

Questions to Oklahoma Green Party about Its Endorsement of Bernie Sanders

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Interview by Jim Brash of *North Star* Editorial Board, February 26, 2016

Questions posed to Rachel Jackson, State Facilitator, Green Party Oklahoma Cooperative Council about their endorsement of Bernie Sanders

1. Is the endorsement of Bernie a tactical move?

Our endorsement of Bernie Sanders in the Oklahoma Democratic Primary accomplishes two goals: 1.) to find a way to participate electorally given our state's repressive ballot access laws, and 2.) to build a base to strengthen our efforts to reform those ballot access laws.

2. Why endorse him now?

The Oklahoma Democratic Party recently decided to allow Independent voters to participate in their primaries. Because we cannot register to vote as Green Party members, many are registered as Independents. We want to encourage them to use their electoral power in the Democratic primary to support the candidate that aligns most with Green Party values. We believe Bernie Sanders represents the best chance for Oklahoma Greens to do that, given the current lack of ballot access.

3. How will this endorsement help the Green Party of Oklahoma?

We hope it will bring attention to our ballot access situation among progressive and leftist voters in Oklahoma. Because of its relative obscurity compared to other social justice issues, ballot access is a difficult issue around which to mobilize. We are hoping that we can sustain the support we gain from Sanders supporters in our state and fold it into our ballot access reform efforts.

4. Will you be endorsing Bernie in November?

At this moment, the Green Party of Oklahoma does not intend to endorse Sanders should he win the Democratic nomination.

5. What has been the feedback from the Green Party national office?

We have not received a response from the GPUS national office, though many Greens around the country have responded via social media. Those responses have been divided. Many of them express support for our endorsement given our lack of options for electoral participation in Oklahoma. There have also been a few strongly negative responses from Greens who believe (for various reasons) that our endorsement is problematic. You can likely identify their comments on our Facebook page. The Green Party values local control, and we believe we made the best decision for Oklahoma.

6. What has been the feedback from greens in general, about the endorsement?

From members of the Green Party of Oklahoma, the response has been divided as well, but the majority of the response has been positive. Those who have responded negatively believe we should not endorse any candidate of the two major parties, or believe that his stance on issues such as Israel and the Middle East disqualify him from a Green endorsement. Those who have responded positively see the potential in local coalition building with the progressive Oklahomans the Sanders campaign has attracted.

7. Have the Green Party of Oklahoma made endorsements of Democrats, independents, and other non-greens previously?

We have endorsed Independent candidates in state legislative and city council elections.

8. What were the results of those endorsements?

We currently have a Oklahoma City Councilman, Ed Shadid, who we endorsed and who has successfully represented Green values while in office.

9. Why is it so hard to gain ballot status in Oklahoma?

Oklahoma Greens hold varied opinions on this. I explain it this way. The current ballot access laws create a double bind for the Green Party of Oklahoma, and any other third party seeking access to the ballot here. In Oklahoma, people effectively join political parties by registering to vote. Currently, people cannot register as Greens in Oklahoma because registration is tied to ballot access. This creates a disconnect that makes it difficult to amass the number of Green Party members we need to help us meet the ballot access requirements. In this election cycle, for instance, we would have needed to collect approximately 24,745 signatures, or 3% of the total votes cast in the last gubernatorial election. The numbers of petitioners we would need to collect these signatures exceeds our current membership numbers by quite a bit. There's the double bind. In order to increase our party membership to attract both volunteer petitioners and funding for paid petitioning, we need ballot access so people can register as Greens so we can increase our party membership.

I might also add that beyond volunteers, most successful petitioning campaigns pay signature collectors. For instance, the Libertarian Party of Oklahoma was successful in collecting enough signatures (approximately 42,000) to get their presidential candidate on the ballot this November. However, and without citing specific numbers, their national party spent twice the amount of the total national Green Party budget paying petitioners to collect these signatures in Oklahoma. We simply do not have the local or the national financial resources to field such an effort. We have to rely on volunteers. Thus, building our base for future ballot access efforts is our best strategy.

10. Do you think the Green Party should endorse Bernie during the entire primary season on a national basis?

No. The GPOK does not hold this position either. We would much prefer to have the GPUS presidential candidate on our state ballot, and we urge Greens elsewhere who can vote for the Green presidential candidate to do so.

11. How does the Bernie Sanders campaign help independent political activism in Oklahoma?

I think the Bernie Sanders campaign has mobilized independent political activists, making them more visible as a voting block as well. Stereotypical constructions of Oklahoma as a “red state” erase the political progressivism and leftist activism the Sanders campaign has managed to harness. My hope is that regardless of whether or not Sanders wins, independent Oklahomans continue to build and grow the coalitions his campaign has enabled.

12. Does a Bernie Sanders nomination, help or hurt the Green Party?

With ballot access in a limited number of states, it’s hard to imagine a Green Party presidential candidate winning a national election regardless of who wins the Democratic Party nomination. However, I do think the Sanders campaign has brought attention to Green Party values and their increasing appeal to American voters. Politically, I think this is a gain for the Green Party, regardless of who articulates those values and what party he or she represents.

13. How do you think his potential presidency would affect the Green Party, going forward?

I am not sure if it would, particularly as long as Sanders is affiliated with the Democratic Party. I think the bigger barrier for Green reform is the current Congress, even with Sanders as President.

14. Are there any other gains, from your perspective, for the Green Party of Oklahoma making this endorsement?

Other than electoral participation, greater local visibility for our party, and coalition-building for ballot access, none come to mind.

15. What would you like to say to greens around the country that don’t agree with this endorsement?

A couple of things:

- a.) Honor local decision-making and trust those of us on the ground.
- b.) Urge the GPUS to invest more in achieving and retaining ballot access nationwide.

16. Where does the Green Party of Oklahoma, sees itself heading & accomplishing post 2016 ?

We will continue to work with other third parties in Oklahoma to reform the state’s ballot access laws. There are currently several bills under consideration in our legislature (particularly HB 1813 and SB 2181) that reduce the signature requirements for ballot access and forming a new political party. We plan to organize a strong citizens’ lobbying effort around this legislation. We would also like to field candidates in city council elections and possibly the 2018 gubernatorial election as well.

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