



How the Sanders Phenomenon Unleashed a Socialist Movement

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May 12, 2017

The references throughout this research are equally centered around the emerging belief that there is a shift in sociopolitical ideologies occurring within the electoral base of U.S. politics. On a macro-scale, the academic and political exploration of the “Sanders Phenomenon,” which are a series of events that unleashed a populist wave of democratic socialist political ideology within the U.S. electorate, has been mostly ignored. The purpose of this research is to explore, compare, and draw similarities in each author’s analysis to build a concise understanding of how the paradigm of previous generations’ support for neoliberal policies have affected the political revolution we experience today. The references I have included are specifically selected to provide a comprehensive outlook on several key factors in this ideological shift in domestic U.S. politics.

The argument presented serves as a response to a CBS News “Face the Nation” interview with House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi on December 4, 2016. In the interview, when asked about what Democrats who want a new direction can expect, Pelosi is quoted as saying, “...I don’t think that people want a new direction. Our values unify us.” Pelosi’s open admission of resisting change demonstrates a blatant disregard for the staggering number of losses Democrats have struggled with. The Democratic leadership’s continued unwillingness to acknowledge a growing divide within its base is a slight to the numerous progressives clamoring for representation, some of which who were registered as Independent but entered the Democratic Party to vote for Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) during the 2016 primary season.

Partisan Ideological Identity & Conflict

The common consensus in adhering fault for the ideological shifts in the two major political factions of U.S. politics is a generational divide among their support base. One may make an argument based on the principles of age-gap within political identities, but would be hard pressed to explain exactly why. It is true that political attitudes among the younger electorate are dependent on the events and personalities which shaped their political beliefs and associations, and as such, will continue to remain prevalent as they continue throughout their adult life[i]. However, in the study “Ideological Factions in the Republican and Democratic Parties,” Noel focuses on the belief that what splits parties are divides between the ideologically pure and the pragmatic, arguing that it is a difference about political means, not policy ends[ii].

Millennial voters are more receptive to Left-wing populism than Right-wing when reviewing statistical data that shows a -50 favorable to unfavorable percentage in contrast to Sanders' +23 from Jan-March 2016 among voters under 30. This becomes more evident upon reviewing the 2016 Democratic Primary, as despite some concessions, Secretary of State and Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is viewed as a moderate Democrat with orthodox positions like President Barack Obama's, and sits center of the Democratic Center-Left coalition[1].

This is apparent in the primary results, as Clinton supporters are more inclined to favor compromise in comparison to Sanders' supporters, who are much less probable of compromising their ideological principles[2]. In the results Noel mentions, Democratic voters who think that Obama betrayed them were more favorable towards Senator Sanders, and those who were pleased with the Presidents' performance were favorable towards Clinton. Gallo expands on that, by referencing data that shows 69 percent between the ages of 18-29, preferred to elect a presidential candidate with a socialist platform. Less than half of Americans over the age of 30 preferred a socialist presidential candidate.

Sanders Phenomenon

Senator Sanders' self-promotion as a democratic socialist is a rare display of transparency in American politics, where socialist representation is almost non-existent[iii]. The timing could not have been more opportune, then, as Americans' views on monetary and wealth distribution are strongly influenced by their partisanship and ideology. The suggestion of a more equitable, socialist approach found agreement from 86 percent among Democrats to a dismal 34 and 42 percent among Republicans and conservative independents, respectively[iv].

Gallagher suggests that Sanders was the right candidate to step forward, as 43 percent of Democrats favored socialist ideologies, compared to 29 percent unfavorable. Perhaps that is why he chose to primary as a Democrat, as claimed to be encouraged by the Progressive Democrats of America, the Left-wing of the centrists' party, to avoid the 2000 "Nader Effect." Rehman proposes that if Sanders had not chosen to primary as a Democrat and instead campaigned as Independent, the mainstream media would have blocked him out so well from the public eye, no one would have had a clue what he supported[v].

