

Is socialism winning?

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Some socialists have recently claimed that our movement is winning. In a post-election newsletter, the National Political Committee of the Democratic Socialists of America commented, “Although establishment Democrats belittle our movement for socialism, we know that the vision we have for this world is popular. WE ARE WINNING!” An article in *Jacobin* put out a similar message: “There Was Actually a Lot of Good News for the Left on Election Day.” This analysis highlights that 20 out of 29 DSA-endorsed candidates were elected and that 8 out of 11 DSA-backed ballot measures passed, including propositions on the minimum wage, child care, and rent control.

For the first post-election national DSA webinar, “Socialism is winning,” victorious DSA candidates spoke about the opportunities ahead for the Left, suggesting that electing socialists into office moves us closer to winning reforms. Jabari Brisport, who won his race for New York state senate, said:

...across the country, we’re winning these elections. We win ballot measures. We change the conversation. We shift the Overton window. We make our enemies afraid of us because they know we’re going to shift power away from the corporate elites into working class people, into marginalized communities, and give them agency for the first time in our nation’s history. I know that when we win, we can indeed win a Green New Deal. We can indeed defund the police. We can get a homes guarantee. We can get health care for all. We can eliminate student debt.

However, a broader assessment of the political landscape shows that the socialist Left is in a weaker position after this election cycle.



Successful ballot measures endorsed by DSA.

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At the beginning of the election cycle, socialists had high hopes for shifting national politics to the left chiefly through the Bernie Sanders campaign. Once Sanders conceded to Joe Biden, DSA shifted the conversation to how to defeat Donald Trump. Though the organization never formally endorsed the Biden-Harris ticket, leading members advocated for supporting Biden, as did a broad array of figures on the U.S. Left.

In the course of supporting Biden, Sanders and others had to compromise on key demands including Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. Expectations had to be lowered in order to accept Biden's uninspiring neoliberal centrism. Criticism of Biden had to be submerged, including the fact that he faces credible sexual assault allegations.

Biden will not deliver any of the things that people fought for in the Sanders campaign. In fact, Biden positioned himself in opposition to Sanders' politics, bragging after his nomination, "I beat the socialist." He campaigned on "law and order" in opposition to the anti-racist uprising this summer. And he responded to October protests in Philadelphia over the police killing of Walter Wallace Jr. with "There is no excuse whatsoever for the looting and the violence."

Biden's transition team is shaping up to be a centrist dream team, packed with lobbyists, tech executives, and former Obama administration officials. So far, neither Sanders nor Warren have been offered a place in the new administration. Biden recently nominated Neera Tanden as budget director. This puts Senator Sanders in the uncomfortable position of overseeing the appointment of a person who a former campaign aide called "the single biggest, most aggressive Bernie Sanders critic in the United States of America." The Sanders wing is not on the brink of taking over the Democratic Party. Rather, the neoliberal wing appears to have strengthened its hold.

Despite the realities of a potential Biden-Harris administration, parts of the Left insisted on a vote for Biden on the basis that Trump could carry out a coup—but the Right has not been defeated. Though Trump lost the election, he received 10 million more votes than he did in 2016. He is already raising the prospect of a 2024 presidential run. On November 14, thousands of his supporters including members of the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers marched through Washington, D.C., in a "Stop the Steal" demonstration. Though Trump lost the election, his base has been strengthened

over the course of it. To say now that the Left is winning downplays—perhaps unintentionally—the growing relevance and threat of the Right.

What does it mean to win?

The idea that the 2020 election marked a victory for the socialist Left flows from an electoralist perspective that equates winning elections with “building power” and that uses electoral victories as a gauge of strength. DSA-endorsed candidates contested 29 out of more than 595 federal, state, and municipal races. The post-election DSA newsletter points to the 73 percent win rate of DSA-endorsed candidates and ballot measures to support the idea that socialism is winning.



Socialists recently elected to office.

On the DSA post-election webinar, National Political Committee members laid out why they think the socialist Left is in a stronger position. Hannah Allison declared, “We are winning this fight to transform our world.” Allison then went through all of the electoral victories to conclude:

...We are celebrating, like many of you, the big, broad, multiracial coalition, all the amazing community organizations, unions, and national organizations that kicked Trump out of office. And there’s so much more we’re going to fight together to win. We’re going to keep fighting... and to keep building socialist power at the ballot box.

Another National Political Committee member, Kristian Hernandez, highlighted that candidates who supported Medicare for All won their races and asserted that “DSA is winning” because of the win rate of endorsed candidates and ballot measures. She explained:

While we have establishment Democrats out here trying to undermine what we accomplished together, we know that the vision we have for this world is popular. We know it was millions of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and working class people and our movements that kicked Trump out of office.

This echoes organizations like Justice Democrats that responded to centrists' attacks on the Left by telling them:

Scapegoating progressives and Black activists for their demands and messaging is not the lesson to be learned here. It was their organizing efforts, energy and calls for change needed in their communities that drove up voter turnout.

How do we tell if we are winning?

