

US presidential campaign: Can you vote for what you want in 2016?

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The unpopularity of the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates has caused a surge of interest in the left-wing independent choice in Election 2016: Jill Stein.

AS THE 2016 general election campaign got going in earnest after the Democratic and Republican conventions, the choices for voters longing for progressive change got narrower.

During the Republican National Convention (RNC), Donald Trump offered a vision of U.S. society teetering on the edge of catastrophe [1]—a situation that could be rectified, however, by electing him president.

He promised to restore “law and order” in the face of “rampant crime” and protests against police violence. The “peace” he vowed to enforce on America’s streets would be coupled with stepped-up efforts to protect the homeland—more military intervention abroad to fight the evildoers and a border wall to keep out Mexican immigrants.

While Melania Trump pilfered parts of Michelle Obama’s 2008 speech calling on the victims of U.S. society to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, Donald Trump was stealing former President Richard Nixon’s entire platform [2]—right down to his pledge to be a voice for America’s “silent majority” and his “secret plan” to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

For Hillary Clinton, the RNC was a dream come true—coming just as she was seeking a way to inspire disaffected supporters of Bernie Sanders to shift their allegiance to her campaign.

The sinister character of the RNC—with its refrains about social disorder, chants of “build that wall” and scaremongering about looming terrorist attacks—provided Clinton with the perfect message to anyone frightened by the Republican reactionaries [3]: “Vote for me because I’m not him.”

While Trump presents himself as a wealthy and ruthless “winner,” he still has the audacity to claim that he’s the candidate best positioned to protect the downtrodden. “I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people who cannot defend themselves,” he said at the convention—even though that’s exactly how he built his business empire.

Clinton’s counter is to present herself as the “safe” alternative. In contrast to Trump’s “extremism” and “lack of experience,” she claims to be the veteran of the Washington system, who knows what’s possible and how to accomplish it.

Even more importantly, she claims to know what’s *not* possible: The U.S. government can find the money to wage more war, but comprehensive health care coverage and free college tuition are out of reach.

In response to Trump's slogan "Make America great again," the constant refrain during Clinton's coronation at the Democratic convention was that "America is already great." [4] But it sure doesn't look that way to millions of working-class people enduring declining living standards while the rich get massively, obscenely richer.

FOR MILLIONS of people who the Democrats are counting on to vote for them in November, the tried-and-true appeal of "lesser evilism"—vote for us not because we're what you want, but because you *really* don't want the other guy—rings hollow.

Many were inspired by Bernie Sanders' left-wing message, and the fact that his outsider campaign came up short does nothing to undermine the force of his attacks on Hillary Clinton as the candidate of Walmart, Wall Street and war.

As he promised from the start of his campaign, Sanders endorsed the eventual winner, and at the Democratic convention, he collaborated in the effort to sell Hillary Clinton as "a wonderful president" in his words, despite the discontent of his supporters at the arrogant attitude of the Democratic Party apparatus [5].

By November, the vast majority of these disgruntled Sanders supporters will likely feel they have no real choice but to vote for Clinton in order to stop Donald Trump from getting in the White House.

But they do have a chance to vote for what they want: By casting a ballot for Dr. Jill Stein, who will be officially nominated as the presidential candidate of the Green Party at its convention in Houston this weekend.

Stein's platform—for a \$15 an hour minimum wage, taxing the rich, aggressive measures to tackle climate change and more—is obviously much closer to Sanders' ideas than Hillary Clinton's. At the Democratic convention, angry Sanders supporters were drawn to the Green Party alternative [6]—a walkout by more than 100 delegates on Tuesday night was greeted by a Stein campaign rally.

IN THE weeks leading up to the Democratic convention, Stein enjoyed a surge of support and attention unknown for a left-wing third party candidate since Ralph Nader in 2000.

Though it is still early in the general election season, several polls showed Stein with greater support than Nader won, even though she is not as well known to voters. A late June CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey, for example, showed Stein with 7 percent of the vote [7]. Among voters under 45, she broke into double digits. Even more modest showings—3.5 percent support in the polling average calculated at the RealClearPolitics website [8]—is well ahead of any left-wing independent candidate since 2000.

After Sanders formally endorsed Clinton in early July, Stein made the case to Sanders supporters that their candidate's:

"false pragmatism is not the path to revolutionary change but rather an incrementalism that keeps us trapped, voting for lesser evil again and again. Each time a progressive challenger like Sanders, Dennis Kucinich or Jesse Jackson has inspired hope for real change, the Democratic Party has sabotaged them while marching to the right, becoming more corporatist and militarist with each election cycle."

At the same time, the Stein campaign launched an effort to raise \$500,000 in a month's time—to be matched by the federal government under the rules of the election system. Donations flowed in, much of it in small amounts, like the Sanders campaign experienced. The Stein campaign reached its goal and then some in just two weeks.

Stein also got high-profile endorsements from author and activist Cornel West and actor Viggo Mortensen. As West wrote in the *Guardian* [9]:

"This November, we need change. Yet we are tied in a choice between Trump, who would be a neo-fascist catastrophe, and Clinton, a neoliberal disaster. That's why I am supporting Jill Stein. I am with her—the only progressive woman in the race—because we've got to get beyond this lockjaw situation. I have a deep love for my brother Bernie Sanders, but I disagree with him on Hillary Clinton. I don't think she would be an outstanding president. Her militarism makes the world a less safe place..."

