

Can a New Political Party Save America From Itself?

Dec 11, 2018

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When it comes to criticizing the Democratic Party, nothing speaks like experience within the belly of the beast. Ralph Nader is living proof. After years of effectively pressuring congressional Democrats to protect consumers and the environment against corporate greed,

he watched firsthand as the party bowed to the demands of Big Business during the Jimmy Carter administration.

And then there's Nick Brana, the leading activist behind the [Movement for a People's Party \(MPP\)](#). Like Nader, Brana isn't content merely to expose the corruption of the dismal dollar Democrats—a party that late political scientist [Sheldon Wolin](#) [rightly called “the inauthentic opposition.”](#) He's looking to replace them with something much better: Let's call it an “authentic opposition.”

Don't let his tender age of 29 fool you. Brana has served his time inside the belly of the beast that is the Democratic donkey, first as a volunteer for Barack Obama and later as a member of John Kerry's political action committee. These experiences gave him a front-row seat to the “quid pro quo” between concentrated wealth and elected officials.

Brana later served as the deputy director for voter protection of close Clinton ally and top Democratic Party fundraiser Terry McAuliffe's successful 2013 Virginia gubernatorial campaign. It was, in his words, “a test run for the [2016] Hillary Clinton campaign.” There, Brana got to know future Clinton campaign chief [Robby Mook](#) and other high-ranking Clinton staffers.

“I was naive,” Brana recalls. He thought activists could bring about progressive change for working people, the poor and the common good through the Democratic Party.

Now he thinks of the Democrats and the Republicans as “two subsidiaries of a single corporation.” While the Republicans make no serious pretense of being anything but an oligarchic organization, Brana says, the Democrats play a more “insidious” and disingenuous part. Their “counterrevolutionary” role is to masquerade as the people's voice and function as a great “black hole for progressive energies and passions.” In his estimation, the Democratic Party is a nefarious shock absorber for the ruling class.

While commuting to and from his job for McAuliffe, Brana began listening to left-wing podcasts featuring iconic author and dissident

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After McAuliffe won, Brana decided not to follow him to the Virginia state capital. Alienated by the [corporatism of the party’s neoliberal masters during the Obama years](#), and inspired by Chomsky, he took a break from politics before ultimately joining the campaign of progressive presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in 2015. There he served as national political outreach coordinator.

And yet his leftward progression remained far from complete. Sanders gave Brana the thankless job of lobbying the Democratic Party’s [explicitly anti-insurgent “superdelegates”](#) to the national convention. The task “showed me definitively that the party was not materially different from the GOP,” Brana told me two weeks ago. Ultimately, it proved to be “an eye-opening experience.” The Democratic superdelegates were “offended that we wanted to talk to them about policy,” Brana recalled.

The fact that Sanders [performed far better](#) than Goldman Sachs-and Council on Foreign Relations-approved Clinton in one-on-one match-up polls with Donald Trump at the end of the primary season held no interest whatsoever to the elite functionaries Brana tried to coax into Sanders’ camp.

This experience dispelled Brana once and for all of the notion that he could make the world a better place through the Democratic Party. The (Democratic) party, he determined, was not a political entity at all but a privately owned business under the command of “a committee of corporations.” Thinking that the organization’s “oligarchic” nature could be undone by “some magic bullet” candidate, Brana told me, “is like believing that a single drop of clean water could purify a bucket of toxic sludge.”

“You don’t take the Democratic Party over,” Brana says. *“It takes over you.”*

Sanders offered an alternative. The Vermont senator tantalized through [a grassroots small-donor campaign that received literally no big-business support](#) while skewering plutocracy and America’s savage economic inequality. This was an extraordinary development in a primary awash in corporate money.

Were it not for the fixing of the primaries and the Democratic National Convention by the Clintonite “committee of the corporations” that owned the Democratic National Committee, Sanders might well be sitting in the White House right now. Trump would be back in his Manhattan tower, his political life relegated to the Twittersphere.

Brana favors the metaphor of a burning house. “When your home is on fire,” he says, “you run for the exits. If the door on the left is closed, you’ll run for the door on the right.” Think of the house as the U.S. political system. Think of the fire as [neoliberal capitalism](#), engulfing the country in precarity and inequality. The “left” exit to which Sanders beckoned was blocked by the unelected dictatorship of money atop the Democratic Party, leaving voters to choose between a flame-throwing centrist and a racist, misogynistic reactionary. Trump ultimately claimed the populist mantle that Clinton openly disdained, outperforming [his Democratic opponent with small \(middle-class and working-class\) donors](#). Resentment abhors a vacuum.