The historic turnout of millions of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, working class people to vote for Biden is taken as a sign of the Left's strength. But the fact that the Democratic Party mobilized its base with help from nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and unions is not a new phenomenon and does not in and of itself reflect social movement strength. Even if it did, the conclusion that we are in a stronger spot when Biden barely managed to beat Trump does not follow.

Electoral victories are not a sufficient way to gauge whether the balance of forces is shifting. Socialists winning down-ballot elections certainly points to the possibilities of the moment. But we have not yet grappled with some of the limitations of these gains, namely how little winning an election actually guarantees. Reforms are won based on the balance of class forces—when the working class creates a situation where the political price would be too high to *not* implement a reform. The victory of a candidate who supports Medicare for All does not necessarily tell us if we are any closer to winning Medicare for All. Though progressive ballot measures passed in some places, popular policies were rolled back by referendum in California.

The electoral arena is important, but workplaces, neighborhoods, and the streets are the primary and decisive arenas of class struggle, the spaces where workers and oppressed people can start to feel their own power.

Down-ballot socialist and progressive victories are contradictory. On the one hand, they give socialists a platform to promote ideas and politics. At the same time, they can bolster illusions that the Democratic Party can be a working class political instrument or that reforms are won by electing socialists to office.

Objective conditions make winning reforms an uphill battle. Government officials at the state and local level are likely to face austerity budgets as the capitalist class attempts to mitigate the economic crisis on the backs of working people. Just last week, the defection of several progressive Democrats and the DSA Alderman Vasquez on the Chicago City Council provided the margin of votes to pass Mayor Lightfoot's austerity budget, which leaves police funding intact.

Chicago DSA issued a statement censuring Vasquez, a positive step that should be a model for how other DSA chapters and left-wing organizations respond to politicians. The budget vote raises larger questions about how to engage in electoral politics, what it means to hold politicians accountable, and the pressures socialists face in office.

The ideology behind "we're winning"

If the post-election assessment is that the socialist Left is winning, then we do not have to do anything differently. That is the logic of electoralism, which rests on the idea that elections are the key source of social change. This perspective orients towards elections as the path to socialism, running candidates with the goal of gaining majorities or significant minorities in representative bodies of government to then pass reforms and eventually legislate in socialism.

If socialism is full democracy—everyday people in control of social forces that shape our lives—then movements that attempt to introduce socialism on our behalf could succeed in providing reforms but inevitably will not be socialism.

Electoralism is a political error distinct from electoral strategy itself. Socialists should contest the electoral arena. Engaging in electoral competition can be a way to measure the independent capacities of workers and social movements to fight for themselves. *This* is how participating in elections can build power, promote socialist ideas and lead to formation of a party that can champion demands of social movements and present an alternative to the two capitalist parties.

The lack of critical post-election assessments has meant that DSA is slipping deeper into a default electoralist practice without interrogating this slide. When Sanders conceded to Biden in early April, questions of why he lost the Democratic primary twice and what has or has not been built through DSA's all-in for Bernie strategy were left unexplored. Many DSA members and the Left more broadly believe that Sanders almost took over the Democratic Party.

There is not a lot of talk about a "dirty break" on the socialist Left anymore. Instead, there has been a doubling down on arguments that *the* strategic priority should be electoral and that working class gains will be won by struggling within the Democratic Party and the U.S. state. This tendency existed in the DSA before the elections, but it seems to have deepened.

Many DSA calls and statements will end with "and we need our own party," but it remains to be seen how that is going to influence our strategic priorities as we face a Biden administration.

How do we win?

DSA is the largest socialist organization in the U.S. with around 85,000 members. What are all of those members going to do? In the coming months, we must continue to discuss and debate how we are going to act differently in these new conditions.

Given the "socialism is winning" assessment, we can anticipate that some DSA members will argue for a focus on supporting and running socialist candidates. Mobilizing people as voters can be a part of a broader strategy, but if it becomes the primary goal of our organizing we risk falling into an electoralism that will not deliver working class power.

If we are not yet closer to defunding the police or winning reforms like Medicare for All, we need to reorient our strategic focus. The electoral arena is important, but workplaces, neighborhoods, and the streets are the primary and decisive arenas of class struggle, the spaces where workers and oppressed people can start to feel their own power.

These spaces have not been stagnant or quiet. This summer we saw the largest movement in U.S. history win swift, unprecedented reforms and change the entire conversation about racism and police violence. This past April, we saw a labor uprising against unsafe working conditions in hospitals and warehouses. In August, professional athletes went on strike against racism, raising the prospect of a general strike for Black lives.

We need to assess these movements and what they mean for how we can win reforms. There is a risk that "defund the police" will be turned into a legislative demand that revolves around electing better city council representatives. Yet, this summer's rebellion showed that disruptive—often illegal—struggle from below is key to winning.

We need to throw ourselves into struggles to defund the police, to protect essential workers, to defend tenants from evictions, and to build anti-fascist coalitions.

Even though socialism is not yet winning, socialism *can* win.

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