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'To me, populism means having respect for the people'

US political commentator Krystal Ball on the realignment in US politics and how a Bernie Sanders presidency would look like

In their show "Rising" and their new book "The Populist's Guide to 2020: A New Right and New Left are Rising", Krystal Ball and Sagaar Enjeti regularly challenge the establishment in media and politics as well as conventional wisdom. Although Ball is distinctly left and Enjeti represents rather conservative views, both often agree on the causes of the current political realignment in the United States.

Your book is called "The Populist's Guide to 2020 – A New Right and New Left are Rising". You also identify as a "populist". What does that term mean to you and how would you define the new left?

To me, populism means having respect for the people and centering politics around the democratic will of the people and serving the interests of the broad majority, which inherently means the working class because it's the most numerous demographic group in the country. This approach cuts across race and gender lines and could be a unifying force in American politics.

The new left for me is very much typified by the Bernie Sanders movement, but it's not exclusively about his movement. It's a very simple concept, which believes in the fundamental humanity and dignity of every person. In a wealthy country, basic economic rights must be guaranteed, whether that's health care for all, quality education, access to college education, clean air, clean water and building a livable planet. These are basic rights that should be accessible to all in a wealthy country.

What does the new left and the new right have in common? Where are the main differences?

There are certainly parts of the populist right that I find very

troubling and problematic and which are against my values. But what we ask is the following question: what if both political parties in the US would not compete over the interests of the rich, but for the affection and interests of the working class? What kind of policies would come from that?

Probably the most obvious place where the left and the right differ is on immigration. Sagaar is very much for immigration restriction. However, as a son of immigrants himself, his views are thoughtful and nuanced, not reactionary. I have much more a view of working class solidarity, including across borders. It's a fundamental myth to think that the reason why working class people in the US are struggling is because of immigrants. The small number of immigrants that want to come into the country in addition to the people that are already here could easily be incorporated into our society. According to economic research, it would actually improve the economic well-being of the working class.

We also have differences with regards to foreign affairs as well. But the central theme of the book that binds us together is the view that a lot of the institutions in our country, from media to political institutions, are fundamentally corrupt; that they represent the interests of the few, and that their power is sort of hollow and shaky and more mirage than reality at this point.

We hear a lot about the partisan gridlock in Washington, but you rather talk of a bipartisan consensus between Democrats and Republicans. Please explain your perspective.

I think the idea of gridlock is an illusion. It seems like they're gridlocked because anything that we would actually want them to do, they don't do. But when it comes to war-making, to trade deals that have hollowed out much of the country, or to sidelining unions, in many ways there has been a bipartisan consensus.

I can give you a specific example from my home state Virginia. There, Democrats control the governor's mansion and both of the state houses. So they have complete control. For all intents and purposes, they should be able to pass whatever agenda they want. Many Democrats ran on union rights, on repealing what's called "right to work" which basically makes it very difficult for working people to unionise in their workplaces. They would be the first state that rolled back "right to work" which would be massive win for working class people and for the labour movement.

But when it was time to actually get it done, their corporate masters weighed in. So now it's not going anywhere. Even though Democrats have the power in the state, there is a bipartisan consensus driven by

corporate money to keep these anti-labour, anti-union provisions in place. So there's plenty of bipartisan consensus going on when it comes to the interests of the wealthy and corporations, just not when it comes to actually doing something for working class people.

You describe the system and its effects, for example, the destruction of the working class as one reason that enabled Trump to get elected. In this regard, you called the eight years of Barack Obama in the White House a "missed opportunity". How so?

The response to the financial collapse ultimately was a disaster. We lost a majority of middle class jobs which were replaced by low wage jobs. Wall Street was bailed out. They are fine and richer than ever before. Meanwhile, homeowners lost all of the wealth that they built. No one bailed them out. On the other side, no single bankster who not only crashed our economy, but nearly destroyed the entire global economy was sent to prison. This whole idea of the rule of law, which we hear about a lot lately from Democrats with regard to Donald Trump, took a big hit when during the Obama years no banksters were held accountable for their actions.

The health care reform that Obama pushed through is certainly an improvement for us over the previous system. But costs have nevertheless continued to go up. Millions are still uncovered and the insurance industry was the primary beneficiary of that law. He continued to push for trade deals that have been incredibly damaging to working class and industrial communities across the country. This all happened at the beginning of his presidency when he had a super majority in the Senate and a large majority in the House. He could have done anything. However, unions and the middle class have continued to decline. The fundamental direction of neoliberalism was essentially continued and has left us with skyrocketing inequality and without a lot of hope or opportunities in their town where they want to live.

