

Bernie Sanders and the Left. “End of the Line” for Bernie?

Why there is still hope and why the Left should rejoice and push forward

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While some have become skeptical, there are those – from [The Nation](#) via [Politico](#) and Tom Cahill ([U.S. Uncut](#)) to [Robert Reich](#) – who are now saying that this is not the end of the line for [Bernie Sanders](#) U.S. presidential bid.

And it is indeed true that we should remind ourselves that ever since the 1980s the Democratic party leadership has scheduled the primary season in ways that voters in more conservative states would go to the polls first in order to prevent leftist grassroots candidates from challenging the neoliberal party establishment. Keeping that in mind, it’s also true that pretty much all the upcoming states are way more favorable to Sanders than most of the ones that have already voted.

And it’s also true that only those will now despair who had somewhat unrealistic hopes with regard to what was actually possible Tuesday night. After all, despite all the Sanders momentum etc., another historic [upset like the one in Michigan](#) was unlikely.

Regardless of how critical one is of how the corporate media prefers to talk about polls and electability instead of about actual political issues, regardless of how the 2016 U.S. presidential election is taking place in a highly dynamic and ultimately unpredictable “[populist moment](#)” and regardless also of how incredibly wrong therefore FiveThirtyEight and other influential polling institutions were when it came to predicting Michigan, one must admit that the [FiveThirtyEight predictions](#) have been quite accurate in most of the previous states so far. And despite the come-from-behind momentum resulting from the Michigan boost, one could simply not expect another upset in the states that voted [Tuesday night](#). [1] FiveThirtyEight’s predictions of Sanders victories, just based on their polls, were <1% in Florida, <10% in Illinois, <1% in North Carolina, only 3% in Ohio and 46% in Missouri. So in a way, it was rather surprising that Sanders even came so close to winning Illinois and Missouri, beating the delegate goals of the Clinton campaign.

End of the Firewall?

All in all, Sanders’ lost by big margins only in the two states where everyone knew he would. And although those two states increase Clintons’ lead by more than 70 delegates, Reich and others are correct when they note that the Democratic primary scheduling “firewall” for Clinton has now come to an end. In the upcoming states the situation looks much better for Sanders with [FiveThirtyEight suggesting](#) a Sanders win probability – based on the previous primary elections – of 40% in Arizona, 75% in Idaho, 82% in Utah (March 22), 91% in Alaska, 81% in Hawaii and 85% in Washington (March 26), 61% in Wisconsin (April 5), 80% in

Wyoming (April 9) etc.

In other words, unless the corporate media message according to which the presidential bid of the leftist candidate – against whom both the [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#) have been fighting tooth and nail all along – ended last night leads to disillusionment, even lower millennial and working class voter turnout in the upcoming states etc., a Sanders comeback, which equals a continued presence of his extremely popular left social-democratic message, is not that unlikely and can and should be fought for. And Reich and others are right to point out that the majority of delegates are still in play – with big prizes like California (548 delegates) and Wisconsin (96 delegates) still to come. And if the momentum is back and the movement behind Sanders continues to further effectively deconstruct Clinton’s faux progressivism, “faux feminism”^[2] and her zombie-ish electability myth (polls show that the probability of a Donald Trump or Ted Cruz presidency is much higher with a Clinton nomination), etc. then also the super-delegates will find it harder to support Clinton against the popular vote. And the left may find comfort in the fact that Sanders is actually still doing better than he ought to be doing according to at least one of the comprehensive three Sanders victory scenarios [outlined by DailyKos last month](#).

Nevertheless, yesterday obviously made things more difficult. Sanders’ come-from-behind momentum appears to have taken a brunt. And gone is the message that Clinton can only win the solid South (which – with maybe a few exceptions like Florida, Virginia and North Carolina – Democrats are bound to lose in the federal election anyway...) but hardly anywhere else, especially not in the Midwest/rust belt hard-hit by the highly unpopular free-trade agreements like NAFTA, CAFTA and TPP which Clinton embraced until she suddenly and without further explanation [changed her mind](#) on the trade issue in a blog post(!). So a successful Sanders nomination as the Democratic candidate in the 2016 presidential elections has become even more unlikely last night, for sure.

However, here’s why beyond this type of reasoning leftists should not be disillusioned. In the very narrow sense of success, i.e. a successful Democratic nomination, a Sanders victory was extremely unlikely from the get-go. No one, not even the wildest optimists among us, expected Sanders to even get this far last year. And this also appears to have been one of the reasons why many of his radical left-wing supporters today were initially very critical of his campaign when it started, not just because of some controversial foreign-policy stances or because of real “social-democratic illusions” (especially with regard to finance and banking reform) but especially because he was considered a catalyst of left-wing, anti-neoliberal grassroots mobilization for an eventual neoliberal Clinton presidential bid.

And even when the campaign developed what Loren Balhorn would have called Sanders’ “[WTF?! dynamism](#)” (if only the German publisher had let him get away with that), only the boldest (or most clueless) leftist observers ended up saying last week that they would once and for all declare Sanders to become the Democratic party nominee. Of course, we all have hopes and dreams. We would not be leftists if we didn’t believe in the possibility of sudden unexpected change. If history was left to the pollsters and ‘pundits,’ the [October Revolution](#) would never have happened. Still, we must remember that only an incredible mass movement can/could bring Sanders even close to winning the Democratic nomination.

Why Should the Left Rejoice?

