

The Only Article You Need to Read about the 2016 Election

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This is the latest in a series of articles discussing the pros and cons of a Bernie Sanders campaign in the Democratic Party. Scroll down to find other articles. – Ed.

In the general election, the Democrats need the left to be silent about how bankrupt and corrupt the party is so it can gloss its rush to the right in a veneer of progressive rhetoric.

If you're progressive or on the left, here's your cheat sheet on how to participate in the 2016 presidential election, which is just 18 months away. If you live in one of the first states in the Democratic primary process, like Iowa, New Hampshire, or South Carolina, vote for Bernie Sanders. You can also sign an online petition for him, if you're into that sort of thing. If you chance upon one of his campaign rallies and have nothing better to do, join the crowd.

But don't do anything else. Don't become a campaign volunteer, do phone banking, door knocking, get the vote, and certainly don't send him a dime of your money.

During the general election, if you live in a swing state where polls show a razor-thin margin between Hillary Clinton and whatever crazy the Republicans nominate—and that will be a few states at most—flick a lever for Clinton, if you are inclined. Otherwise, don't do a thing for her campaign or send her a penny as she and Bill will be raking in \$2 billion from their network of plutocrats.

Anyone with a shot of winning the presidency knows they have only two interrelated jobs: CEO of the American-led project of capitalist globalization and Commander-in-Chief of its war machine.

At the presidential level, the two parties are aligned on the big issues like free trade, monetary policy, deregulation, welfare, education, and entitlement "reform," war, surveillance, and policing, borders, and prisons. There is slight to modest contrasts on actual policies (not rhetoric) concerning immigration, health care, LGBT and reproductive rights, climate change, and labor issues.

So I am not of the opinion there is no difference between the two main parties—there is a very big one. When a Democrat is president, it spurs left opposition to the whole system. When a Republican sits in the Oval Office, it results in a partisan movement that splits the left and liberals.

Under both Clinton and Obama, the base realized a Democratic White House pushes the same policies as Republicans, but they offer only breadcrumbs in return like a bump in food stamps, more Pell Grants for low-income students, or weak and conditional immigration reform.

This helped create the conditions for independent organizing like the global-justice movement, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter. When Reagan and the Bushes were in office, the left poured its energy into campaigns to elect Democratic presidents.

So why not work to get the Democrat elected, like much of the left poured their energies into Obama's 2008 presidential campaign? Because the Democrats don't need the left's support.

In 2004 I participated in strategy meetings about how the peace and social justice movement should respond to the Republican National Convention coming to New York City. In the room were leaders of the antiwar, feminist and labor movements. In one session, they each listed how many canvassers they were devoting to John Kerry's presidential campaign. For most groups it was a handful. One national feminist organization sent a few dozen organizers into the field. When it came to the representative from organized labor, they said unions were going to put thousands of organizers in the field—just in Ohio. It dawned on me that the left can never compete with organizations that have long-standing ties to the Democratic Party.

What the Democrats really want is the left's silence. The left, as disorganized as it is, is the source of ideas, energy and passion for a party that is an empty vessel of corporate sloganeering.

The left spawns the movements and ideas—LGBT and reproductive rights, income inequality, national healthcare, climate justice, police and prison reform, antiwar—that both form and motivate the Democratic base. That's where the Democrats draw their votes from, but the party needs money from corporations and plutocrats to run its machinery and to play its part in what is projected to be a \$5 billion presidential campaign. More than that, the Democrats are one wing of the party of Wall Street, so they will never fulfill any social-justice demands without a powerful push from below.

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The role of Progressives for Obama in 2008 was to push as many leftists into the campaign as possible and then attack those disinclined to support a candidate who supported more war, bailouts with no accountability for Wall Street, and wanted to cut Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid to pay for the financial catastrophe.

After Sanders tossed his hat in the ring for the Democratic presidential nominee, there was the predictable Sanders-is-the-real-progressive-in-this-race column from the usual quarters. And there is already "The People for Bernie Sanders" working to corral the left into the Democratic Party. It's easy to forecast how this will end.

In July 2016, at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, after Sanders' team meets with Hillary Clinton's senior strategists but not the nominee herself, his campaign manager speaks to the media: "We are proud of all we accomplished, the millions of Americans who cast their votes for the Sanders 2016 campaign, and the issues we raised about economic inequality, the struggling middle class, and an economy rigged for the benefit of a few billionaires. Senator Sanders may not be the nominee in 2016, but the concerns he championed are front and center."

When asked about the closed-door meeting and Clinton's \$2 billion in campaign contributions from Wall Street and wealthy donors, Sanders' manager says, "What we got from the Clinton campaign was a commitment to begin the process to talk about reducing income inequality. We've moved. They've moved. It's truly unity in that sense. We are fully behind Hillary Clinton as our party's presidential nominee for 2016, and are our only focus for the next 100 days is to make sure she is elected to that office. Thank you."

I'm not making this up. The above quote is paraphrased from the Dennis Kucinich 2004 campaign. He ran on opposition to the Iraq War, but by the convention Kucinich backed the nominee, John Kerry, whose position was to escalate the war, in exchange for vague promises.

Every time a progressive challenges the mainstream Democratic candidates, such as Kucinich, Jerry Brown in 1992, Jesse Jackson in 1988, Ted Kennedy in 1980, even John Edwards in 2008, there is a pattern. If the insurgent campaign catches fire, it raises progressive hopes that the Democrats might finally have a presidential nominee more on the level of the party's grassroots than C-suite executives.

But the campaign is overwhelmed by money pouring into the coffers of whichever Wall Street Democrat clinches the nomination. Because the progressive standard-bearer ran in a process that is impossible for a real left-wing candidate to win, they were defeated before they ever began.

But the progressive serves an important purpose. They energize the activist base and raise hopes that the Democratic Party is open to progressive ideas, even though the money, use of super-delegates and drawn-out primary limit the victors circle to establishment candidates.

Sanders' campaign will help divide the left and bind many of them to the Democratic Party. Over the next six months expect a stream of articles praising Sanders as the people's, progressives', the left's champion, or attacking anyone who disagrees.

Short of a mile-wide asteroid smacking into the earth, Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic Party nominee. She needs challengers to enliven a primary that is more coronation than contest, and she needs the sparring to keep her in fighting shape for the general election. Plus, having a left-wing candidate allows her to appear as the responsible moderate who stakes out corporate-friendly positions slathered in progressive blather.

By the time the convention is over, those progressives who hopped on board the Sanders train to nowhere will have reconciled themselves with supporting Hillary, whatever their misgivings. It's basic psychology. Like investors who throw good money after bad, it's hard to admit after spending more than a year of your life advocating for a candidate that lost, that maybe it's time to stop investing in the Democratic Party.

But if we step back and take a look at just the last few years, it's non-electoral organizing like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, immigrants' rights, and low-wage worker organizing that is actually making social change and forcing the Democrats to the left.

So go ahead and vote for Sanders and Clinton, but that's all. Spend the rest of your time, energy, and money on building militant grassroots activism. Because while elections are about moving candidates, social movements move the whole system.

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