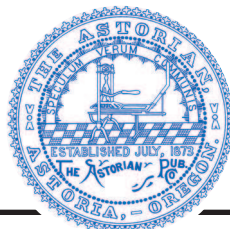


OPINION



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editor@dailyastorian.com

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KARI BORGEN
Publisher

JIM VAN NOSTRAND
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

PRO-CON

Can a progressive Democrat win the presidency in 2020?



PRO: A progressive Democrat will win the presidency in 2020

WASHINGTON — In 2016 a billionaire, who shows open contempt for people who are not rich, managed to win the votes of the white working-class — often workers without college degrees — by a margin of close to 30 percentage points.

Undoubtedly racism and sexism played a role in this huge victory, but it also mattered that many workers felt that Hillary Clinton sided with the rich and powerful against ordinary workers.

There was some basis for this view. She was associated with trade deals in Bill Clinton's administration, most notably NAFTA and China's admission to the WTO, that cost the country millions of manufacturing jobs.

The explosion of the trade deficit in the last decade cost the country 20 percent of its manufacturing jobs and devastated communities in states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin. All four of these states flipped from Obama to Trump.

Clinton also was associated with the deregulation of the financial industry. This made many of her political allies very rich, but the excesses of the industry helped to inflate the housing bubble, the collapse of which gave us the Great Recession.

For a Democrat to win in 2020, they will have to retake some of the white working-class votes lost to Trump in 2016. This means pushing an agenda that promises real benefits to workers. The outlines of this agenda are already well-known and being pushed by several announced or likely candidates.

At the top of the list is health care. Polls show this is a top concern for voters. While the Affordable Care Act extended coverage to tens of millions of people, many are still not insured. Furthermore, premiums and co-pays often place an enormous burden on those with insurance.

Most of the Democrats considered leading contenders have proposed measures to extend coverage.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders leads the way with his push for Medicare for All, although he knows this is not likely to be accomplished in a single step.

To get closer, he has proposed lowering the age for Medicare eligibility from 65 to 55 or 60 and allowing people of all ages to buy into the program.

Sanders, along with Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, has also pushed a variety of bills that would lower prescription drug costs.

Drugs are the most rapidly rising component of health care costs.

Other areas that will need to be addressed include the cost of college and child care. There have been a variety of proposals put forward by Democrats to make public colleges free or at least affordable, to the poor and middle-class. The same is true of plans to make daycare affordable for low and moderate-income families.

The United States also needs to catch up with the rest of the world in providing paid leave for sickness, childbirth and family concerns, and vacation time. Here also, there have been a

variety of proposals that would move us forward in these areas.

The United States needs to take stronger measures to slow global warming. Proposals for a "Green New Deal" would create jobs in retrofitting homes and businesses as well in developing solar and wind power and other clean sources of energy.

This is a partial list of areas where the Democratic candidates will have to propose progressive solutions, but a big part of the story will be convincing working-class voters both white and non-white that they are on their side and not working for the rich and powerful.

Several prospective candidates, including both Sanders and Warren, as well as Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown, are well-positioned to make this case.

All three can point to decades of standing up for ordinary workers. Perhaps other candidates will pass this test as well. But, if Democrats fail to take a clear stand against the rich and powerful in 2020 they will likely achieve the same result as in 2016.

Dean Baker is a co-founder of the Center for Economic and Policy Research.



Dean Baker

CON: With the economy humming, progressivism is a likely loser

DALLAS — Your father's Democratic Party might have a good chance at capturing the White House in 2020; your children's Democratic Party, which is what we have today, faces a tougher fight.

To win the election, Democrats will have to overcome two major obstacles: history and their lurch to the political left. They cannot change the first obstacle, and they seemingly don't want to change the second.

Let's start with history: It's very difficult to beat an incumbent presidential candidate. It has only happened five times in the 30 presidential elections since 1900, and most of those occurred under extraordinary circumstances.

For example, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Republican President Herbert Hoover in 1932, primarily because of Hoover's feckless efforts to address the economic devastation of the Great Depression.

Republican Ronald Reagan defeated President Jimmy Carter in 1980, in part because the economy was experiencing record high inflation and interest rates and the Iran hostage debacle.

And Democrat Bill Clinton defeated President George H.W. Bush in 1992 because Bush broke his "no new taxes" pledge and third-party candidate Ross Perot siphoned off 19 percent of the vote.

Yes, many people can reasonably claim that the Trump presidency is also an "extraordinary circumstance," creating the opportunity for an election upset.

Even so, when the economy is doing well — and if the various investigations don't reveal serious presidential wrongdoing — history overwhelmingly favors the incumbent.

The second factor working against a Democratic upset victory is the party's increasing leftward shift to democratic socialism.

The Gallup polling company reports that 57 percent of Democrats have a positive view of socialism, as opposed to only 37 percent of all voters.

It wasn't that long ago when many Democrats were widely respected for their thoughtful, moderate leadership: Sens. Sam Nunn of Georgia, Lloyd Bentsen of Texas and Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, to name a few. Those days are gone.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders used to be the only self-described democratic socialist in Congress. Every time he would introduce his socialized-medicine scheme, "Medicare for All," other senators would run for cover to avoid any hint of association.

At a recent Medicare for All press conference, Sanders was surrounded by Democrats, many of whom are vying to be the next president of the United States.

Democratic presidential hopefuls, and the party generally, are embracing policies like those supported by the group Democratic Socialists of America: free college education; free health care; free child care and paid family leave; universal basic income; and a carbon-free economy with only renewable energy and electric cars.

Of course, "free" means taxpayer — that's you — must pay for it.

This is a far cry from the Democratic Party of even President Bill Clinton, who once famously proclaimed "the era of big government is over." Today's leading Democrats think the era of big government has just begun.

The mainstream media have become co-conspirators in this leap to the left by constantly promoting the most outspoken leftists, especially Sanders and Rep. (and media sensation) Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York. They, and a few others, are the voices providing the energy and policy ideas driving the Democratic Party.

The problem for Democratic candidates is that America is still a moderate to center-right country.

A 2018 Gallup poll found that 35 percent of Americans described themselves as conservative and another 35 percent as moderate. Only 26 percent claimed to be liberal.

Lurching to the left may win donations, enthusiastic volunteers and even the Democratic presidential nomination. But it will almost certainly lose the election.

To be sure, President Donald Trump faces some re-election headwinds, many of his own making. But the biggest factor in favor of his re-election will be running against a democratic socialist, in fact if not in name.

Merrill Matthews is a resident scholar with the Institute for Policy Innovation.



Merrill Matthews