

US leftists and the Democratic Party: From Realignment to Reinforcement

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Leftists looking to take over the Democratic Party will confront even more roadblocks than in the past.

Reforming, realigning, or refashioning the Democratic Party into a [vehicle for social democracy](#) is one of the oldest, oft-repeated, and frustratingly unsuccessful strategies of the US left.

The Populists tried it in the 1890s, only to be absorbed and disarmed. The new industrial unions of the CIO attempted it beginning in 1936, just as the New Deal began to retreat. The Democratic Socialists, led by [Michael Harrington](#), pursued the realignment strategy in the 1970s at the very moment the “party of the people” began its trek to the [neoliberal right](#). Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition launched two highly visible runs for the Democratic presidential nomination in the 1980s even as Democratic National Committee (DNC) chief Charles Manatt recruited big business and its money. Then came Bill Clinton.

Could it be different this time around?

The hope that the Democratic Party can be pushed substantially to the left has been given new life by two wholly unexpected political events: Bernie Sanders’ [spectacular showing](#) in the Democratic presidential primaries, and Donald Trump’s [terrifying election](#) as president. Hope, on the one hand, and fear, on the other, have sent a new wave of activists toward or into the Democratic Party.

Several decades ago, realigners argued that the Democratic Party wasn’t really a party at all — just a loose coalition of disparate elements.

At the time, the institutional basis of the Democratic Party was the alliance of northern urban machines and southern (Dixiecrat) courthouse gangs, with organized labor as a junior partner. By the 1970s, however, the city machines were mostly dead or dying; the Dixiecrats were beginning their exit; and labor, Northern liberals, and the rising African-American vote seemed to provide the foundation for US social democracy.

The would-be realigners had other things going for them: party organization was weak; state parties were part-time and populated with amateurs; straight-ticket voting had fallen from 74 percent in 1952 to 50 percent by the mid-1960s; discipline in congressional votes had slumped from 70 percent of major floor votes in both houses during the 1950s to 58 percent of votes in the House and 51 percent in the Senate by the early 1970s; and after 1968 party leadership fell to a less than impressive cadre.

Yet this seemingly feeble party repelled the would-be reformers. And today, due to large-scale changes over the past few decades, the Democratic Party appears even more impregnable.

The party has become a well-funded, professionalized, multitiered hierarchy capable of intervening

in elections at just about every level. It selects candidates, provides funding, furnishes endorsements, offers media relations, and supplies computer and digital campaign and get-out-the-vote services. In Congress and most state legislatures, its leaders impose a high level of party discipline, such that for the last two decades 90 percent of floor votes in both houses have been along strict party lines.

The party structure and establishment has been fortified against its rivals, external and internal.

The Transformation Process

Since the 1970s, the most visible change in both major parties, and in the political process itself, is the explosion of money at every level of party operations and elections.

Underlying this change has been the dramatic rise in economic inequality, which has made the rich far richer. As Thomas Piketty [notes](#) in his monumental study of inequality: “The upper decile’s share increased from 30–35 percent of national income in the 1970s to 45–50 percent in the 2000s.” The top 1 percent gobbled up about 40 percent of that.

Corporations have also seen their pockets swell. Despite falling profit rates at times and recurring crises, corporate profits leapt from \$788 billion in 2002 to \$2.1 trillion in 2015.

Wealth naturally followed the same course. [Saez and Zucman](#) calculate that the 1 percent now own 42 percent of national wealth, the equivalent of \$35 trillion. The top 0.1 percent hold 22 percent of the country’s wealth, up from 7 percent in 1978. Beginning in the 1980s, and accelerating in the 1990s, the largest corporate merger movement in US history consolidated capital in industry after industry and pushed profits higher, despite crisis after crisis.

Flush with cash, business interests and the wealthy bid up the cost of elections to new heights and commercialized the way elections are run — at all levels of governments.

The total cost of the 1980 presidential election was \$161 million. By 2012 it had grown to \$2.6 billion, and in 2016 it ballooned to at least \$6.9 billion. For the House of Representatives, corporate and trade association PAC spending soared from \$40 million in the 1981–82 election cycle to \$298 million in 2013–14. As state legislatures professionalized — most became full-time institutions beginning in the 1970s — the cost of elections rose to \$1 billion in 2000 and then to \$2.2 billion in 2014. The tab for state and federal, non-presidential offices stood at nearly \$4 billion as of 2014 and will certainly climb higher as the two major parties attempt to beat one another by throwing more and more money at elections.

Huge amounts of money also go into local elections. In New York, real estate interests poured \$6 million in “outside” money into the 2013 Democratic primaries, according to the city’s campaign finance board. In Chicago’s 2015 city council (aldermanic) races, the Illinois Public Interest Research Group reports that the “money primary” determined who would win the actual primary 93 percent of the time. Incumbents outraised and outspent challengers five to one.

