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USA

From Slaveholders to Sanders: A Brief History of the US Democratic Party, for British Readers

- Features -

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American socialist Bill Crane provides a brief history of the Democratic Party from its inception to the present, and asks how revolutionaries might relate to the movement behind presidential nominee Bernie Sanders.

The US Democratic Party is the oldest surviving modern political party. [\[1\]](#)

In its longer than two centuries' history, it has survived multiple political crises, including one genuine social revolution, transforming itself accordingly each time. What was once the political operation of the slave-owners of the US South, the closest thing the country has had to an aristocracy, in the mid-twentieth century presented itself as the party of Keynesian state management, economic populism and establishment anti-racism. Toward the end of that century it transformed itself yet again to be "history's second-most enthusiastic capitalist party" under the neoliberal order.

American socialism, since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, have always had a somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward the Democrats. If Eugene Debs, godfather of the US Socialist Party in its heyday and its perennial presidential candidate (running once from a prison cell) [could say](#) that the conflict between Democrats and Republicans had "no issue, no principle in which the working class have any interest," this did not stop his comrade Upton Sinclair from running as the Democratic candidate for governor of California on a social-democratic platform [several decades later](#).

Similarly, mass movements such as that for Black civil rights have divided on the issue. While Martin Luther King, Jr. openly broke with the Democrats over the Vietnam War toward the end of his life, his successor Jesse Jackson ran several popular high-profile campaigns inside the party.

Bernie Sanders, Independent Senator from Vermont and an avowed democratic socialist, has made worldwide headlines with his call for a "political revolution against the billionaire class" in his campaign for the Democratic nomination for President. This poses the question of the Democratic Party much more acutely for the US left than probably at any time during the past several decades. Even those of us, like myself, coming from a tradition that has proudly argued for the left, the working class, and progressive social movements to break from the Democratic Party have no easy answers, as many [former revolutionaries](#) and even some [current advocates](#) of socialism-from-below argue for engagement with and participation in the Sanders campaign.

This article is a necessarily abbreviated history of the Democratic Party. In contrast to many European leftists, who tend to see the Democrats as the US equivalent of right-trending social democracy, I will argue that the Democrats' history and composition marks them as qualitatively different. Unlike the British Labour Party or the French Socialists, the Democrats have never been a workers' party or had structural links to the organizations of the working class. Moreover, their composition as an exclusively electoral machine rather than a mass-membership political party leaves them without the activist basis on which even weakened European social-democratic parties operate in the era of neoliberalism.

The Good Old Party

The Democratic Party begins its lineage with Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, noted

partisan of the French Revolution, third President of the US, and also probably the most influential writer and theorist of American liberal democracy. He became the party's first president when he defeated the Federalist John Adams in the election of 1800. In a touch of irony, Jefferson's organization became known as the Democratic-Republican Party, or more concisely, the Republicans.

As well as being the early US' most noted theorist of political liberty, Jefferson was one of the wealthiest slaveholders in his home state of Virginia, in which respect his brutality was notable [even by the standards of his time](#). The contradiction was a real one. In the United States up to 1865, political liberty and radical democracy for the white man was the dialectical inverse of the brutality Black people faced under slavery.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson expressed some of the core principles of his worldview, which to a certain extent continue to frame American political discourse. He argued that the bedrock of American democracy was the yeoman farmer, independent, free, and hence virtuous. In a society that remained predominantly agrarian up till the Civil War years, the greatest threat to individual liberty was the federal government, run by career politicians who were likely to use their privileges to favor their own interests or those of special interest groups. Hence, 'that government is best which governs least,' along the principles of political democracy and economic *laissez-faire*.

As the British Marxist historian John Ashworth [has shown](#), Jeffersonian (and later Jacksonian) Democracy was an ideology that remained throughout its life *functionally pro-slavery*. This does not mean that every Democrat of the age was a partisan of the slaveholders—even prominent slaveholding Democrats like Jefferson maintained throughout their lives a moral ambiguity toward slavery itself. Pleas for the highest degree of economic and political liberty had the effect of endorsing (often unspoken) the bondage of Blacks in the Southern states, for they were not included in the promise of American democracy. For the Democratic mainstream, slavery was a matter of the individual conscience, in which the federal government was forbidden from interfering. Thus, a Northern Democrat who had no interest in slavery but accepted Jeffersonian ideology would likely end up a strong partisan of the slaveholders in national debates.

