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What's at stake in the Democratic primaries

While the Democrats differ less on policy than one might think, they do have opposing ideas on how to win against Trump

The Democratic primaries are in full swing. This year's presidential contest will be the highest-stakes election for the Democratic party and American democracy in a long time. There has been much talk of 'deeply divided Democrats' and 'fights for the soul of the Democratic party'. But from the other side of the Atlantic it may be difficult to understand what the most important differences are among the Democratic candidates and their implications for the future of the left and democracy.

Normally, intra-party differences pivot around policy disputes. There are indeed policy differences between the 'progressives', Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, and the 'moderates,' Pete Buttigieg, Joe Biden and Amy Klobuchar—but on economic policy these are less than one might think. Indeed, on economic issues all the candidates favour policies further left, and closer to traditional European social-democratic policies, than any field of Democratic candidates in recent memory.

For example, with regard to health care, all the candidates support moving beyond the reforms introduced under Barack Obama's presidency towards universal coverage. Where they differ is on how to get there: Sanders and Warren favour a rapid transition to a 'single-payer', public ('Medicare for all') system, while the moderates favour gradual change, beginning with the expansion of a public option (Medicare) to those lacking private insurance.

Similarly, all the candidates advocate higher taxes on the wealthy, fighting inequality, more business regulation, increased spending on social programmes and infrastructure, making college more affordable and devoting greater attention to environmental issues and climate change. As with health care, on these issues the candidates differ more on how they favour achieving these goals than on the goals themselves.

Policy differences between progressives and moderates appear more clearly with regard to non-economic issues, with the former calling for decriminalising border crossing, providing health care to illegal immigrants, abolishing the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, offering reparations for slavery, prioritising transgender rights and other policies far to the left of the American mainstream and even most Democratic voters.

These are not, however, normal times. More important and consequential, therefore, than the candidates' policy differences are deeper disputes about how to win elections and what the future of the left should be.

Reaching out

On one side are those who believe the path to victory in 2020 lies in reaching out to independent voters and maybe even Republicans who support some of Donald Trump's policies as president but are disgusted by his corrupt and polarising behaviour. Supporters of this strategy point to extensive research showing that moderates outperform extremists and to the 2018 mid-term congressional elections, when the Democrats retook the House of Representatives by capturing wavering and previously Republican-leaning districts. From this perspective, some of Warren's and Sanders' stances appear nothing short of 'insanity', since they are far to the left of even what many Democratic — much less independent or Republican — voters prefer.

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In addition, many worry that Sanders' past makes him unelectable. Although he and Warren do not differ much on policy, Warren is less rabble-rouser than wonky technocrat: she claims to 'have a plan' to solve any problem — a phrase so associated with her that her campaign sells T-shirts with that printed on it. In addition, before serving in Democratic administrations and as a Democratic senator, she was even a Republican. (In the European context Warren would easily fit in the social-democratic category: she has called herself 'a capitalist to her bones' and presents the policies she favours as designed to save capitalism rather than bury it.)

Sanders, on the other hand, wasn't even a member of the Democratic party until he ran for president. His past is littered with positions with

which Republicans will have a field day: his support for non-democratic but self-proclaimed socialists, such as Fidel Castro in Cuba and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, as well as the Iranian revolution; his 'honeymoon' trip to the Soviet Union; his campaigning for the Socialist Workers' party; his argument that (particularly low) wage labour is akin to slavery, and more.

Moreover, Sanders calls himself a democratic socialist, rather than a social democrat, and is clearly sceptical of the possibility or even desirability of reforming capitalism — views with which, despite the purported rise of interest in socialism among the young, most Americans do not agree. (In Europe, Sanders would probably find himself in the company of far-left figures such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon or Jeremy Corbyn.)

Mobilising the base

On the other side of the electability debate are those who believe the path to victory lies not in trying to attract independent and wavering voters but in mobilising the party's base. Supporters of this strategy point to research arguing that voters generally don't know much about policy and the intense polarisation of the American electorate, which makes them care even less. In this view, Democrats and Republicans are so committed to their own 'team' — technically, 'negative partisanship' has become so strong — that they will vote for any candidate their party puts up.

From this perspective, there are hardly any real independent or wavering voters, so any strategy based on trying to attract them is fundamentally flawed. Instead, the key to victory lies in getting as much of one's own 'team' to the polls as possible. If this is true, then Sanders has advantages over Warren, since his 'passion', 'authenticity,' 'values-driven' politics and anti-establishment appeal is most likely to motivate disaffected and alienated Democrats to vote. (Reflecting this, Politico recently reported, for example, that the Sanders campaign was instructing volunteers to attack Warren by noting that the people who support her are 'highly-educated, more affluent people who are going to show up and vote Democratic no matter what'.)

Sanders does draw more support, than Warren for example, from young people and disaffected — particularly male disaffected — voters, who do indeed tend to vote less than other Democratic constituencies. Sanders also enjoys disproportionate support among committed far-left activists, who say they are less likely to vote for another Democrat if Sanders does not win the nomination. (Sanders, to be clear, has said he will support whoever wins it.)

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Left-wing populism

On one side are those who believe the left's path lies in countering right-wing populism with a left-wing version. Chantal Mouffe is probably this view's most influential advocate but echoes of this strategy can be found in the approaches of left leaders like Corbyn and Mélenchon. In this view, the left needs to turn its back on its centrist, social-democratic past and recognise that the reigning political and economic order is corrupt and perhaps irredeemable.

Those in this camp believe that a mass of disaffected voters are waiting to flock to their revolution and view the left's job as injecting 'passion' back into politics, which will mobilise these voters as well as revitalise democracy. The best way to do this, in turn, is by openly acknowledging 'the antagonistic dimension of politics' and that society is indeed divided into friends and foes — with the 'real' foes being not minorities and immigrants but rather the rich and the establishment.

How the Democratic primaries play out is thus set to have an immense impact — not only on the 2020 elections but on the future of the left and democracy, in the US and beyond.

Although Sanders fits uneasily into the populist category, he does believe in the need for a 'political revolution' and views the economic and political status quo, as well as the Democratic establishment, as more fundamentally flawed than do the other Democratic candidates. Moreover, many of his most vocal supporters revel in an aggressive and antagonistic approach to politics and view moderation and compromise as anathema. (This was also true in 2016, of course, when so-called 'Bernie Bros' caused much hand-wringing. In these primaries a small but vocal subset of Sanders' supporters have also engaged in persistent, nasty 'social-media' attacks on other candidates and the Democratic party, which to be fair to Sanders he has not openly encouraged.)

On the other side lie those who believe the future of the left lies in a revitalised 'social-democratic' approach to politics, which would focus on reforming the existing political and economic orders, rather than calling

for a fundamental transformation of them. This approach is also comfortable with moderation and compromise and views polarisation and antagonistic, ideological politics as a threat to both the left and democracy.

Those in this camp recognise that swing voters are repelled by the ideological and divisive appeals which spur on the faithful. They believe that the left's future and the health of democracy requires at least diminishing the antagonism of such voters, if not winning them over. The examples of countries such as Hungary and Turkey, where divisions among the opposition facilitated the ability of populist leaders to undermine democracy, may be worth considering in this regard.

In the United States these views about the left and democracy have led to a recent outpouring of fear among moderates and many members of the Democratic establishment about the possibility of a Sanders victory. If the left's strategy consists of whipping up the already dissatisfied with harsh critiques of the status quo, which are not accompanied by viable plans for gaining power, implementing policies once in power and healing societal divisions, these concerned Democrats believe that not only is Trump likely to win but that faith in democracy is likely to erode further.

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