

How to Have a Party

Toward a Democratic Socialist Movement that Can Win

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The Dual-Party

This is a national call for American democratic socialists to organize local and state-level left-wing political parties with an inside-outside strategy of engagement with the Democratic Party. We will bypass the failures of attempted Democratic Party takeovers and third party bids alike by building our own independent grassroots organization that participates in elections in accordance with the following three strategic principles:

1. We will run candidates in the primaries of major parties for offices at all levels of government.
2. We will actively support the most left-wing major-party candidate in general elections where running as a third party with intent to win could split the left/liberal vote and result in a right-wing victory.
3. We will run our own candidates in general elections as a third party in races shielded from the spoiler effect, where either Democrats or Republicans consistently win more than 70% of the vote.



These local democratic socialist parties we begin organizing today will network together to assemble a national organization dedicated to seeding new chapters around the country and establishing an active, visible socialist presence in local, state, and national politics. Governance of the organization—its platform, its policies, its leadership—will rest in the democratic decision-making of a dues-paying mass membership. Our tentative name for this much-needed institution is the dual-party. We aim to build, in essence, an independent socialist political party that drafts its own candidates, funds them, and runs them in Democratic primaries to build its power without counterproductive focus on maintaining an independent ballot line. It will remain organizationally independent of the Democratic Party establishment and act as a unified bloc unto itself. Its relationship to the party would be analogous to that of workers' councils and other working-class institutions to capitalist government in the classical socialist and anarchist theory of dual power—a new independent power growing alongside and within the old, poised to take its place as the latter weakens.

Politicians elected on its slate, whether inside or outside the Democratic Party, will operate as a single socialist political bloc, accountable to our grassroots base, and steadily build the power to bypass the two-party stranglehold on American democracy and implement policies in accordance with the democratic socialist platform.

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) can and must be at the forefront of this effort, either by transforming itself into such an electoral organization or leading the charge for building it in coalition with other socialist or progressive organizations.

This is our best chance to win.

Why This Strategy?

On February 25, 2017, Tom Perez was elected as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

In the aftermath of Hillary Clinton's devastating defeat by Donald Trump, progressives in the Democratic Party organized around the Chair candidacy of Keith Ellison in the hopes that the Party could be reformed as a grassroots social-democratic party capable of casting off the strangling grasp of corporate donors and winning decisive victories against Trump and his shaky "anti-establishment" coalition. Ellison had endorsed Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primary and has a strong record of progressive grassroots organizing to maintain Democratic victories in a mostly white Midwestern state. As a black Muslim with a fierce commitment to economic populism, he was a potential bridging voice across the falsely premised debate between neoliberal identity politics and identity-blind class politics that raged through the Party during the primary and after the election. He quickly racked up major endorsements, and his grassroots supporters flooded state party conventions across the country.



When it was clear in the weeks following the 2016 election that Ellison was overwhelmingly backed by the party base, Obama and his inner circle cast around for someone to beat him. The Democratic establishment did not merely back a preferred candidate; they actively pushed Perez to run to keep Ellison from the seat. Nor, as many have implied, did the progressive Sanders wing launch a campaign of in-fighting as a rehash of the 2016 primary. The party leadership was afraid of the left faction that Ellison represented and instigated an internal battle over the DNC Chairmanship in order to keep that faction (or, more accurately, the party's own activist base) subdued.

Although the DNC Chair is primarily tasked with guiding nationwide campaign strategy, the Democratic establishment threw their weight behind a candidate whose only experience in running for office has been to the Montgomery County Council, against one of the Party's most experienced and effective political organizers. In a time where the Democratic Party is allegedly taking a public stand against the anti-Muslim policies of the Trump administration, allies of the Party establishment launched an Islamophobic smear campaign against its own front runner to keep him from a position they kept assuring the public was symbolic and unimportant. Obama himself made calls to members of the DNC urging them to back Perez instead of Ellison. And it worked. By the second ballot Perez secured a narrow majority.



Many liberal commentators urged us to remain united. Perez, they say, is fairly progressive as Democrats go. Even if he were ideologically identical to Ellison, however, this would miss the point. A tiny political elite exercise unchecked power over the Democratic Party's political direction and decision-making. These structural defects impede our ability to transform the party into a vehicle for socialist or social-democratic politics that can meet the needs of all Americans and win the critical struggles of our time. We need a new strategy.

Reform the Democrats or Go Our Own Way?

There are two core problems in the structure of the Democratic Party that we must contend with.