First of all, in terms of the narrow question of a presidential bid, there is the fact that

because of the far-reaching popularity of his unique left-wing social-democratic message there's still hope to be generated from the fact that, as the polls show, Sanders still has the capability of building majorities both within the Democratic primary as well as in the federal elections in November. And even though he has commented that he wouldn't run as an [independent candidate](#) because of how it would split the vote and possibly hand the election to the GOP, it is still a possibility. A possibility which presumably would depend on a mixture of how the dynamism plays out in both parties' primary elections over the course of the next months and maybe also who is pushing Sanders in which direction. Generally speaking, with Trump having moved one step further in the direction of a Republican nomination Tuesday night by winning Florida (albeit losing in Ohio against the establishment's new favorite candidate, John Kasich, as opposed to the tea party government shutdown leader Ted Cruz...) and with the Republican party establishment apparently being dead set on preventing Trump at whatever political cost, we might even see four presidential candidates in November. And obviously such a split in both parties would be highly beneficial to such a Sanders presidential bid, because otherwise the [Ralph Nader 2000](#) trauma would be reawakened and it would be all Clinton vs. Trump.

However, the point why the global left should rejoice is, *secondly*, that all of these ifs-and-butts questions are really not even the most important ones. The main reason why the global left should rejoice is because the left in the U.S. will not only have won in case Sanders eventually wins, against all odds, the nomination and the 2016 presidential election (which, given the popularity of his message and the widespread hatred of Trump, he then probably would). The American left has already won no matter what happens next! It has won by how the Sanders campaign politicized the usually completely depoliticized American presidential elections of neoliberal candidates of various shades vaguely promising 'hope' and 'change' and 'conservative values'. It has won by enforcing a debate about capitalism and its surface symptomology income and wealth inequality. It has won by pulling it out into the open how this obscene inequality is corrupting liberal democracy, how it has created an oligarchic power structure and how only a comprehensive strategy of conflict-oriented social movements at all levels - the workplace, the street, and the political/parliamentary system, i.e. a revolutionary realpolitik (Rosa Luxemburg) inside and against the state, which is aimed at shifting the balance of forces between capital and labour, can undo it. And it has won by clearly demarcating the divide between the left in the U.S. and the neoliberal wing of the Democratic Party.

Despite [Sanders' recent claim](#) that he ran as a Democrat because it would give him greater media exposure and because they had an existing institutional structure, he clearly also did so to drive home just how neoliberal Clinton was and to reveal how a left Democrat could run. A very strong reason to keep hope alive in the Sanders camp is because of how he will continue to reveal this divide in the party. It is a real victory of this campaign in exposing what Sanders, based on decades of dealings with the party knows: that the DP is the main barrier to leftward movement in the U.S. and the true source of the neoliberal hegemony. By showing that it is possible to run as a socialist Democratic candidate and have a chance, Bernie has opened up future possibilities by exposing the rift in the party. In fact, we quite possibly will look back at this as the moment of the break with neoliberalism of the party. And Sanders' run has also put the left on solid footing of attack if Hillary becomes the president. Again, this will take future work but it will be much harder to pass off future rightward drift as inevitable or just Democratic party business-as-usual with the divide in the party exposed. The background noise of future politics will always be: we had another path but chose this one. Conversely if Trump wins the left will also have a solid foundation to

argue that his victory was due to the neoliberal drift of the Democratic Party and only a left Democrat could've/can stop the hard right in the future.

And finally, and this may be the most remarkable achievement, the American left has won by establishing Sanders' concrete left-wing social-democratic and/or transformative transition demands in the American political landscape and imagination: single-payer health care, free public education, a federal living wage of \$15/hour, the Workplace Democracy Act facilitating unionization, fundamental banking reform (even if focused on dismantling instead of socialization...). Hence, the American populace is now much more aware about the real tertium-non-datur alternative: A left-wing Social Green New Deal as a general, inclusive and solidarity-based high-road exit strategy from the crisis, which would re-shift the relationship of forces between capital and labour and could function as the most coherent entrance project to a post-capitalist future, or the global neoliberal unity coalition's low-road exit strategy of austerity with further immiseration, nationalist exclusion and destruction of the public good.

All of this will not go away. Or rather, beyond carrying on the Sanders presidential campaign, the American left now has the opportunity (and, we think, obligation) to not let the Sanders mobilization eventually dissolve but integrate the millions of enthused, but often - not least because of their extremely young age - politically inexperienced Sanders supporters into (the already existing) [social movements mobilizing](#) around those concrete demands of "Medicare for all," "Fight for 15 and a union" etc.

And in all of that, the Sanders movement is also a historic victory not only for the American left. Rather, the American left has given the world the greatest gift. And that is that, because of U.S. hegemony, the entire world has been watching how the anti-neoliberal left is now suddenly capable of building majorities around transformative transition programs. We cannot overestimate and should take pleasure in how this fact would send shivers down the spines of current and former third way social-democratic party leaders all across the core capitalist countries if only the Clintons, Blairs, Schroeders, Jospins, Zapateros, Hollandes, Gabriels, Renzis and Sánchez' had spines. Yes, the entire world is watching how the anti-neoliberal left is now suddenly even moving into the direction of once again and realistically posing the question of (political) power - and not only in the "imperialist chain's weakest links," i.e. economically devastated peripheries with very, very little room for maneuvering such as Greece, but also in the very heart of the core capitalist countries and the American Empire.

Thus, the SYRIZA-Corbyn-Sanders freedom train continues zooming down the tracks. Its path is bumpy. To every up-hill there's a down-hill. But it's moving forward, and, despite it all, it's moving forward fast. •

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Notes:

1. It is also unclear what impact the recent violence at Trump rallies had in the primaries outcomes. While those on the left would like to believe that seeing protesters take on and challenge the xenophobic and racist atmosphere of those events we should also be mindful that many would see that violence and the potential for more in the future and run back into the arms of the neoliberal Democrats who they see as able to protect them.
2. Liza Featherstone, Ed., [*False Choices: The Faux Feminism of Hillary Rodham Clinton*](#), Verso Books, London/New York 2016.

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