The Democrats as the organized political expression of the slaveholding class split and collapsed as a national party with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. With the strength of their party in the South having gone into rebellion, Northern Democrats either went over to the new Republican party or consigned themselves to be a marginal force in that part of the country. Though Democratic rule by the planter class in the South was re-established after the end of Federal Reconstruction in 1876, Democrats could not truly claim to be a national party for decades. From the end of the Civil War until the Great Depression (a period of over seventy years) they elected just two presidents for four terms.

Roosevelt's Reinvention

The major re-invention of the Democratic Party took place under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was elected to no less than four terms as president between 1932 and 1944. [2] Roosevelt first came into office as a repudiation of the Republican Party led by President Herbert Hoover, which proved itself both unable and unwilling to find a way out of the economic crisis starting in 1929.

Though Roosevelt's brave promise of 'a New Deal for the American people' during the campaign of 1932 was unmatched by much in the way of concrete proposals to end the crushing poverty and unemployment faced by the millions of Americans who elected him, it was this name that would stick to his presidency, and a whole period of American political institutional formation. It was the economic recovery Roosevelt instituted, drawing on Keynesian economic management, that would end the Democratic Party of the old Southern elite and, by giving it new mass

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constituencies in organised labour and Black people, would cement it as the more liberal and populist of the two main American parties.

The accomplishments of the New Deal were indeed great. Millions of Americans, from builders to artists, participated in the economic recovery through federal employment in the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Roosevelt also instituted poverty relief to the elderly in the form of Social Security, which remains, despite Neanderthal Republican opposition, the most enduringly popular government program in the history of the US. With the prompting of Black leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, Roosevelt's administration also began dismantling some of the racist barriers to Blacks in the government, ordering the desegregation of the US armed forces. He also signed the G.I. Bill into law, paving the way for hundreds of thousands of ex-servicemen to attend higher education free of cost.

It is this period of American political life that Bernie Sanders has evoked time and again in his campaign speeches, calling on the example of Roosevelt to lead an economic recovery that can put millions of Americans back to work and in education. In a [speech](#) at Georgetown University in November, Sanders defined FDR's accomplishments as a positive example of his own "democratic socialism": "real freedom must include economic security," he said, channelling Roosevelt.

All of this, I suspect, would come rather as a shock to Roosevelt were he alive today. A true scion of the ruling class, it was Roosevelt's fear that the depression unaltered by federal economic intervention would lead the way to a socialist revolution. He expressed this well in a letter to his Supreme Court appointee Felix Frankfurter, [lamenting](#) "the failure of those who have property to realise that I am the best friend the profit system ever had."

This is indicative of a profound truth about the New Deal that Sanders and many of his supporters fail to recognise. The programs instituted by Roosevelt were never about any kind of socialism, but meant to rescue American capitalism from its own destructive tendencies. Economic reconstruction in post-war Europe, which did take place under the (gradual reformist) banner of socialism, went much further than the New Deal ever did or was meant to.

The achievements of European social democracy, such as a national health service, nationalisations of whole branches of industry, experiments in some places with workers' ownership and enduring levels of working-class prosperity, were never matched in the US. As Robert Brenner has [pointed out](#), the New Deal reforms led to each large union in essence negotiating a "mini welfare state" for its own members, some of the benefits of which were then extended piecemeal to the rest of the working class. This left the American welfare state in the end much weaker and more susceptible to rollback by the capitalist class.

A more enduring and stable welfare state would have depended (a) on the will from the ruling class to accommodate itself, and (b) the force of the working class in an independent, mass labour party. Both were entirely absent in the United States.