First, the party lacks a mass membership base. It is entirely unclear what is meant by the label "Democrat." "Democrats" may be people who consistently vote for Democrats and who identify with what they understand to be Democratic political positions. They may be people registered with their state as Democrats for the purposes of organizing primary elections. They may be among the considerably fewer number of party supporters who register as "members" of their state party and can participate in state party conventions. But for none of these concentric circles of party "membership" is there any institutional mechanism by which a popular base can hold Democratic leadership accountable. Despite the name "Democratic Party," its internal structures are nothing of the sort. The Democratic Party is less a political movement of people fighting for common causes than a well-positioned elite club seeking out and continually negotiating constituencies in order to preserve itself. The party establishment merely positions itself as a gatekeeper to the voting public, exerting

a stranglehold on available political options. The single mechanism by which the Democratic base can influence the party is in primary elections, and even these are limited. Without external organization to popularize left-wing Democratic candidates, it is difficult to overcome establishment endorsements, and for the presidential primary the outcome is heavily skewed in the party leadership's favor by superdelegates. Without a mass membership that can assert its authority over the party's direction and goals, it is entirely unrealistic to expect that the Democratic Party as it exists can be wielded to achieve our goals. There is no pathway within the existing party structure where "participating in the process" can move the party in a substantially democratic or leftward direction.

Second, participation in decision-making at virtually every level of the party is determined by fundraising. In state parties, caucuses have a voice in determining party policy and leadership only insofar as they can raise money for the party, not because of their popular base of support. It is first and foremost donors to whom Democratic leadership is accountable. This is embedded in the broader political context, where public campaign funding is minimal and where money often decides elections. But it is also a result of how the Democratic Party is structured, where internal authority is derived through raising donations. The structural logic of the party defies democratic decision-making, and we lack the institutional power to reform those structures. Making the party limply "progressive" is challenging enough as it is; reforging it into a socialist or social-democratic party contrary to the interests of those who control every step of the internal decision-making process is likely impossible.

Because of these serious defects within the Democratic Party structure, previous attempts to convert the Democrats into a social-democratic party have failed. When the New Politics movement tried in the 1970s, their efforts were upended by a coalition of multinational business interests, the betrayal of union bureaucrats, and the usual leftist infighting. Even the famous New Deal concessions earned by the agitation of the workers' movement in the 1930s have ultimately been peeled back, not just by the Reagan coalition but by neoliberals like the Clintons within the party itself. The Democratic Party has never been wholly an institution of ordinary working people, and it lacks the institutional architecture through which engaged citizens could reforge it as such. To the extent that it has ever fought for the interests of the oppressed, it has only been dragged forward by enormous groundswells of revolt whose economic achievements have ultimately failed to last.



Many progressive and radical organizers faced with these facts have come to the conclusion that our path forward is through building up a minor third party to compete electorally with the Democrats and Republicans. But this, too, is a doomed strategy, tried repeatedly over decades with no discernible path to victory. Even in 2016, with the most extreme case of wildly unpopular major party candidates and historic rage against the political establishment, the Green Party candidate Jill Stein received only 1.06% of the popular vote. Green Party activists can blame this on voters being too afraid of the spoiler effect (or in their words, Democratic fearmongering about Trump), but that is not a strategic response. We need a political strategy that accounts for people's widespread (and very legitimate) fears about spoiling elections and throwing away their vote in a time of an ascendant Right. Without major electoral reforms like automatic runoff/ranked voting ballots, these minor parties will never win, and the American public knows it. Even if they hate the major parties, they will still vote strategically. The Democratic Party can exploit lesser-evilism to great effect because what they say is in fact true: minor left-wing parties help the Right.



Furthermore, the Green Party's only defense against the spoiler charge is that it has failed so completely that it is powerless to change the outcome of elections one way or another. So consider what a revamped Green Party or Socialist Party USA could do, in impossibly good circumstances. If party organizers were so effective that they could continually build public momentum, perhaps adding five or ten points each election cycle, we would face an extended transition period where the new Left party gradually eclipsed the Democrats. During this period, Republicans would have uncontested and unified control over the federal government and most state governments, to the point where they could amend the Constitution at will, because of a split liberal vote. With our rapidly shrinking window to address climate change and the global ecological crisis, among other critical matters, this is a suicidal strategy. First-past-the-post voting must be done away with before multiparty democracy can thrive. Without major election reform, building up our own independent party would likely amount to nothing—there is no shortage of irrelevant socialist parties in American politics—or worse, it could amount to something tragic.



Furthermore, as Seth Ackerman has explained in his piece “Blueprint for a New Party,” the major parties control minor party ballot access and can place insurmountable obstacles in the path of minor party election bids should they ever pose a serious threat. Existing laws for ballot-qualified parties even regulate their bylaws and leadership structures. In Ackerman’s words: “When third-party activists seek ballot status, they are often seeking to grant far-reaching control over their own internal affairs to a hostile two-party-dominated legislature. That is a peculiar way to go about smashing the two-party system.” All in all, it remains unclear how major election reform of the sort that would make third parties viable could be achieved in the first place. The reforms that could end the two-party system are in the hands of politicians within the two parties themselves.

Thus the Left is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Both the history of independent Left parties and the history of co-opting the Democratic Party are marked more by their failures than their successes. The 2016 election has only brought the bankruptcy of both strategies to the fore. Over and over the Left confronts the same false choice; over and over again it is outmaneuvered owing to the inadequacy of both options. What, then, is to be done?