"We are having a moral and spiritual awakening. It gives us democratic hope. It's not about having hope, but being hope. It's time to move from being spectators, to being actors."

IN THE words of the late U.S. socialist Peter Camejo [10], "The enormous success of the two-party, pro-money political system developed in the United States is in getting about half the people simply not to vote, and forcing those who do—even when they disagree with corporate domination—to vote in favor of what they oppose."

By contrast, readers of this website will have a lot in common with Stein's radical political vision, though we do have some disagreements. For example, while opposing U.S. intervention in the Middle East, Stein has sometimes downplayed the role of other imperialist forces [11], such as Russia, which is intervening to uphold its own interests.

Stein's newly announced running mate Ajuma Baraka is a dedicated fighter for Black liberation, opponent of U.S. imperialism and supporter of the Palestinian struggle. But he has written articles minimizing the scale of repression carried out by the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria [12] against the revolutionary opposition, while reinforcing the myth that the Assad regime represents an expression of "national sovereignty" against U.S. imperialism. These mistaken views will only alienate people drawn to Stein's vision of a democratic struggle for change in the U.S.

In general, the Stein platform is clearly left wing, and she represents an independent alternative to the two-party duopoly. Stein has no realistic chance of winning the presidential election in 2016 and putting her program into action. But she deserves the vote of those who support it—because if they vote for Clinton instead, their agenda will be set back.

Even before the election, Clinton is moving to the right with a strategy of appealing to conservative "swing" voters [13]. At the Democratic convention, after a first day of pushing the theme of "unity," featuring Sanders making an endorsement speech, the Clinton campaign focused on appeals to their right.

Clinton and her party assume the liberal Democratic base will vote for them because there is no other "realistic" choice—and so they won't feel under any pressure to respond. And if Clinton does become president, there's nothing at all to hold her accountable to the beliefs and demands of those who cast their ballots for the Democrats. She will be free to serve the corporate masters of the Democratic Party [14].

A vote for Clinton won't even stop Donald Trump, though this is the main message of liberal organizations. Trump will lose the election if Clinton wins, of course. But Trumpism could well thrive under a neoliberal, imperial Clinton presidency.

How so? Clinton is committed to upholding the status quo that is fueling economic anxiety and stoking the violent cycle of war and reprisal. Large numbers of people have concluded from this that the system is broken. On the left, those people gave their support to Bernie Sanders or got involved

in grassroots struggles for change or both. But on the right, discontent with the status quo paved the way for Trump's rise [15].

A Clinton presidency that continues to disappoint everyone besides the 1 Percent and its hangers-on will feed the very conditions that allow right-wing demagogues like Trump to get a hearing.

A VOTE for Stein, on the other hand, won't be a vote for the winning candidate in 2016. But it will send a message—first and foremost to tell the millions of Americans longing for a political alternative that they aren't alone—and take a small step toward building a more effective independent challenge in the future.

But voting in November is only one part of the struggle to change the direction of this country.

As historian Howard Zinn put it [16]:

"There's hardly anything more important that people can learn than the fact that the really critical thing isn't who is sitting in the White House, but who is sitting in—in the streets, in the cafeterias, in the halls of government, in the factories. Who is protesting, who is occupying offices and demonstrating—those are the things that determine what happens."

Supporting a left-wing independent candidate against the two-party duopoly on Election Day has to be part of building a long-term alternative, including the social movements that can challenge whoever becomes the next president.

Presidential elections determine the individual at the pinnacle of power in the U.S. system, and these individuals shape the terms on which the political battles over the future are fought out. But so do grassroots struggles—movements against police violence, strikes by union members and those seeking a union, mass marches to defend the environment.

When that resistance is in motion, it can make itself felt, whichever party is in power.

Throughout U.S. history, the biggest changes for the greater good haven't come through voting for the lesser evil, but on the contrary, from fighting in workplaces and communities. The 1930s and 1960s eras of mass resistance in the U.S. won progressive change by relying on the truth of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass' words: "Without struggle, there is no progress."

Bernie Sanders' campaign further demonstrated that there are large numbers of people dissatisfied with the system who are ready to do something to change it.

If not now, when? If not us, who?

Your vote on November 8 for a genuine left alternative is one step toward building for change. But the struggle needs to go on all the other days of the year, too.

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P.S.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2016/08/03/can-you-vote-for-what-you-want>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/07/20/is-their-republican-party-over>
- [2] https://socialistworker.org/2002-2/411/411_08_Watergate.shtml
- [3] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/06/08/moving-to-her-im-not-trump-campaign>
- [4] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/05/12/hillary-thinks-americas-great>
- [5] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/08/01/the-un-democratic-national-committee>
- [6] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/07/28/what-happens-to-a-bern-deferred>
- [7] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/21/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-national-cnn-poll/>
- [8] <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/289859-third-party-support-surging>
- [9] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/14/barack-obama-us-racism-police-brutality-failed-victims>
- [10] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camejo/2005/greensafter2004.htm>
- [11] http://www.jill2016.com/stein_in_russia_calls_for_principled_collaboration
- [12] <http://www.blackagendareport.com/content/elections-syria-people-say-no-foreign-intervention>
- [13] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/08/01/clinton-is-the-one-who-should-be-ashamed>
- [14] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/05/26/the-worlds-greatest-democracy>
- [15] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/06/08/explaining-the-rise-of-donald-trump>
- [16] https://socialistworker.org/2004-2/500Supp/500S_20010216_Zinn.shtml