Senator Sanders is known as the longest serving Independent in congressional history and has with him an arsenal of 21 political campaigns of political experience and an equally extensive history within the civil rights movement. Despite his misstep of addressing the Black Lives Matters movement[3], Sanders worked hard to develop his campaigns directive to address issues of concern to people of color. Master criticizes Sanders by suggesting, "the primacy he gave to questions of class, economic inequality, and corporate power evidently prevented many African Americans and Latinos from seeing themselves in his campaign." Rehmann adds that Sanders' program for labor cooperatives should have been more thorough, as well as the lack of convincing behind tackling gentrification and skyrocketing rents in metropolitan areas. Rehmann also points to Sanders' weak foreign policy and the debate centered around if "big banks" should be broken up into smaller first, or assimilated as "public utilities"[4].

Sanders' task was no small feat, as his economic platform was designed to construct new and broad "historic blocs" of different subaltern classes and identifying groups, and was especially aimed at creating an alliance between working and middle class citizens[5]. In that process, Rehmann claims he was unable to acquire enough time to properly address the concern that a

focus on class is considered by many minorities to be a focus on white privilege. It is with this understanding of the necessity of re-address that the continued sustainability of a post-Sanders movement for social justice within a fully democratic system will only be attained if it is inclusionary in its outreach efforts of the BLM and similar movements for immigrants[6].

The radical and historically relevant nature of such a candidate and their ideological platform in a dead-pulsed political body suggests the shift of civic engagement that moves beyond the predisposed regular political channels. Senator Sanders has vehemently pushed the narrative of the need for building a populist movement, proclaiming at every rally and almost every speech given, that the “political revolution” can only be achieved through the creation of a grassroots, sustainable, people-powered movement[7]. His narrative is a direct attack of neoliberal capitalism at the “weakest link in the imperialist chain”[8]. However, as Master suggests, the “disappointment in Obama suggests that the mistaken demobilization that followed 2008’s ‘Occupy Wall Street’ may be avoided” for further civil movement sustainability[9].

Neoliberalism

The primary factor in the ideological divide’s sustainable populist movement within Leftist American politics remains to be the clarification of what “neoliberalism” constitutes as. The philosophy of “neoliberalism” came from the collaboration of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek in 1938. Hayek and von Mises saw social democracy, in the after effects of Roosevelt’s New Deal and the gradual development of Britain’s welfare state, as policies of collectivism that occupied the same grounds as Nazism and communism[vi].

The conceptualization of neoliberalism is “oft-invoked but ill-defined,” as Flew suggests, in an exploration to clarify the origins and contextual meaning of the term[vii]. Flew proposes in his research that neoliberalism is attributed to a category which is used to denounce anything one disagrees against[10]; the state of reality[11]; a doctrine of Western society[12]; the dominant ideology of global capitalism[13]; and a focus on the Foucault and Marxist understanding of neoliberalism as a hegemonic historical institutional form[14].

Michel Foucault targeted the swelling of neoliberal policies during the emergence of an “intellectual reaction” to Keynesian economics and the welfare state that required priority be given to market-conforming economic policies recovering war-torn civilizations. Keynesianism works, per Monbiot, by invigorating the consumer’s demand to promote economic growth. Flew contrasts Foucault’s assertion with Browns’, where he presents that the philosophy demands free markets, trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as necessary and integral, and thus must be implemented through law, social and economic policy[15].

Policies such as outsourcing, largely attributed to overcome the profit-squeeze of a budding corporate America in the 1970s, contributed massively to the decline of industrial working class communities, which were geographically characterized by chronic unemployment, population loss, and social strife. Monbiot argues, where neoliberal policies cannot be enacted through a domestic, democratic process, they are pursued in international courts through trade treaties that incorporate “investor-state dispute settlements,” or rather, offshore juries where corporations can lobby for the removal or reduction of social and environmental protections.

Policies such as outsourcing undermine the social peace achieved between capital and labor, and led to the decline of the welfare state. Komlosy suggests the decline in the West led to deep

social strains ranging from region to region which stirred the discouragement from citizens in believing in the political system of liberal democracy, sourced from policies that declined the labor workforce in America[viii].

The West's Hegemonic Crisis

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of *hegemony* to conceptualize the fact that modern capitalist societies are protected from the working class by use of militaristic and civilian police force. It is by the “silent compulsion of economic relations” analyzed by Marx that is held together by hegemonic institutions designed to manufacture consent of subaltern classes[16]. Per Rehmann, a hegemonic crisis occurs when the model no longer functions in a sustainable manner and when the ideological commonalities of the working and middle classes in the model no longer functions as it should. An increase in left wing populist ideologies, such as Marxism and democratic socialism, as well as hostility to wealth consolidation “tend to go up when the economy slows down, as it has done in recent years,” Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the CATO Institute remarked.