We Must Form a Dual-Party

In conversations taking place across the country, progressives and radicals tired of the old debates between third-party supporters and naive Democrats have begun to strike a new course. In his Jacobin essay cited above, Ackerman proposed a different type of organization, with the independent structure of a democratic working class party but a flexible approach to the ballot line, typically running in the primaries of other parties but occasionally as an independent third party. Daniel Moraaff, a political organizer with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) proposed a similar strategy and elaborated upon the specifics of how such radically democratic political clubs might operate. Socialists across the country have used primaries in Democratic strongholds and nonpartisan local elections as opportunities to attempt something similar. This strategy has no single architect—until now it had no name. It is the burgeoning electoral movement of anti-Trumpism, a shared framework which is beginning to emerge through conversations and organization-building on the Left as we try to respond to the material realities of our time. Already the dual-party is being built, piece by piece, in local struggles across the country. Now is the time for a concerted, aggressive, coordinated effort to hammer it into being.

The process of mass organizing and base-building has to be first rooted in local campaigns and local organizations; this is not the announcement of a new national party to be waved into existence. We have many miles to go with our work on the ground. The role of this pamphlet is merely to help build broad leftwing consensus around this strategy with the hope of facilitating effective coordination being individuals and organizations committed to making it a political reality.

That being said, we are strongly committed to the three strategic principles of dual-party electoral politics and to organizing ourselves into an internally democratic institution that develops diverse working-class constituencies and remains directly accountable to its mass base. Absent from Ackerman's "Blueprint" and from much of this broader socialist discussion is a precise outline of how this dual-party would run candidates across differing political circumstances, and American leftists and progressives are rightfully worried about the possibility of spoiling elections. If we are to successfully carve out a strong base of support among Democratic voters, we need these clear strategic principles of how we will avoid that pitfall. If we are to stand up to the corrupting influence of corporate money on American politics, we have to center a dues-paying grassroots membership to finance our campaigns. And if we are to build a viable replacement for the Democratic Party that actually channels the energies of the public into political struggle, then we must form rigorously democratic organizations. Mutual agreement on these basic organizational principles is a precondition for joining together to win.

Small socialist organizations already exist across the country. Some, like Socialist Alternative in Seattle, already have a history of launching successful electoral campaigns. Larger organizations like DSA campaign for progressive Democrats and movement struggles while articulating a transformative vision of a society beyond capitalism. Others emerged recently from the enthusiasm generated by Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primary. To win the battle of democracy, we must gather these scattered organizations and factions and individuals into a unified dual-party structure that can most effectively wage our common struggle for liberation from the local to the national level.

Organizing this movement together gives us a very real chance to elect socialists into positions of power and hold them to a common platform. We could push Democrats to shift to the left to remain competitive in both primary and general elections. We could continually inject socialist ideas into the political mainstream and force politicians to engage with them publicly. Though we can't expect much success in Republican primaries, running socialist candidates in some of them is a potentially powerful way of base-building in rural communities and spreading our ideas more widely. We could finally force Democrats in deep blue cities to compete for votes.

There is especially powerful momentum for democratic socialist insurgency in Democratic primaries. The most successful socialist electoral campaign in American history, even more so than those of Eugene Debs, was Bernie Sanders's 2016 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. We can build on the Sanders campaign and take its achievements to the next level. While challenging the Democratic Party as an independent political force, a dual-party would be uniquely positioned to build power within it. By raising our own funds independently and assembling a national network of committed activists, we may be able to secure a seat at the table to shift party policy and potentially, with time, party structure. Absent that, our independent membership and fundraising carries with it the implicit



threat of withdrawal. The neoliberal centrist wing of the Democratic Party will make every attempt to betray the progressive socialist wing in the coming years, but that left wing having the organizational independence to walk away, form a viable leftist party, and leave the establishment powerless may force them into line. At the very least they will think twice. And if we achieve the voting reforms necessary for a functioning multiparty democracy along the way, we would be perfectly positioned to either seize the reins of the Democratic Party or go our own way as a fully independent political party, depending on strategic assessment of the political conditions at that time.

In our present moment, the rallying cry of “Elect progressive Democrats” rings woefully insufficient. We require a concerted and well-organized movement capable of overcoming the machinations of the establishment center—one that sustains the landscape-shifting power of Sanders’s public willingness to self-identify as a socialist.

Never in living memory have the conditions for such a mass movement been so ripe, with the complete collapse and discreditation of the neoliberal center. Nor has such a movement ever been so necessary, with the contradictions of capitalism and its resultant social crises bringing to power a dangerous proto-fascist movement that threatens all we hold dear. The crucial lesson of the 2016 election is that only the economic populism of democratic socialism—not neoliberal management of a decaying status quo—can wrest control of our country back from Trumpism. More to the point, we require an organized grassroots movement of socialists vying for power in a strategic framework that develops our own democratic institutions while leaving third-party irrelevance in the dustbin of American political history.

Let’s build it together.

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