

# United States and 2020 Election: If Sanders Should Lose

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## **The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) endorsed Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party nomination for US President. But what if he doesn't win the primary?**

Earlier this year, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) endorsed Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party nomination for US President. 13,324 members (24% of the membership) voted in an advisory referendum, [with 76% in favor of endorsement](#). DSA's National Political Committee quickly moved to officially endorse Sanders and prepare an independent expenditure (IE) plan for DSA to campaign on Sanders' behalf.

But what if he doesn't win the primary? How will DSA orient itself towards the 2020 election at the height of anxiety around the possibility of a second term for Trump? The pressure will be on to work for whoever the Democrats nominate, and the path we choose will have consequences for the alliance of socialists in DSA.

I wrote a resolution for the 2019 DSA Convention, R15 "In the Event of Sanders Loss" in anticipation of this scenario. The proposal simply states, "should Bernie Sanders fail to win the Democratic Party nomination the Democratic Socialists of America will not endorse another Democratic Party presidential candidate for the 2020 general election." I'd like to offer a more detailed explanation for why it is important that DSA adopt this position at the 2019 convention.

There's a lot of excitement around Sanders. He's a major party candidate you don't have to hold your nose to vote for. He has broadly popular anti-neoliberal policies like universal healthcare and free college. He supports unions and aggressive climate change action. He talks about the "billionaire class" as the source of the problems in society and has been credited with ending the taboo around the word "socialism". Most matchups show Sanders beating Trump if he were to secure the Democratic Party nomination, so there's a sense that this is a possibility within reach.

Not to yuck anyone's yum, but there is every reason to expect that Sanders will have an extremely difficult time securing the Democratic Party nomination. For one, the political terrain is different than it was in 2016. Sanders presented a major contrast next to Hillary Clinton, whose presumed nomination acted more like a royal coronation than an exercise in democracy. Establishment Democrats were disoriented by Sanders and unprepared for such a successful challenge from their left. In 2019, the spread of candidates has already adapted (albeit disingenuously) to Sanders' signature policy, Medicare for All, and given lip service to inequality. At the end of June in the first Democratic Party debate, Sanders' performance had mixed reviews: his [polling has dipped](#) putting him in a three-way tie for second place with Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris, while corporate favorite Joe Biden is still in the lead. Of course, it's early in the campaign and we are not so quick to dismiss Sanders, but it is important to recognize that the terrain is different in 2019 and significantly more challenging.

More important is the reality of the Democratic Party, which is anything but democratic. Though Sanders generally won states that had “open primary” laws, allowing any registered voter to participate in one of the major party primaries, many states have arcane rules designed to discourage participation and secure a victory for the desired candidate; New York, for example, requires that one be registered as a Democrat nearly a year prior to the primary to be allowed to participate. Even among those who could vote, we saw in 2016 that votes for Sanders were suppressed in the primary by limited polling sites and purging voter rolls, and evidence has shown that the Democratic National Committee (DNC) [actively intervened to ensure that Clinton would be the nominee](#). When a group of Sanders supporters [sued over violation of party rules](#), courts ruled in favor of the DNC as a private corporation that has no obligation to voters. More recently, [Politico has reported](#) that Wall Street has made it clear that [Sanders is not an acceptable candidate](#): “It can’t be Warren and it can’t be Sanders”. It starts to get difficult to imagine how Sanders could take the Democratic Party nomination.

Should this change our calculus on supporting Sanders? Not really. Sanders’ platform is good — it’s hard to take issues with any of what he proposes, though you would be right to point out that the policies themselves are closer to the New Deal than they are to even social democracy. But that’s not the point. DSA should be clear that the reason to support Bernie Sanders is because of the openings he creates for class struggle. In These Times [reported](#) that “Sanders is...using his lists to help mobilize turnout at worker-led actions” and Vox adds that he [used his email lists to warn immigrants about ICE raids](#). In an [interview with Rachel Maddow](#), Sanders explained how he would deal with a Congress hostile to his program: “The point that I make over and over again...is that the ideas I talk about are ideas that American people want. They don’t get it because you have a Congress indebted to wealthy campaign contributors.” We hope he wins; we should push the contradictions as far as they will go in his election campaign but be honest about the enormous difficulties Sanders faces.

The most significant parts of what Sanders does is bring a narrative about class antagonism (“the billionaire class”) into American politics, where he lends legitimacy and creates space to talk about class in a way that has not been possible in recent memory. But more than that he presents a theory of change that is not about giving all your power to a politician, rather he explains that it will take mass movements and a “political revolution” to accomplish his program. That he calls himself a socialist is really just a bonus.