There had been several attempts to start such a party in the US. The Socialist Party under Debs was one, and the Communist-backed Farmer-Labor Party of the 1920s was another. Labor militancy in the 1930s, which was both a condition for and a result of the success of the New Deal, broached the question again to labour's leaders. However, the will to break with the Democrats was absent. Leaders of the newly-formed CIO, who had launched organising drives under the slogan, ["The President wants you to join the union"](#) found the offer of a seat at the table with Roosevelt more convenient to their instincts.

With the main radical force of labour organisation, the Communist Party, having abandoned independent politics in favour of the Popular Front alliance with the liberal members of the ruling class dictated by Moscow, only a small constituency for forming a workers' party was left. David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman, two leaders of the

International Ladies' Garment Workers Union who had been members of the Jewish Bund in Russia, formed the American Labor Party as a halfway house for socialists and union members supportive of the New Deal but unwilling to join the Democrats. It only caught on in New York City, and after a series of splits was wound up in the 1950s.

Can We Turn the Democrats Left? Two Major Attempts

The transformation of the Democrats from the party of white Southern conservatives into the apparent representative of organised labour, Blacks, women, the LGBT community and other progressive interests was a massive shift in American politics. From this, many leftists as well as some civil-rights groups have drawn the conclusion that its recent shift back towards the right represents a break in continuity and that the party should be 'reclaimed' for the popular interests it used to represent.

However, understood properly, the Democratic party has *never* been a 'party of the people' in any real sense. Its role in American politics is that of a typically ruling-class party, which has developed the function of an effective shock-absorber for social movements that threaten the rule of American capital. The history of the party from Roosevelt onwards demonstrates precisely this.

I will now tell briefly two stories that show how effectively the Democrats have managed to co-opt and neutralise progressive movements. Both begin in the 1960s and end roughly in the 1980s. While deeply intertwined, the attempt to 'realign' the social-democratic left within the Democrats, and that of Black leaders to shift the party left show similar goals, and a similar failure to affect the priorities of the ruling class, which will likely be replicated by any future attempts to change the party.

Paul Heideman [tells the story](#) of early attempts at realignment in the 1960s. Renegade Trotskyist Max Shachtman had drawn the conclusion that the Democrats could be turned into a mass party of labour when he led his group into the declining Socialist Party in the late 1950s. Realignment also attracted the support of Bayard Rustin, a Black ex-Communist and adviser of Martin Luther King, Jr. They concluded that an alliance between the Left, the emerging coalition around Black civil rights, and the AFL-CIO, on whom the Democrats depended for much of their ground game, could drive the conservative and racist 'Dixiecrat' wing out of the Party.

Indeed, the Dixiecrats were alienated by civil rights and left the Democrats *en bloc* during the 1960s. However, instead of prosecuting a further turn to the left, Shachtman and Rustin maintained a pragmatic alliance with the labour bureaucracy, firmly pro-Vietnam War under the leadership of George Meany. Rather than change the Democrats, they themselves were changed and became advocates of a conservative part of its leadership.

Michael Harrington, a onetime follower of Shachtman, was committed to strategic independence from the labour bureaucracy at the same time he pursued work inside the Democrats. His Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) was instrumental in reviving attempts at realignment in the form of the New Politics (NP) coalition. NP won a number of progressive reforms within the party. They ended once and for all the monopoly of 'smoke-filled rooms' where elected officials and union bureaucrats would choose the Democratic nominees for President, Congress, and important state offices.

As a result of NP's audacious work, many delegates selected from good-old-boy patronage networks at the 1968 convention were replaced with progressive and anti-war delegates, among them many women, Blacks, and members of other oppressed groups in 1972. The height of NP's strategy was seen when they secured the nomination of South Dakota Sen. George McGovern on an anti-war platform for President.

At this development the old networks of the Democrats revolted. Meany effectively withdrew the AFL-CIO's practical endorsement, leaving McGovern without any troops on the ground. The Democratic state machines quietly supported Nixon's re-election campaign, which went on to win every state except Massachusetts.

Attempts at realignment nonetheless continued. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) was formed in the early 1980s out of a merger between Harrington's DSOC, and part of the multitendency New American Movement, an ex-New Left group. Its main goal was, and remains, working within the Democratic Party's structures and campaigns to turn it left. Harrington's call for socialists to be 'the left wing of the possible' was echoed by many in the declining New Left groups during the 1980s, who sought to make themselves relevant during the reaction launched by Ronald Reagan.

