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## *The Myth of the “Electable” Democrat: Neoliberal Bankruptcy, 2020 Edition*



Inauguration Day walk down Pennsylvania Avenue to start Bill's second term as president, January 20, 1997 – Public Domain

As the Democratic primaries near, the usual chorus of Democratic-establishment pundits have emerged to remind Americans that their party needs to remain “moderate” and appeal to “the center” if it wants to win the presidency. The calls for moderation are pervasive in commentary from the New York Times, the Hill, and the Wall Street Journal, among others.

Most recent is a January New York Times op-ed from Ezra Klein, entitled “Why Democrats Still Have to Appeal to the Center, but Republicans Don’t.”

Klein is the sort of pundit who likes to drape his political prescriptions in empirical social science data, thereby adding the appearance of legitimacy to what are neoliberal Democratic talking points. He warns primary voters that “Democrats can’t win running the kinds of campaigns and deploying the kinds of tactics that succeed for Republicans. They can move to the left...but they can’t abandon the center or, given the geography of American politics, the center-right, and still hold power.”

Klein draws on statistics describing the demographic foundations of Democratic and Republican Party support, claiming that Democrats must appeal to Americans of many different backgrounds. Democrats are “more diverse,” drawing support from “a coalition of liberal whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and mixed-race voters,” in addition to “liberal and nonwhite Christians, Jews, Muslims, New Agers, agnostics, Buddhists, and so on...winning the Democratic primary means winning liberal whites in New Hampshire and traditionalist blacks in South Carolina. It means talking to Irish Catholics in Boston and atheists in San Francisco.” In contrast, Klein points out that the Republican Party is primarily comprised of white voters, with “three-quarters of Republicans identify[ing] as conservative, while only half of Democrats call themselves liberals.”

Klein believes that “to win power, Democrats don’t just need to appeal to the voter in the middle. They need to appeal to voters to the right of the middle.” Republicans, to the contrary, rely on undemocratic entities like the Electoral College and the suppression of minority voters to win elections, while relying disproportionately on white conservative supporters who vote in high numbers, despite the party’s steadily “shrinking constituency.”

But Klein’s narrative is largely a regurgitation of an old establishment Democratic trope that’s been crammed down Americans’ throats for the last three decades. The notion that moderate pro-business Democrats are the party’s only chance to win office traces back to the rise of Bill Clinton’s “New Democrat” “third way” coalition, which is defined by center-left social politics and conservative, pro-business economic policies in favor of deregulation, free trade, corporate tax cuts, and attacks on the welfare state. I’m intimately the narrative of the “electable” neoliberal Democrat in my own line of work as

a professor. Most social scientists, after all, are milquetoast liberals, so claims that only establishment Democrats can win abound in the halls of higher education.

### **Things Change**

The claim that only neoliberal Democrats are viable candidates has been exposed in the era of Donald Trump. Trump's election demonstrates that candidates don't need to appeal to the "center" to win. Reactionary media and political leaders have been pulling Republican voters to the right for decades. Given this shift, the vast majority of Republican voters are willing to vote for most any right-wing candidate running in the general election, so long as they aren't a Democrat. Claims were commonly made in 2016 that Trump would spell doom for the Republican Party, since his brazenly xenophobic, racist, sexist, and authoritarian rhetoric would never appeal to moderate Republican voters. Clearly, this wasn't the case; an overwhelming 88 percent of Republican voters turned out in favor of Trump.

Klein recognizes that Republicans no longer need to rely on moderation to win because of the rightward movement of the party. But he and other Democrats have no insight into what is politically possible, were the Democratic Party to commit to building a durable popular base in pursuit of progressive change. And establishment Democrats have no vision for how to make their party relevant at a time when nearly half of Americans don't bother to vote, and when the vast majority of Americans express little to no trust in government. As a neoliberal entity, the party is fundamentally incapable of operating as a democratic medium for raising support among disadvantaged groups.

### **Sanders' Appeal**

Bernie Sanders' rise in the 2016 Democratic primary provides more evidence to challenge traditional neoliberal notions of "electability." As I've documented, the mainstreaming of Sanders' progressive agenda was revealed in polling at the time, which found that one quarter of Democrats in 2016 believed Sanders' identification as a "democratic socialist" made him more electable, while less than one in ten felt it made him less so, and with two-thirds who thought it made "no difference." In other words, 90 percent of Democrats felt the "socialism" stigma was irrelevant to their political calculations. Such sentiment undermines the notion that only neoliberal Democrats can appeal to voters.