Whether or not you agree on how likely it is that he gets the nomination, the point still stands that DSA should prepare a position in case he fails. What will DSA do if in 2020 Sanders is not awarded the nomination (either through foul play or because he couldn’t get enough support)? We already know who the other possibilities would be as the Democratic Party candidate, which presents us with either a standard lesser-evil corporate Democrat or someone like Elizabeth Warren who has some reforms in mind to save capitalism from itself. DSA should not support either of these options. Let’s take them in turn.

While Warren may have some similar policy prescriptions to Sanders, her orientation is completely different. We can quibble about Sanders calling himself a socialist, but [Warren wants to remind us](#), “I am a capitalist. Come on. I believe in markets. What I don’t believe in is theft, what I don’t believe in is cheating. That’s where the difference is.” Much more troubling is [her explanation](#) that “In short, climate change is real, it is worsening by the day, and it is undermining our military readiness.” As socialists, none of the elements that are attractive about Sanders are present in Warren. Warren presents herself as an expert who will solve problems with technocratic policies, not social movements. She engages a military citizen as her subject, not a working class fighting against authoritarian capital. If Sanders is the “class struggle candidate”, Warren is the class snuggle candidate.

Should the Democrats put up Biden or Harris, it will be a classic lesser-evil argument: shouldn't we try to "reduce the harm" of another Trump presidency? But this ignores that neoliberal Democrats set the stage for the far-right; we couldn't have had a Trump without Obama. The crisis of 2007 cracked the bipartisan agreement on keeping a limited spectrum of centrist neoliberalism, and Obama's administration of austerity and worsening conditions likely only survived because of the unique social role he played as the first black President. The right has preyed on the resulting anger and weaponized racism to bring Trump to the Presidency. Clinton demonstrated that corporate politics is not an effective counter to Trumpism, and if we scratch beneath the surface we see that most of the policies we loathe in Trump were largely [continuations of policies under Obama](#). There's no signs of the Democratic establishment shifting course.

Wall Street-favorite Joe Biden has been on the wrong side of nearly every major issue in American politics, from working with [segregationists to fight bussing](#) to [stumping for the Iraq War](#). More recently, he [comforted donors by saying](#) he would not "demonize" the rich and "no one's standard of living will change, nothing would fundamentally change." Branko Marcetic [writes for Jacobin](#), "If Biden has an ethos, it's an antiquated, anachronistic centrism, not even focused on finding a pragmatic middle that most of the public can get behind, but on "reaching across the aisle.""

Kamala Harris is not nearly the embarrassment that Joe Biden is but [stays the course on centrist social liberalism](#). Harris has progressive rhetoric, but her actions rarely follow suit. After slamming Biden in the debates for his opposition to bussing, she turned around the very next day to clarify that she was actually also [against mandatory bussing](#). Harris criticized the Jeffrey Epstein deal, but then [accepted money from his law firm](#). Marcetic, again [writing for Jacobin](#), argues, "It should matter to us that Harris, the ardent criminal justice reformer, not only did little to enact this reform during her years as a prosecutor but backed harsh, punitive policies that undermined her own progressive rhetoric on the issue. It should matter that she at times did so needlessly, taking a harsher stance than her right-wing opponents. It should matter that she repeatedly attempted to keep an innocent man locked up in prison and attempted to defend a falsified confession." We could go on with the host of other Democratic hopefuls, but we'd only find more of the same.

For DSA, Sanders is a unique candidate who can hold together the coalition of socialists in the "big tent"; across the spectrum, for one reason or another, we can generally agree that the Sanders campaign is compatible with our organization. His policies, while meaningful, are less important than the way he uses them to talk about power in American society and how working people can make the changes we need. There will be immense difficulty in Sanders securing the Democratic nomination, which is not meant to discourage comrades but rather to point out what is ahead of us.

When the pressure of the election season is in full swing, it will be tempting to fall in line with the host of organizations calling for support of the Democrats. There isn't a win here. As an organization, DSA should make it clear that we will not endorse corporate politicians, especially as this will create divisions among our own membership. Non-endorsement does not dictate that individual members must abstain, but rather as an organization we agree not to lend our credibility to a Democrat we know to be an adversary. That's the rationale behind R15 "In the Event of Sanders Loss".

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**P.S.**

- Medium, Jul 19, 2019:

<https://medium.com/@andrew.sernatinger/if-sanders-should-lose-e1559c7b2fd3>