But [as shown by Mike Davis](#), the formation of the DSA, rather than being one of the first events in a process which would pull the majority of the Democrats left, turned out to be the conclusion of a process in which social-democrats and former revolutionaries were pulled to the right. Seeking an alliance with the US labour bureaucracy in the AFL-CIO, the leaders of the DSA backed the right-wing candidacy of Walter Mondale, formerly Jimmy Carter's Vice President, in the primaries of 1984. Mondale shared some of the responsibility for the Democrats' neoliberal turn under Carter, and as the presidential candidate made commitments to cut social welfare even deeper than had Reagan in an attempt to appeal to big business.

The DSA's Quixotic attempt to pull the Democrats to the left continued after Mondale and into the 21st century. However, the Democrats accelerated rightwards under Bill Clinton, who with the neoliberal Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) scrapped the party's lukewarm commitment to social equality for disadvantaged groups and the welfare state, 'ending welfare as we know it' and laying the basis for the destruction of organized labour's remaining bastions through the North American Free Trade Agreement. Subsequent Democratic campaigns and administrations have led equally reactionary attacks on labour and the oppressed, as well as leading the way in reformatting US imperialism for a new era. The DSA's commitment to 'the left wing of the possible' has in the worst circumstances led to its leaders giving socialist cover to a neoliberal, ruling-class party.

The campaign of Jesse Jackson and Rainbow-PUSH for the Democratic nomination for President in 1984 (and again in 1988) seemed to have much more promise. Jackson was a former aide to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who after his mentor's death led the way for Black leadership embracing the Democratic Party and capitalism, which King had rejected at the end of his life. Despite this, his 1984 campaign was launched on a principled social-democratic commitment to reversing Reagan's attacks on the welfare state, as well as opposition to US military intervention in the Middle East and Central America and aid to apartheid South Africa, and support for Palestinian liberation.

Jackson's campaign drew the enthusiasm and energy of thousands of Black activists, as well as many militants of the then-declining Maoist organizations of the New Communist Movement. For a time, he looked as if he really had a chance to win the nomination over Mondale and neoliberal Colorado Senator Gary Hart. However, when it got to the convention floor, Jackson's principles were abandoned. Not only did he not receive the nomination for President, Jackson's goals for a more democratic convention structure, for commitments to roll back Reagan's attacks on the poor and working class were whittled away until nothing remained.

Jackson could have maintained his principles and preserved the coalition that propelled him nearly to the nomination if he had broken with the Democratic Party and run an independent campaign for President. However, in his words, 'you don't walk away from money you have in the bank.' Jackson, and the national Black political leadership he represented, had too much invested in the success of the Democrats. Unfortunately, this meant that the progressive activists in Rainbow-PUSH became little more than a ginger group in a Democratic Party that was racing to the right, and Jackson himself becoming a Black spokesman to get out the vote for neoliberal Democrats, a

role he retains to this day.

Both major attempts, by the social-democrats and the Black leadership, then, to ‘take over the Democrats for the left’ failed. They did so despite largely favourable circumstances—on the one hand, the departure of conservative Dixiecrats and their replacement by organized labour in the New Deal coalition, and on the other, the resurgence of Black demands in a popular social-democratic campaign. We are left without any of these conditions today. Organized labour and the Black social movement (in addition to women’s and LGBT groups) are in the first case much weaker and in the second further removed from the halls of power than at any point since FDR’s administration.

Realignment did accomplish some basic objectives, such as reforming the primary system and forcing the Democratic leadership to include more women, Blacks, and advocates of progressive causes. Yet even before the internal counterrevolution of the DLC, a huge gulf divided it from social-democratic parties like Labour. Unions had a seat at the table, but no structural voice in setting Democratic policy, their role open to challenge as labour grew weaker under neoliberalism. The party remains primarily responsible to the centrist faction of capital.

