

United-States: Notes on the Election

Sunday 26 June 2016, by [BURNHAM Linda](#) (Date first published: 15 June 2016).

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A. Unfolding events of the past several months have confirmed that the presidential contest now underway is the most historically significant in at least the last 50 years. The reasons for this are several:

1. Racism and nativism, perpetual undercurrents in U.S. politics, have been explicitly tapped as rallying points for discontented voters. Dispensing with dog whistles, signifiers and symbolism, and building on the racial resentment carefully cultivated by Republican (and not a few Democratic) politicians in the post-Civil Rights era, straight up racism and xenophobia have come in from the margins and been incorporated at the center of a presidential campaign.

2. Trump's uncanny ability to surface and make manifest that which is latent has sparked the transition of a substantial section of the cross-class alliance of whites – long the base of the right's corporatist, anti-tax, anti-government agenda – into a base supportive of a pro-authoritarian, proto-fascist politic. In case anyone remained unclear about this, the campaign has underscored the fact that white racial solidarity is the anchor and heart of right wing politics in the U.S. across the spectrum from ordinary conservatism to rabid white supremacy.

3. A “legitimate” presidential candidate has sanctioned mob violence.

4. Have I mentioned the extremes of crude, gratuitous misogyny? Disgusting.

5. The unexpectedly strong support garnered by Trump has triggered a conversation about “white rage and resentment,” which has in turn triggered a conversation about the white working class, economic distress and white poverty – a long-neglected topic that is normally displaced by the patently false presumption that poverty and the social dysfunctions associated with it (aka the choices and adjustments that poor people make when the deck is completely stacked against them) are the province of black and brown people.

6. Both the support for Bernie's “socialist” agenda and Trump's support among the white working class, especially strong among those with less than a high school degree, have placed the impact of the Great Recession and income/wealth inequality much more central to the agenda of presidential contenders than in previous campaigns.

7. An avowed socialist is winning broader national support than ever before, especially among young people. The proportion of people claiming to be socialists, or open to socialism, is higher than ever before.

8. Both political parties are confronted with intense internal pressures, the Republicans from a

loose-cannon-candidate with no allegiance to the party bosses or donors, the Democrats from an insurgent left it didn't see coming. The rift between Trump and his supporters and the Republican Party establishment is so wide that many predict a split in the party, should he win the nomination.

Bottom line, massive socio-political currents are moving swiftly and in unexpected directions. All political actors are scrambling and adjusting to orient themselves to the new flow of events.

B. The issues posed by all this for grassroots activists and the social movement left are complex and daunting. However, one of the most positive aspects of this electoral cycle is that it has clarified what's at stake in the realm of electoral politics in general and presidential elections in particular. The unusually stark distinctions among candidates is pushing all political actors to position themselves, not only vis-à-vis specific candidates, but also in relation to the issues of whether, when and how to operate in the electoral arena. Here are a few observations about where we find ourselves.

1. Many grassroots organizers, and the social movement left as a whole, are very late to the party. Too many organizations, networks and movements are only now, belatedly, trying to sort out how to take action in response to the rise of an emboldened racist right, in relation to the main events on the electoral calendar between now and November, and in relation to the Democratic candidates and their platforms.

2. There are multiple reasons why we're so late:

(a.) Much of the social movement left works through non-profit organizations that are designed specifically to keep us out of electoral politics.

(b.) The two-party system discourages the participation of the social movement left as there's no political party with viability in national elections that consistently advances left of center politics (in contrast to parliamentary systems in which social movements often align with left political parties that field candidates at local, regional and national levels.)

(c.) We have not fully come to terms with the structural stability of the two-party system, which means that various versions of abstentionism (including the conciliation of abstentionism) still hold sway among many organizers and in many sectors of the social movement left.

(d.) We have not fully come to terms with the imperative of undermining the power of the right, power which is exercised through their electoral positioning (among other ways.)