Looking at the 2016 election, we see the poverty behind the claim that Americans thirst for a neoliberal Democrat. Hillary Clinton, the quintessential corporate-friendly

politician, failed to defeat one of the most unpopular presidential candidates in modern history. And her party stumbled badly when it came to cultivating support from economically vulnerable Americans.

As documented at the time, Donald Trump did not gain disaffected voters who were harmed by manufacturing outsourcing, so much as pro-free trade Democrats lost them. The Democratic Party lost 3.5 times as many votes from those living in rustbelt areas hardest hit by corporate free trade than Republicans gained, when comparing Republican and Democratic presidential vote tallies from 2012 and 2016.

The story of the modern Democratic Party is one of demobilizing working-class Americans. This is hardly a radical claim, or one lacking historical foundation. The party shamelessly embraced center-right pro-business policies for the last 25 years, and as a result has failed to build a stable coalition that can consistently win and hold political power.

### **Neoliberalism in Freefall**

Looking at the 2020 Democratic primaries, we again see the limits of Democratic centrism. Polling data in the run-up to the primaries demonstrates that those depicted as the most “electable” Democratic candidates benefit from little to no support from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Pete Buttigieg, a neoliberal Democrat if there ever was one, receives virtually no support from people of color and from the less educated. Joe Biden’s campaign has done little to nothing to inspire support from younger and poorer Americans. An overwhelming 73 percent of his supporters are 50 and older, while just 7 percent are 18-29, and only 19 percent are 30-49, for a total of just 26 percent who are under 50. Elizabeth Warren polls well among whites, liberals, and those with a college education, but not so well with everyone else. She benefits from little enthusiasm from people of color, who make up just 4 percent of her supporters.

By comparison, Bernie Sanders does better among disadvantaged groups. Looking at generational cohorts, Sanders’ largest group of supporters are 18-29-year olds, followed by 30 to 49-year olds. He receives six times more support from the 18-29 age group than he does from those 65 and over. He is more likely to be supported by liberals, and he receives a range of support from different educational groups, including high school graduates, and those with two and four-year college degrees. Sanders also polls well among black, white, and LatinX voters, in contrast to Buttigieg and Warren.

Finally, Sanders' support is significantly higher among middle and lower income Americans. He is more than two times as likely to receive support from Americans with moderate to low incomes (households earning less than \$75,000 a year), compared to those with higher incomes (over \$75,000). By comparison, Warren receives twice as much support from higher income Americans than from those with lower incomes. Buttigieg polls equally among higher and lower income groups, while Biden performs better with higher income over lower income Americans by a ratio of 1.3:1.

### **Sanders' Problem**

Sanders' main challenge moving forward is that he isn't really a Democrat, but a progressive independent running in the Democratic primaries. And this clearly hurt him in the 2016 election. As I've documented, Sanders was more likely to receive support from Americans who self-identified as political independents, not as Democrats. Most Democratic primary voters in 2016 preferred an establishment candidate of the Clinton variety. This challenge remains moving into the 2020 primaries. Biden is clearly the central establishment figure in the party, and he retains significant support from the party's sizable centrist, corporate-friendly base, which will be well represented in primary races across the country.

Nine months out, it's impossible to know how the 2020 general election will turn out. But based on available evidence, it's clear that the "more of the same" approach to propping up Democratic neoliberal politics will continue to fail in cultivating sustained mass support. As an electoral strategy, it's failed to produce consistent Democratic victories, despite the promises of its adherents over the last few decades. The 2016 election was the most extreme case of the party's failure, as witnessed by the mass demobilization of formerly Democratic voters who felt betrayed by the party's pro-business politics. Biden, should he win the Democratic nomination, will do little to inspire traditionally disadvantaged demographic groups to vote. Based on pre-election polling data, it's clear that Warren, Buttigieg, and Biden are incapable of building a progressive electoral coalition that will unite white liberals, the poor, younger Americans, and people of color.

As a professional politician, Sanders hasn't been central to progressive movement building. But he has declared support for these movements, via his alliances with Fight for \$15, the Madison protests, and Occupy Wall Street. Contrary to the other Democratic primary candidates, he recognizes the importance and centrality of such movements to driving progressive political change. Furthermore, the public is increasingly attuned to

the bankruptcy of Democratic-establishment politics, regardless of what the party's pundits say. Their efforts to prop-up Bill Clinton's "new Democrat" coalition represent a last desperate gasp of air for a party that has struggled for years to remain relevant in an era of mass discontent with government. Sanders' rising popularity in recent primary polling suggests that much of the party's base hungers for a serious left alternative to the Democrats' pro-business politics.

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