Furthermore, unlike the membership parties of the old social-democratic left, the Democrats remained as they were and are now: an electoral machine without a real activist base, thus giving an immense measure of control to the party bureaucracy and elected officials. If equivalent structures pose huge challenges to the leadership of a socialist like Corbyn in the Labour Party, in the Democrats they are likely insurmountable.

The Berning Question

I write the following the night after the New Hampshire primary, the second round of campaigns that will result in the selection of Democratic and Republican nominations for President during the summer. Sanders’ success in Iowa, where he nearly won, and his landslide victory in New Hampshire, a northeastern state bordering his own Vermont, has put paid to the Democratic elite’s plans to have a speedy coronation for Hillary Clinton as the party’s nominee.

His campaign for the Democratic nomination has shown more promise than any left-wing campaign probably since Jackson’s in 1984. His avowal of ‘democratic socialism’ and the fact that increasing numbers of his supporters as well as Democratic voters generally are willing to identify as socialist shows a mass audience for our ideas that has not existed in a long time in the US. His call to renew the welfare state, and to break the monopoly of corporate economic interests over American politics reflect a yearning for substantial progressive change in perhaps the most deeply inequalitarian and undemocratic society in the world of developed capitalism.

Sanders himself has walked an interesting road to the current race. A member of the Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL) and a civil rights activist during college, as a politician he initially led an independent progressive and socialist coalition in Vermont as the mayor of ‘the People’s Republic of Burlington.’ As an eight-term Congressman and then a US Senator since 2006, he has maintained his formal independence from the Democrats, up till recently, by running as an Independent in each election, though he caucuses with other Democratic Senators.

Sanders supports continued American operations in Iraq and Syria under the liberal model of ‘international coalition-building,’ which he also supported in Afghanistan. His stance on Palestine is hardly to the left of the Clintons, calling for a two-state solution with continued negotiations on the basis of Israel’s ‘right to defend herself.’ He has also taken a conservative stance on undocumented immigration, denouncing open borders as a ‘[Koch Brothers proposal](#).’ [3]

It would be foolish for any socialist to not be concerned with these and other reactionary stances of Sanders. In terms of a comparison which is often made, it marks him as being *far to the right* of Jeremy Corbyn, who has taken principled anti-imperialist stances on Iraq, Syria and Palestine, as well as solidarity with migrants. However, they are easily explicable in terms of his essentially social-democratic politics.

FDR, who Sanders praises as a ‘democratic socialist,’ led the US into the imperialist Second World War and interned thousands of Japanese-Americans. The American social-democratic left which Sanders came out of took the side of American imperialism over the national liberation movement in Vietnam. While being politically anti-war Michael Harrington failed to support the anti-war movement, and his support for Israel was a major divide between the DSA and Jesse Jackson’s campaign in 1984. Sanders’ stance on open borders, moreover, matches the chauvinism of the AFL-CIO leadership which sees undocumented migrants as a threat to American workers’ (declining, relative) relative prosperity.

The American revolutionary left has supported social-democratic candidates in the past. The most successful in recent memory was consumer advocate Ralph Nader, whose Green Party campaign for President in 2000 won over three million votes. Nader has many troubling views, including a similar hostility to open borders and a disturbing history of suppressing union organization in his own businesses.

Nader’s campaign, however, was run on a platform of principled independence from the Democrats. This is precisely why the Democrats launched into him with such vitriol in 2000, blaming him for the defeat of Al Gore rather than the fraud-infested recount process, and in 2004 when they convinced the majority of the Green Party to split from him on a safe-states ‘Anybody But Bush’ platform. Sanders’ decision to run within the Democrats, despite his own status as an Independent Senator, immediately confronts him and his supporters with a number of problems.

All the party networks, from the Democratic National Committee, to elected officials at the national and state levels, to the party-oriented pressure groups such as the DLC, to major party contributors and canvassers of capital and labour, women’s, Black, and LGBTQ groups are overwhelmingly in favour of Hillary Clinton. Should he win the nomination, Sanders may face a palace coup of the type made by Hubert Humphrey in 1968, when he won the nomination without running in a single primary. Even if his victory in the primaries were convincing enough to undermine a coup, he could well face the situation faced by McGovern in 1972, when the Democratic machine essentially seceded from its own nominee.

