

On Socialist Electoral Strategy

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Much has been made of a supposed leftward shift in the Democratic Party over the last three years. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib, four new Democratic congresswomen known as “the Squad,” began capturing widespread media attention, many treated the 2018 midterm elections where Democrats won the House as a turning point for the party, where the left wing of the party was on the rise, leaving the Third Way era behind. A new strategy began to be promoted and championed by groups like the Justice Democrats, that of challenging incumbent Democrats in safe-blue districts with volunteer armies from a group we’ll call progressive activists, borrowing a term from a recent study on polarization in the United States from a group called More in Common. This group comprises only around eight percent of Americans, and is disproportionately white, secular, and college educated.

The thinking behind this strategy came from establishment Democratic disapproval of progressive candidates running against Republicans in swing districts, due to a perception that doing so could result in Republican victory. Hailing the victories of progressives in 2018, Data for Progress co-founder Sean McElwee wrote that “Democratic primaries offer the best hope to get insurgent candidates in office and pull the party left.” In the same piece, he argued that progressives had lost against Republican candidates simply because general election voters in the districts did not want what Bernie Sanders was selling.

McElwee and the establishment Democrats he purports to oppose are probably correct that candidates like Ocasio-Cortez could not win many districts outside of urban cores in the United States. According to a CBS News poll conducted in July, the most popular and well-known member of the Squad, Ocasio-Cortez, has an abysmal net favorability rating of -14 percent, close to Donald Trump’s -15 percent. However, Nancy Pelosi is even more unpopular, sitting at -21 in the same poll. Meanwhile, single-payer healthcare continues to command majority support among Americans even in the wake of attacks from the right and center. While Bernie Sanders’ favorability rating has dropped over the last several months, he is still consistently more popular than any of the aforementioned politicians. So where is the disconnect between the popularity of social democratic

demands and the unpopularity of Democrats?

They Blue Themselves

The four members of the Squad each won their elections in heavily Democratic districts. However, this does not necessarily mean these districts were more left-wing than others. As Benjamin Studebaker points out, only Omar won a district which voted for Sanders in the 2016 primary. Of these, Pressley and Ocasio-Cortez both beat longtime incumbents in primary elections. Contrary to popular media narratives, both figures came from established professional class pipelines. Despite Ocasio-Cortez's much touted work history as a bartender, it was often conveniently left out that she had been an intern for the late Senator Ted Kennedy (though one could argue the jobs were one and the same). Additionally, Ocasio-Cortez was "honestly questioning" over whether to support Clinton or Sanders in the 2016 primary, further reflecting her professional class background.

Although mostly unreported on at the time, Ocasio-Cortez attracted significant financial support from the nonprofit, financial, and technology sectors in her 2018 run, taking in more donations from California than New York City. When discussing Ocasio-Cortez's early proposal of a 70% top marginal tax rate, one of her financier donors remarked that "in [his] experience, that's where [her] liberalism ends: As soon as any significant redistribution is in sight, they turn very quickly toward the center." Her eventual victory over Crowley in the 2018 Democratic primary was largely powered by neighborhoods dominated by white gentrifiers, indicating a failure to connect with older working-class residents. This is not to say the downwardly mobile urban professionals that disproportionately compose the gentrifying residents are not working class, but it does demonstrate the troubles her campaign had attracting a demographic outside of progressive, professional class activists.

Pressley's rise to prominence as a "progressive champion" is even more baffling. Originally a Boston city council member, she became a surrogate for Hillary Clinton's campaign during the 2016 Democratic primary, decrying Medicare for All and efforts to overturn Citizens United. Her opponent, Mike Capuano, had virtually identical policy positions to Pressley, and where there were differences, she was more often than not to his right, repeatedly equivocating on foreign policy and signaling openness to public-private partnerships, which Capuano opposed. Pressley additionally attracted the support of the wealthy Democratic donors of Massachusetts.

These paths to Congress contrast sharply with the one Bernie Sanders took. After years of unsuccessful campaigns at the fringes with activists and academics in the Liberty Union party, he emerged victorious in Burlington's 1981 mayoral election with a base of working-class voters rather than the activists that made up Vermont's third parties, even attracting a number of conservatives who opposed regressive property taxes.

This base allowed him to sometimes take positions at odds with the activist left, including opposing a direct action at a union Gatling gun factory due to what he saw as "'blaming the workers' and not focusing their attention on the federal centers of strategic thinking on U.S. foreign policy." Sanders did not have to compromise his anti-imperialist principles during this time, visiting Sandinista Nicaragua against the wishes of the Reagan administration in 1985 and making fiery speeches opposing American intervention in Latin America. This earned him the scorn of ultra-leftists around Vermont like eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin, but his commitment to bread and butter, working class politics over middle-class activist concerns eventually propelled him to his position today as one of America's most popular politicians, despite lacking a party.

It's The Economy, Stupid

The Squad have attempted to cast their opposition as motivated by racism and misogyny, casting the large number of Americans who oppose their politics into the same basket of deplorables Clinton infamously referenced in 2016. They routinely espouse academic concepts and social values the vast majority of Americans oppose. While it wields disproportionate influence in media and urban centers where the Squad is based, eighty percent of Americans oppose political correctness, with people of color opposing it more strongly than white people per the aforementioned More in Common study.