(e.) We lack a broader left strategy that could help us make sense of the relationship, overlap, distinction and tension between organizing grassroots social movements and organizing for power via elections.

(f.) We're slow learners.

3. Though late, there are many opportunities to lead, learn and take action over the next 7 months. A few examples:

(a.) The prospect of a Trump candidacy in the general election will press home, with unparalleled urgency, the questions of where one stands on voting for "the lesser of two evils" and the centrality of the fight against the far right. (Cruz is no better in terms of policy, and in some regards, far worse.) Folks will feel (and resist) the intense pressure of a choice between voting for the proto-fascist, voting for the unprincipled centrist hawk (assuming Hillary wins the nomination), or abstaining as a point of principle. This will be a defining point that will shape the politics of, and

divisions between, sectors of the left going forward. We can lead in this both by clarifying our own politics and by encouraging others to clarify theirs.

(b.) This election has underscored that black voters, in their consistent, long-standing and overwhelming opposition to the Republican Party, constitute the de facto anchor of (an incipient) anti-right, anti-fascist alliance. (Many election observers have been diverted from this basic truth by the “why are all the Black people voting for Hillary instead of Bernie” whine.) The Latino and Asian vote have been strongly Democratic in recent presidential elections, but more variable than the Black vote. It is likely that Trump has done lasting damage to the Republican brand among Latinos. The mobilization of voters of color is critical to defeating Trump (or Cruz) and needs to be prioritized and resourced accordingly. These voters are also crucial to building a progressive bloc to contend for influence and power at every level of government over the long term.

(c.) Trump’s appeal to low-income white voters with low educational attainment has driven the issue of organizing working class white folks to the top of the agenda, where it needs to remain. The power of the right cannot be undercut unless a large segment of its base is broken off. Obviously this is a long-term proposition, but whatever tactical moves we and others make in this electoral cycle, we need to retain this lesson into the indefinite future: white rage is lethal to democracy and progress and if we’re not organizing white folks around their suffering, we can be sure that someone else is.

(d.) There are 5 tactical periods or moments for intervention and distinct tasks for each moment:

i. Between now and the conventions [maximum damage to Trump and Republican brands; mobilize toward conventions; connect to Sanders momentum]

ii. At the conventions, which subdivides into Democratic [network, learn, influence platform language] and Republican [broadest possible show of strength of democratic/anti-right/anti-fascist forces]

iii. Between the conventions and election day [all out to defeat the right, meaning both bird-dogging the Republican candidate and underscoring the dangers posed by his authoritarian, anti-democratic policies and supporting the Democratic candidate]

iv. Election day [GOTV and protect the integrity of the election]

v. Post election, which subdivides into if Trump, or Cruz/if Hillary, or Bernie

(e.) The question of what happens to the energy currently bound up with the Sanders’ campaign once Bernie (unfortunately but likely) fails to get the nomination and puts his weight behind Hillary is being hotly debated on the left. Left labor and others are (presumably) positioning themselves to create some kind of political and institutional frame for increased influence within the Democratic Party. The success or failure of such efforts cannot be predicted. It does seem clear, though, that only an effort inclusive of the leadership and base of the labor movement, the largely white millennials that have turned out for Bernie, and the Black and Latino voters critical to the defense of U.S. democracy will have what it takes to build a durable, politically impactful progressive formation. Such an alliance, whatever form it takes, would present the strongest challenge to the party from the left at least since the Jackson campaigns of the 80s. Grassroots activists and the social movement left need to be a part of this motion, working through the strategic relationships between long-term, on-the-ground organizing, periodic electoral battles and pathways to power.

The U.S. left is not strong enough - not nearly strong enough - to frame its own choices. Every choice that is framed for us by the center and the right will be agonizingly difficult. The key issue is

whether the choices we make create the possibility to build our strength and move in the direction of a coherent strategy, or further weaken and marginalize our already fragmented and debilitated forces.

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P.S.

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