Even this is a best-case scenario. Despite his success in Iowa and victory in New Hampshire, Sanders still remains without any real hope of winning the Democratic nomination. At the Democratic convention, only two-thirds of the delegates are selected through the state primaries. The rest, the so-called ‘superdelegates’ are unelected officials introduced as a counter to New Politics’ success at reforming the Party machine in the 1970s. Clinton has received the overwhelming support of this group so far, mostly elected Democrats and party machine operators, since she herself is from this background. At this point, technically she could win only 35% of elected delegates and still be crowned.

The crucial question for Sanders and his supporters is how they will react to a Clinton victory. Sanders has committed, loudly and repeatedly, to campaign for the eventual Democratic nominee. ‘I will not play spoiler,’ Sanders [said](#) in August. ‘I do not want to be responsible for electing some right-wing Republican to be president of the United States.’ In the most recent Democratic debate, he doubled down: ‘I do want to see major changes in the Democratic Party. I want to see working people and young people come into the party in a way that doesn’t exist now. And you know what, I want a 50-state strategy so the Democratic Party is not just the party of [25 states](#).’

Revolutionary socialists who share many of the goals supported by Sanders, such as a \$15 minimum wage, single-payer healthcare, and free state-provided higher education, have called on him and his campaign to break with

the Democrats now, or should he be unsuccessful in winning the nomination. We are, however, forced to uneasily concede that his Democratic campaign makes a certain amount of sense in a country whose electoral realm features the unchallenged domination of two capitalist parties. Sanders would certainly not be reaching the amount of people he is now succeeding in reaching with his calls for a ‘political revolution,’ were he to run an independent campaign.

More likely than the McGovern scenario, then, is a repeat of the Jackson scenario. Sanders at the convention will face an overwhelming call by the Democratic establishment to surrender every one of his principled positions in order to become part of the Clinton campaign. That Sanders has already given up his potential leverage of threatening to run as an independent leaves little indication that he will not follow the same course as Jackson in 1984.

Revolutionary socialists seeking to influence the Sanders campaign from within face an impossible task with both the Democratic establishment and their own candidate fundamentally opposing their efforts. Socialists, or any other rank and file activists for that matter, have little space in which to prosecute their demands. ‘Any parallel project within the Democrats’ to Corbyn’s Labour ‘is inconceivable,’ [writes Adam Hilton](#). ‘The party, unlike even the hollowed out Labour Party, has neither an organizational presence, nor any real meaning at the local level. In the likely event that Sanders does not outcompete Clinton in the primaries, there are few institutional spaces where any forward momentum could be maintained.’

Whereas from the outside, though we swim against the stream, we can engage with Sanders supporters in public fora and in all kinds of activism in which the stakes are not stacked so impossibly against us. Through principled socialist independence, we can convince groups of Sanders supporters to go beyond the limits of his campaign, most basically its commitment to working within an established capitalist party. Socialists celebrate Sanders as an advocate of substantial social reform, and the wide reach of his social-democratic message. But a ‘political revolution’ confined from the start within the limits of what the Democratic Party establishment finds acceptable is a revolution that will certainly fail. As veteran American socialist Charlie Post [writes](#):

‘The only way any of the enthusiasm generated by Sanders’ anti-corporate message will have any resonance is if we find ways to work with the minority of Sanders supporters who will not support Clinton to build INDEPENDENT movements and organizations. I believe that this will be best done by being supportive of those “Feeling the Bern” without joining them in another dead-end Democratic campaign.’

[RS21](#)

[1] Technically, the British Tories are more than a century older, but as they had their start as an aristocratic pressure group of the partisans of absolute monarchy, the Democrats hold the claim to be the oldest in the sense of modern, electorally-oriented groups.

[2] He died in 1945 just after he had begun his fourth term. In 1940 he had broken the custom that Presidents would only serve two terms. Thereafter the Constitution was amended to make this custom the law.

[3] Charles and David Koch are energy billionaires and large contributors to a host of reactionary causes in the US at state and federal levels.