



Bernie is the hero of 2016: Just because he's losing the nomination doesn't mean he's failed

Sanders should continue his fight to represent the interests of American workers. There's too much at stake

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Since Hillary Clinton's triumphant Tuesday, in which she won four out of the five state primaries and padded her delegate lead — almost ensuring her the Democratic nomination for president — the Bernie Sanders campaign has noticeably adjusted its tone, hinting, as the New York Times reports, that “the senator is looking past the nominating fight and toward a future role in shaping the [Democratic] party.” On Thursday, it was announced that the campaign was downsizing its staff by more than 200, while Sanders has begun to focus increasingly on the Democratic Party itself, rather than his primary opponent.

“The Democratic Party has to reach a fundamental conclusion,” said the senator at an Oregon rally on Thursday. “Are we on the side of working people or big-money interests?”

While Sanders may not end up becoming the Democratic nominee, he has already accomplished more than anyone could have predicted just six months ago, and is now a powerful force in the Democratic Party and American politics. Since announcing his candidacy a year ago, winning the nomination has always been somewhat subordinate to creating a popular progressive movement, or what he has termed a “political revolution.” As he explained in a speech back in October:

“We need millions of people—people who have given up on the political process, people who are demoralized, people who don't believe that government listens to them. We need to bring those people together to stand up loudly and clearly and to say ‘Enough is enough.’ This country belongs to all of us, not just wealthy campaign donors.”

Sanders has run on a bold (but by no means “radical”) platform that directly challenges America's plutocracy. And the one underlying message of the Sanders campaign has been straightforward and simple: The economy is about power, and over the past 40 years, as unions have weakened and monied interests have united to drive policy and political debate in Washington, economic gains have gone to the wealthiest, while wages have stagnated for the vast majority. Contrary to the mainstream notion that America's economic winners and losers are

determined entirely by merit and the invisible hand of the market, those who win tend to be those who already have enough economic (and therefore political) power to rig the game in their favor.

In his latest book, “Saving Capitalism,” former Labor Secretary Robert Reich refutes this myth of the free market:

“Few ideas have more profoundly poisoned the minds of more people than the notion of a ‘free market’ existing somewhere in the universe, into which government ‘intrudes. But the prevailing view, as well as the debate it has spawned, is utterly false. There can be no ‘free market’ without government... Competition in the wild is a contest for survival in which the largest and strongest typically win. Civilization, by contrast, is defined by rules; rules create markets, and governments generate the rules.”

In an ideal democracy, the power to determine these rules of the market would rest in the hands of the people. Of course, the United States is not an ideal democracy, and the founding fathers — many of whom were extremely cynical about the masses (perhaps justifiably so for the time) — designed the Constitution to ensure that the economic and social elites retained control.

But throughout the country’s history, the people — workers, farmers, suffrage activists, civil rights activists, abolitionists, populists, socialists, etc. — fought to create a more inclusive and democratic society. When people united to form popular movements, they generated a collective strength that the economic and political elites could no longer afford to ignore (or could no longer suppress). Eventually, popular movements led to the progressive and New Deal eras, and as the political apparatus became increasingly democratic, the rules of the economy were leveled to ensure working people were treated and paid fairly.

But the people became complacent — worse, they were divided by race, gender, religion, culture, and so on. Starting in the ’70s, corporate America came to realize the importance of taking back political power, which had become more evenly distributed throughout the 20th century. To quote Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell’s 1971 memo, a sort of capitalist manifesto:

“Business must learn the lesson... that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination—without embarrassment and without the reluctance which has been so characteristic of American business.”

Private industry took Powell’s advice. Since the ’70s, corporate lobbyists have infested Washington, thousands of political action committees have formed, right-wing think tanks like Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation have become major influencers of public policy, and political campaign spending has gone through the roof — especially after the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling of 2010.

“It is not a coincidence that as more and more money has infected the two parties, their concern for the well-being of the vast majority of the American people has declined,” writes Mike Lofgren, a former Republican who worked in Washington for nearly 30 years, in his outstanding book, “The Party is Over.” “The extensive political ads that pollute television after Labor Day

during an election year may ooze with empathy for Joe Average, but actions speak louder than words.”

Indeed, according to an oft-cited Princeton University study that analyzed 20 years of public opinion polling data, compared to legislation passed in Washington during the same time period, American politicians are influenced very little by the needs of Joe and Jane Average. The report found that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.”

In other words, America is a plutocracy (or, if you prefer, an oligarchy).

And the only way to challenge this “government by the wealthy” is for the people to rise up and demand a fair and just economy, as they have in the past. This has been Bernie Sanders’ message throughout 2016 — that only the power of the collective can stand up to the power of monied interests.

Whether the Bernie campaign can broaden into a larger popular movement that exists beyond electoral politics will be determined in the months and years to come. But as longtime Democratic strategist Robert Shrum recently put it to The Hill, Sanders has “ignited a new powerful and enduring grassroots movement inside the Democratic Party” and “brought a new generation of people into politics.” He has also reminded us that real change can only transpire when people come together and demand it, and that there is true power in collective action.