From a left-wing perspective, the election of Donald Trump was obviously a huge catastrophe. Have the Democrats learned any lessons from 2016?

Zero, absolutely zero! Rather than asking: "What could have led to this situation? How could people have chosen this horrible man like it was their best option? Where did we go wrong?", they have spent these past couple of years making excuses.

Don't get me wrong, all of these things have an element of truth. It's not that they're completely fanciful, but they fixated on Russia and that whole obsession of whether the FBI director holding a press

conference in the final weeks of the campaign changed the results or whether sexism was part of it. Again, these are all real things, but they missed the essential truth that the election against this ridiculous reality show, obnoxious, offensive man should never have been close at all.

The very fact that it was within range where one of those little external shocks could shift the direction is in itself a catastrophe. No, they haven't done anything to understand what went wrong. And you can see it in the analysis that's happening now in the media. They want to run another candidate just like Hillary Clinton. They believe that this is the winning model, although it's exactly what was rejected the last time. So that in and of itself proved they've learned nothing.

You are highly critical of identity politics and describe it as a weapon. Isn't the end of any form of discrimination and the goal of equality in general a fundamental pillar of progressive politics?

Of course, and bigotry is real. The problem is that often for a neoliberal left token, diversity and lionising of individual trailblazers from vulnerable or minority communities is used as a substitute for real progress. For example, all the pundits thought that Kamala Harris as a black woman was going to do great in the election because they believed that African-Americans in the US would support her. And let me be clear, having a black woman as president would represent real progress and would be important.

But I don't privilege that over having a candidate who is actually going to change the reality for the multi-racial working class in this country, which is disproportionately made up of women and people of colour. So to me, the policies that are going to change the reality for millions of people are more important, than having one diverse person at the top of the chain of oppression.

You predicted the rise of Bernie Sanders for a long time and he has actually moved to the frontrunner position now. Will the Democrat establishment allow Sanders to be nominated?

I think if they have any chance whatsoever to take it from him, they will. If Bernie has a majority of the delegates going into the Democratic National Convention, then they can't really do anything about it. The "super delegates" that were so important for Hillary Clinton winning last time are not involved for the first ballot. However, if he comes in with the most delegates, but not a majority, then I have every expectation – which has been confirmed by recent reports – that they will, in fact, try to take it from him. Even though they know that this would utterly destroy the Democratic Party and

probably handle Donald Trump the re-election victory, because many people, myself included, would not vote for the Democratic nominee in that circumstance if they stole it from Bernie Sanders.

But why would they do that, knowing that it would destroy the party? Well, because ultimately they prefer a Donald Trump presidency to a Bernie Sanders presidency. Because under Donald Trump, even in opposition, they know how to maintain their power and their deal flow from their consultancy firms and their lobbying and corporate boards. All of these things stay in place under a Donald Trump administration.

Under a Bernie Sanders administration, however, all of that ends. All of that access, all of that power, it's over. It would be the end of the order of politics that has given them their status and their wealth. So, yes, they'll do everything they can to steal it from him. Anyone who supports him has to recognise that the best hope is to get him over a majority of delegates so that they don't have the opportunity. And then the next best hope is to apply so much pressure that it becomes completely unsurmountable for them to try to pull those tricks at the convention but they absolutely want to and plan to.

How do you imagine a presidency of Bernie Sanders would look like? How can he put his political revolution into action?

I think you have to use the same model, on a larger scale obviously, that he used when he was mayor of Burlington, Vermont. He came in with a very similar dynamic. The Republicans and the Democrats were all opposed to him. And once he won, it was a shocking victory. He won by only 10 votes, no one expected it. He was seen as an aberration and the city council blocked him at every opportunity.

What he did essentially was put his trust back to the populace, delegating power to neighbourhood councils. They were given an own budget which they could spend based on their own priorities. Moreover, he ran his own candidates against the city council members who were opposing him and he was very successful in defeating many of them and in demonstrating to all of them that he had real power and real support within the community. He also was able to increase voter turnout by 50 per cent and completely transform the electorate there.

After that, even though, they would run candidates against him who had backing from both the Republicans and the Democrats, they could never defeat him and his movement because he had demonstrated that power and had a real electoral threat behind him.

So if he does get elected president, it's going to be a long time of

continuing outside pressure challenging obstructionists who try to maintain the status quo. But that's the way that you have to ultimately go to be able to make any change.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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