Behind much of the soaring costs of running for office has been the turn away from old-fashioned party-run or union door-to-door canvassing to purchased forms of campaigning and get-out-the-vote efforts. Paid consultants, mass mailings, pollsters, computer experts, media gurus, and services from profit-making outfits specializing in campaign wizardry have replaced the old clubhouse (or reform club), union, or county foot soldiers. In the 2014 midterm, the cost of the TV “air war” for congressional elections hit \$814 million, the highest ever.

The most recent innovation in commercialized politics is profit-making outfits that provide digital

voter targeting. Companies like [Aristotle](#) and [DSPolitical](#) gather as much as five hundred pieces of information on individuals and then determine who is most likely to vote — setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the more well-off are more likely to be targeted. (Seventy-five percent of those voting in congressional elections have family incomes exceeding \$50,000 a year, and 57 percent earn \$75,000 or more.) Spending on these firms' services jumped from \$22 million in the 2008 presidential election to about \$1 billion in 2016. And according to DSPolitical, these services are now being used in state and local elections as well.

As election costs have skyrocketed, members of Congress have become richer than ever. In 1984 the median net worth of US representatives was \$280,000. By 2014 it had surpassed \$1 million, with Democrats slightly ahead of Republicans. House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, for example, reported a net worth of just over \$29 million in 2013, and the average net worth of a Democratic representative was \$5,700,000. Many congressional Democrats are full-fledged members of the 1 percent.

In short, both the Democratic Party's electorate and elected officials are increasingly skewed toward the rich.

Party-Building

While contemporary election campaigns are often assumed to be "candidate-centered," a recent study by the *Congressional Quarterly* [notes](#), "Congressional aspirants... quickly encounter national networks of party committees and their allied interest groups. At the heart of these networks are the two major parties' House and Senate campaign committees, now active in nearly all phases of congressional elections."

In recent decades, the three major committees that form the core of the national party have taken a greater role in elections, funneling money raised from businesses to campaigns and state parties (on top of what business PACs give directly to campaigns).

The DNC, for instance, spent a mere \$14.8 million on campaigns in 1980. By 2012 it was contributing \$292.3 million to Democratic candidates. Similarly, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) saw its campaign contributions rise from \$2 million in 1980 to \$206 million in 2014, while those of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) climbed from \$1.6 million to \$169.2 million over the same period — both increasing by one hundred times in nominal terms or about thirty-six times in real money. State parties have developed their own prodigious funding operations, throwing in an additional \$182.6 million for congressional elections in 2014.

So where does all this money come from?

Big business, on the whole. Among the DNC's biggest funders in 2016 were Microsoft, Pritzker, Time Warner, the private equity giant Blackstone Group, and several investment firms, such as the \$65 billion [Renaissance Technologies](#) (which gave \$881,450 last year). Of the \$98.9 million the DNC had raised as of last August, \$50 million came from business, \$7.1 million from lawyers and lobbyists, \$1.6 million from ideological or issue groups, a mere \$66,500 from labor, and the rest from individuals.

The DCCC and DSCC also draw heavily from business and lightly from labor. For the 2016 cycle, of the \$55.6 million the DCCC had raised as of August, \$22.2 million came from business, \$3.8 million from lawyers and lobbyists, \$2.9 million from ideological or issue groups, and just \$175,000 from labor. In the off-year cycle of 2014, business lavished the DCCC with \$31.3 million compared to

labor's \$1.2 million. Of the \$41.3 million the Senate Campaign Committee had amassed as of August 2016, \$17.5 million was from business, \$869,300 from ideological and issue committees, and \$117,900 from labor; in the 2014 cycle, business donated \$26.5 million compared to labor's \$910,600.

Individual wealthy donors are another important source of cash for these committees. SourceWatch reports that in 2010, the DSCC compared its two-hundred-thousand-person donor list to a database of the nation's richest 5 percent and discovered that a quarter of the names matched.

Meanwhile, digital crowdfunding by outfits like [ActBlue](#), alleged to democratize funding by bundling small credit card contributions, have just flooded the election process with more money — ironically amplifying the rush of Super PAC money that the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision released.

The most recent success in crowdfunding is also less suggestive than it might appear. On its face, Bernie Sanders' remarkable presidential bid seemed to show how small-donor money could be harnessed to elect leftist candidates. But Sanders' bid for the Democratic nomination run was a, almost *the*, high-profile event of the first half of 2016. Most local, state, and even congressional primaries are markedly different, characterized by very low turnout and scant media coverage. In these races — the overwhelming majority — crowdfunding is likely to be less effective.

In any case, mainstream and incumbent Democrats already use outfits like ActBlue to pump up their political coffers even beyond the business and PAC money they get. And engaging in the electoral funding arms race is bound to tie up resources and, in the end, prove self-defeating. Playing the money game rather than pursuing low-cost grassroots, face-to-face organizing to increase turnout and inject actual political issues into the debate is a huge misuse of activists' time and energy.

Political participation by credit card isn't the antidote to "free speech" by checkbook. It's just another big bid in the auction, pushing the cost of elections higher and deepening the process of commercialization through unaccountable service providers.