‘The rich,’ as Burrus refers to, are the owners of 35 percent of the nation’s property wealth and 42 percent of its financial wealth[17]. Gallagher further points that in 1979, the 1 percent had earned 9.9 percent of all income in the U.S., but by 2007, it had reached an astonishing 23.5 percent. The highest was reached in 1928 at 23.9 percent, on the eve of the Great Depression. Precarity, heterogeneity and informality, all fundamental aspects of capitalism, became the guidelines for the transformation from the post-Depression era to neoliberal efforts to restore economic growth, which ultimately contributed to social and political decay[18].

Rehmann argues that a revolution, or any populist movement, can only sustain itself and achieve its goal if the subaltern classes and their grassroots intellects intervene in a manner that is successful in exposing and addressing the contradictions of society while building up a counter-hegemony. This is most evidenced in modern America, where 65 percent of Americans agree with the statement that “most of the biggest businesses in the world have dodged taxes, damaged the environment, or bought special favors from politicians”[19].

Integrating a Populist Movement based on Socialist Principles

Komlosy states that there are several paths the result of a hegemonic crisis rooted in unsustainable neoliberal policies might take. The West will seek to maintain its authority by mobilizing aggressive military forces under the flag of neutrality while searching for new alliances in the hopes of destroying competitors. The West will surrender its control over international goods and commodity chains, which will spur a development that will contribute to social polarization and prevarication of labor-relations in developing countries. Lastly, and most unlikely, the West will accept the loss of hegemonic stature and become just another “province” of the international community[20]. On the militaristic level, the U.S. is still predominantly hegemonic, using the world’s largest military force to maintain supremacy, but is threatened by strong emerging economies from developing countries in the Eastern regions.

The decline of the West, Komlosy asserts, is a product of developing social and economic international relations that further restructure global commodity chains and the systems produced by them, the rise of supranational institutions, and the end of profit-driven social and economic compromise[21]. Recent elections in U.S. politics have shown that this is a very real crisis, and

Senator Sanders' campaign expressed and articulated what is characterized to be the second layer of people's common sense: the moral outrage against an oppressive economic system designed to produce and increase the income and wealth distribution among the top 1 percent of the American populace.

Bob Master offers in his research a 6-point plan for populists campaigning against neoliberal hegemonic policies to create a sustainable, lasting, and successful people-powered movement that is modeled after the trials, tribulations, and elations experienced throughout the Sanders Phenomenon[ix]. Master admits that a new national left party or a single unified coalition may be unlikely, but argues that populists should still work together to build an entity that represents them in electoral politics and where the question of race is dealt with unquestionably. Master also suggests the new populist movement should rally around a streamlined agenda that takes issue with center point ideals and policies in relation to economic and racial exploitation and oppression while reclaiming democracy; and that a massive grassroots effort focused on political and economic education must be formed and implemented. Finally, he proposes that an openly socialist agenda should be prevalent at all times, and the "political revolution" must seep down the roots of hegemony, into school board elections, city council seats, county legislature, state government and Congress leadership[22].

In the "Face the Nation" interview with House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Dickerson quoted Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack as referring to the Democratic Party as a tree, in that it "looks healthy on the outside, but is in the throes of a slow and long-term demise," to which Pelosi shrugged off and doubled down on her optimism in the "strength of the Democratic Party." What "strength" Pelosi speaks of should certainly be questioned, for the party is at its weakest in history, as evidenced in this research. Average working class voters are rejecting neoliberal ideals of globalized capitalism that is designed to line the pockets of Wall Street brokers, corporate figureheads, and politicians on Capitol Hill who benefit from campaign funding from such individuals. If Democratic leadership continues to represent those ideals based on a campaign built on denial, lies, and an avoidance of pertinent ideological shifts within its base, it will continue to hemorrhage party members, be rendered ineffectual and ultimately replaced by a grassroots coalition of Leftist organizations