an effective part of a president winning, unity-exhorting strategy to assign a morally-compromised state of privilege to all whites, for example (projected as 66.7% of the 2020 electorate)?

White privilege is generally posed as a significant part of many people's subjectivity and social experience. Like racial oppression, its magnetic pull energizes the body politic. Both attract and repel the coloring of being(s) – as it is often debated, portrayed, and publicized as continuously if not totally saturating people's existence.

Enter a wily clown-biking, power-yikes-ing blowhard, honking his counter totalitarian nozzle: in the form of the candidate, 'larger than life,' who'll thwack an exaggerated, buffoon blown-up slight – that a 'yuge group of (his) good people' are privileged in life. In the name of freedom and 'give me a break' tolerance, free speech, and freedom from being the oppressor, he'll smack it so hard, it'll swallow its own stuffing: it's 'The Left', it's the 'Washington swamp occupying establishment'; it's the fake news media; it's the social justice activists on campus: one group's authoritarian whacker becomes another's freedom fighting cracker.

Pressed Between Oligarchy, Identity Politics, and Authoritarian Malarkey

The trick of this racial – and anti-political correctness – dog-whistle politics has been played throughout the ages. As López observes:

> …dog-whistling has an ideological project. Not just stir racial panic; but convince people that the real threat in their lives is government; get white voters to turn against government in a way that allows the right to hijack government for their corporate donors.

Getting multitudes to identify the (longtime austerity-corrupted) social sustaining part of government with handouts to anyone but them, forms a cornerstone of identity-polarizing racial dog-whistle strategies.

Yet, as López, Gray, and polling research indicates, vilifying/shaming ultra-nationalist-supporting voters for the person they voted for, inflames more than just those who voted for Trump. Plus, it makes the corporate media truckloads of money.

This also speaks of the Democratic establishment's austerity-imposing authoritarian-infesting politics. Not wanting to admit to sewing inhospitable/authoritarian bureaucracies into the fabric of everyday life (or going the extra mile to don the Republican elites' Janus-faced authoritarian cryo-smile), the Democratic elites' modus operandi becomes: blame anyone but themselves; blame the white working-class; blame Russia; blame the Republicans: impeach the liar in the grass. With half-baked imitations of Sanders' policies in hand, they serve trays of identity-inclusiveness souffles that include (and provide cover for) the oligarchs and their valets (qua moderates).

Unfortunately (for Sanders-allied movements going forward), this politics of elite capture, finds a 99% split – near 49.5-49.5 in the electoral college. The irony of this is that so many people end up fighting against each other, through gigantic-scale identity group constructions, less aware that this is the way they're fighting the ruling class's authoritarian embroilments.

Liberating Identity Freedom-Sharing in Presidential Policy and Politics

In moving forward with the Sanders-inspired revolution and future presidential campaigns, some identity freedom-sharing policy, ideology, and base-building elements would include:

1. Shifting from mutually-disparaging large-scale identity-dividing politics towards sharing freedoms between all large-scale identities (regarding, e.g., democratic freedoms; freedom of speech; freedoms realized through economic security and well-being; and freedom from environmental discrimination); and turning the term privilege on the 1%, instead of the masses.

2. This can be done, for instance, by moving away from presidential campaign-promoted policies that economically redress societal privilege of all whites, in relation to benefiting from white supremacy. One example is to shift away from emphasizing cash reparations for African Americans in favor of oppressed identity-responsive reparative policies that empower and are shared by all distressed communities (and as Sanders did, supporting a study on reparations). According to Gallup, cash reparations – polls at 67% against, and 29% in favor. Importantly, "73% of black respondents were in favor" of cash reparations. At the third Democratic debate however, Biden gave a "stunningly" racially insensitive answer to the question of reparative policies for African Americans. Yet his support by African American voters was miles above other contenders well after that debate.

3. Focusing on Trump and other ultranationalist candidates' 1%-benefiting manipulation of racism, rather than their imputed racist/evil subjective essences; and doing this by:

4. Shifting the onus of who has knowledge about the racism of Janus-faced populist-nationalists. This would be done by tenaciously detailing how self-proclaimed supremacists/"racists believe [these politicians are] racist." This approach (deftly wielded by Mayor Andrew Gillum in Florida) offers the majority between the polarized sides more common ground to agree about these candidates' manipulation of racism.

5. Engaging multiracial freedom-sharing politics, inspired by the leading symbolic and activist

role of black people in transforming the carceral state. This speaks of a politics that has currently expanded into a huge national groundswell against racism and the militarizing carceral state. It has coalesced, moreover, through the raising of the Black Lives Matter slogan. The Black Lives Matter thematic does not focus on shamefully impugning a large-scale identity because of its racial privilege (it does, however, effectively use race-focused shame against the authoritarian dynamics of police and carceral systems). These politics instead focus on the call to all to share the struggle for racial parity-making for African Americans in police treatment – in the larger freedom cause of all people, to transform carceral systems.

6. Engaging a police-system reforming strategy that also emphasizes expanding the freedom-sharing coalition, and leading roles, to people in other groups by identity, who do not experience parity of treatment in relation to the carceral state (e.g., people by race, religion, disability, gender, sexual-orientation, and economic standing).

Conclusion

This is not to say that it's comparatively more, or less morally compelling, to refrain from impugning all people categorized as white, for their racial privilege. Nor is the argument for cash reparations less morally persuasive than the one favoring repairing all distressed communities. Nor does this shift mean that calling Trump racist is less morally compelling than emphasizing his manipulations of race to benefit the 1%.

But,if a goal of a socialist presidential campaign is to defeat authoritarian creep, and the potential for race-dividing, fascist populism, this national politics must also be about winning state power through thoroughgoing majoritarian victories. Along with a 99%-championing program, another guiding strategy can therefore be added via a simple proposition: it's time for people across all large-scale identities to be empathetically generous to each other by sharing a little more freedom between them.