All of this adds up to a party that, even more than in the past, is both highly undemocratic and structurally tied to the business PACs and wealthy donors that fund their committees and preferred candidates. As the commercialization of campaigns gallops along, rank-and-file Democrats have less and less say in the party.

The Permeable Party?

The most permeable feature of the two major parties is the primary. Yet it's a small opening: much of the money swirling around ends up in these contests, above all to give current officeholders a leg up. In each election cycle since World War II, only between 1 and 2 percent of congressional incumbents have lost a primary challenge, with the rate of incumbency hovering above 90 percent.

The 90 percent-plus ratio holds for state and local offices as well. In general, because they are already well-known, incumbents at all levels are able to gain important endorsements, union backing, and support from party activists; attract what media attention there is; and raise several times what most challengers can muster.

For those looking to get involved in the party at the local level to elect a left challenger, there's an additional stumbling block: after the primary contest, party activists are expected to work for the winner — who, more often than not, is the incumbent they just tried to defeat. This expectation that party activists work for the entire ticket reinforces the status quo. The norms of the party militate against any effort to transform the Democrats by sweeping local, state, and congressional primaries, starting from the ground up.

As the chair of the DCCC readily admits, a priority of party campaign committees “is always incumbent protection.”

When necessary, the party hierarchy will come directly to the aid of an incumbent party regular. When Tim Canova, endorsed by Bernie Sanders, mounted a serious challenge to incumbent Representative and pro-business “New Democrat” Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and other party luminaries endorsed her and/or campaigned for her. This despite the fact that she had resigned in disgrace as chair of the DNC after Wikileaks revealed she had [used her position](#) to undermine the Sanders campaign.

Wasserman Schultz [went on to win](#) 57 percent of the vote.

From Discipline to Conformity

The transformation and fortification of the Democratic Party goes beyond the primary process, the party’s funding sources, and the increased party discipline in legislative bodies.

Those who hope to have a political career of any length, receive party campaign funds and endorsements, or avoid intra-party opposition are not only expected to work for the party’s candidates once the primaries are over, but are also under strong pressures to conform to party norms and priorities.

And most do. Set aside the legislative floor votes and support for the party’s ticket — just look at the Bernie Sanders campaign. If ever there was a litmus test of the relative independence and progressive political practice of Democratic officeholders, it was Sanders’s run for president. While millions of Democratic voters rejected the party establishment by organizing and voting for the self-described democratic socialist, the vast majority of Democratic officeholders [stood by](#) the party’s preferred candidate, Hillary Clinton. Of the party’s 716 convention superdelegates — almost all of whom were present or past officeholders and who possessed a combined 712 votes — Sanders garnered only 44 and a half votes, or just over one half of 1 percent.

But it wasn’t just a matter of hand-picked delegates. Of the 232 Democrats in both houses of Congress, 209 endorsed Clinton in the primaries, while only 10 endorsed Sanders. The Vermont senator didn’t do much better among his comrades in the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC). Ignoring Sanders’s distinction as one of the caucus’s founders, 45 out of 75 members of the CPC endorsed Clinton. In fact, of the one senator and nine representatives who backed Sanders, only five representatives were part of the Progressive Caucus. In other words, 70 out of 75 members of the CPC refused to support a genuine progressive challenge by one of their own.

The pressure to conform exists at every level. Of the 3,170 Democratic state legislators, Sanders won the endorsement of 91, less than 3 percent. Only 3 of the New York City Council’s 51 members endorsed Sanders, including just 2 from the council’s nineteen-member Progressive Caucus. The Chicago City Council Progressive Caucus was only slightly warmer to Sanders: 3 of its 11 councilmembers endorsed the social-democratic senator.

Those are sobering figures for progressives and socialists who think the [Democratic Party](#) is ours for the taking.

Commercialized and Unaccountable

The growth of the Democratic Party’s business-funded bureaucracy over the past half century, the soaring role of money in elections, and the downgrading of grassroots organization in favor of purchased campaign methods has changed this capitalist party, as well as its rival, and the whole

political process.

The party's commercialized campaigning and unaccountable structure has allowed it to impose austerity while fending off the sorts of challenges mounted by the realigners of the 1970s, the Rainbow Coalition of the 1980s, and the Bernie Sanders campaign last year. Unfortunately, Bernie veterans looking to create the party anew will come up against the same roadblocks.

It's time for socialists to [build an alternative](#). The base is there in cities of all sizes. It is there among thousands of Sanderistas with no place to go. It is there in militant unions and among union insurgents fighting to change their unions — many of whom supported Sanders — as well as among activists from Black Lives Matter, Fight for 15, immigrants' rights groups, and workers centers. It is there among the millions of working-class African Americans and Latinos who have seen both major parties let their neighborhoods deteriorate. And it is even to be found among those "left behind" white workers who voted for Trump.

The Democrats' dependence on money and technical wizardry, their addiction to neoliberal policies, and the resulting slump in their vote in much of the country make them vulnerable to an assault from the outside. Starting at the local level, getting active on real issues that matter to the countless victims of neoliberalism, organizing and going door to door, these forces can form the future base for a democratically organized, mass membership party of the Left.

Kim Moody

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