Matthew Yglesias of Vox found more data suggesting white liberals had moved “further to the left” on some issues of race and immigration than even people of color. McElwee is enthusiastic about this shift, openly touting a left driven not by the working class but by the college educated white professionals that currently dominate it. “I don’t ascribe in any way to these ideas that identity politics is bad for us. I think I can take someone who is deeply concerned about patriarchy and I can make them understand how patriarchy intersects with capitalism much more than I can take someone who’s mad because GM took their job away and make them understand socialism,” he told *New York* magazine, highlighting how immaterial this so-called left has become.

It is true that social democratic economic demands like Medicare for All are broadly popular among voters, with minimum wage increases and Medicaid expansions winning on the ballot even in red states. However, some of the more radical liberal policies the Squad champions are incredibly unpopular among all voters. Abolishing Immigrations and Customs Enforcement became such an unpopular idea even among self-identified Democrats that most 2020 presidential candidates, including those who previously supported the idea, have since backtracked.

The identitarian issues the Squad has promoted in their racialized rhetoric contrast sharply with Sanders’ universalist message of social democracy. Despite the fact that the marginalized groups the Squad is concerned with will be the disproportionate beneficiaries of universal policy, they continue to focus on narrow constituencies based on identities at the expense of appealing to broad majorities. Their audience of young urban professionals applaud at the Squad’s denunciations of white privilege while the rest of the country sees its wages stagnate, life expectancies drop, and costs of living rise, no matter their race. Walter Benn Michaels put it best when he declared that “identity politics is not an alternative to class politics but a form of it: it’s the politics of an upper class that has no problem with seeing people left behind as long as they haven’t been left behind because of their race or sex.”

How to Win

Focusing a socialist electoral strategy on the deep-blue Democratic areas the Squad won forecloses the possibility of ever building a movement of the working-class. These elections can only be won through primaries, dominated by already politically involved and liberal voters. This forces socialists to pander to a narrow slice of the electorate, one which has vastly different preferences the rest of the country. These low turnout elections primarily attract existing and already engaged voters, when socialists need to be reaching out to those who don’t vote or are alienated by existing party structures.

Instead, socialists need to be running candidates to reach the working class, wherever they may be. More campaigns must be run like that of Kristin Seale, a candidate in the southern suburbs of Philadelphia who came within 500 votes of winning a district that had been Republican since its founding in 1969. With a focus on issues like Medicare for All and a \$15 minimum wage, she was able to bring class politics to a district that had lacked it, and surely laid the groundwork for future socialist success in the district.

Additionally, socialists need to be better at assessing what matters to working people, and where they are out of touch with the sentiments of the working class. Campaigns must be focused on material demands like Medicare for All and not on divisive social issues which can only fracture working class coalitions. Socialists will never be able to overcome the unpopularity of a radical liberal cultural politics, and it has no reason to saddle itself to it when universalist social democracy will do a better job of addressing the inequalities cultural liberalism concerns itself with. As Walter Benn Michaels said, “the relation between fighting discrimination and fighting exploitation is asymmetrical”. That is, redistributive economics will improve the conditions of victims of discrimination, but even if discrimination were eliminated, the working class would still be poor, only with misery distributed proportionately.

Despite the Squad’s missteps and unpopularity among most Americans, socialists have an enormous opportunity to build a working-class movement with the Bernie Sanders campaign. His independence will also prove useful when the time comes for the socialist left to break with the Democratic party. Democrats currently represent 54 of the wealthiest 66 districts in the House of Representatives, doing so touting increased representation of minority groups over progressive policy. Their focus on identity at the expense of class was a deliberate decision, and socialists do not need to repeat it. A vacuum currently exists in the United States for an anti-capitalist working-class politics, and if the socialist left does not provide it, the right will happily do so.

In contrast to Sanders’ working-class base, Elizabeth Warren’s campaign is firmly rooted in the professional-managerial class. As Politico observed, “In poll after poll, Sanders appeals to lower-income and less-educated people; Warren beats Sanders among those with postgraduate degrees...Younger people who vote less frequently are more often in Sanders’ camp; seniors who follow politics closely generally prefer Warren.” Sanders’ donors have come from everywhere in the country, particularly in the exurbs and heartland, while Warren’s donors have mostly come from newly gentrified neighborhoods in urban areas. And although Warren has sworn off corporate donations in the primary election, she has announced she will use them in the general election, which will tilt her base even further away from the working-class.

If socialists are to win a majority in the United States, candidates cannot continue to be from the academic or non-profit centers which so many Americans rightfully disdain as out-of-touch. Those on the left recognized the unpopularity of Hillary Clinton’s elitist background, and we should recognize this and reject it even when it comes from those ostensibly “on our side” like the Squad or Elizabeth Warren. We must remember the popularity of Bernie Sanders’ universalist demands and reject the professional-managerial class’s candidates of choice. No matter how many times the stakes are obfuscated by Beto O’Rourke decrying a “racist capitalist economy” or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez saying you can be both a capitalist and a democratic socialist, the working class and the capitalist class have fundamentally different interests. Workers recognize this, and it is time American socialists caught up.