Proving the axiom that the Democratic Party resents the progressive left more than it does an increasingly dangerous right, establishment Democrats accused Sanders of nasty things like “voodoo economics,” “unicorn politics” and unrealistic “pie-in-the-sky” prescriptions. Bill Clinton himself stooped to accusing Sanders of stealing voter data and calling his supporters “sexists” who smeared anyone who “disagreed with them as part of the establishment.”

Sanders took these attacks in distressingly self-effacing stride. He sucked it up like a good party man, reserving his barrel-chested

thunder for Trump and the Republicans. Just as Green Party activist, election strategist and former Democratic Party insider Bruce Dixon predicted, Sanders kept his head down and campaigned obediently for the “lying neoliberal warmonger” Hillary Clinton.

He did so while knowing full well she was in deep trouble, thanks to her remarkable unpopularity, her related corporate conservatism and her stunning failure to run on a serious policy platform.

Sanders feared a Trump presidency, and with good reason. But what about the decimated opposition party his election victory left in its wake?

Just weeks after the [totalitarian](#) was inaugurated, Brana and seven former Sanders staffers launched [Draft Bernie for a People’s Party](#). The new organization pressed the democratic socialist to follow his original instinct to run for president as an independent—a decision that Bernie’s senior advisers Tad Devine and Jeff Weaver ultimately talked Sanders out of in 2015. Brana and his comrades asked Sanders to honor the Eugene Debs poster that hangs on his Senate office wall by bringing his database of 13 million voters and small donors on board for an authentic popular opposition party, beyond the corporate duopoly.

In September 2017, they delivered 50,000 petition signatures to Sanders’ Senate office in Washington. The petition arrived during a left-progressive Convergence Conference in which famed academic Cornel West referred indirectly to [Sanders’ deafening silence on the American war machine](#), and how its cost canceled out his social-democratic policy agenda. “You can’t have a democratic experiment if 53 cents on your dollar are already headed to the military industrial-complex,” West said at the time.

With Brana sitting directly to his right on a stage with socialist Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant and left-wing comedian Jimmy Dore, West wondered aloud if “our dear brother Bernie Sanders [has] become *too comfortable and adjusted to the corporate wing of the Democratic Party*, the Schumers and the Pelosis and the Hillary Clintons.”

“Brother Bernie may not last long in the corporate Democratic Party,” [West said](#), “so I’ve got a hunch he may come running [out of the party] many months from now. But you *cannot proceed predicated on what he does!*”

In the months since, Sanders has shown no signs he intends to run as an independent. The self-proclaimed democratic socialist has spurned his petitioners, tailoring his political revolution to the parameters of a two-party system. And how is that working for ordinary Americans when three individuals (Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates) now possess [more wealth among them](#) than the bottom half of the nation, and the 1 percent holds the same net worth as the nation’s bottom 90 percent?

The answer should be obvious. Corporate forces have since solidified and enhanced the power of anti-democratic superdelegates, many of them corporate lobbyists, while moving to eliminate party caucuses, seen as too friendly to progressive insurgents in the Sanders mode. They have also imposed a neo-McCarthyite “loyalty test” that empowers the DNC to advance-veto any presidential nominee deemed insufficiently faithful to the Democratic Party. All of these steps and more aim to further insulate the party from another dreaded populist insurgency.

For the 2018 congressional midterms, the [“CIA Democrats”](#) fielded an unprecedented number of military and intelligence veterans as candidates. Of 107 contenders originally fielded in the primary season with endorsements from Sanders’ “Our Revolution” organization, just 44 made it to the general election, most of them in bright-red (Republican) districts where they hardly stood a chance. Twelve won their general elections. Of those 12, five were incumbent officeholders and five more were longtime party politicians in line for higher office. Only two insurgent Sanders-supported candidates opposed by the party went on to unseat establishment Democrats in their primaries—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Ayanna Pressley of Boston.

And just how left-wing are these two new congresswomen? Despite their instant “radical” celebrity, [Ocasio-Cortez](#) and [Pressley both endorsed](#) the multimillionaire arch-neoliberal Nancy [“We’re](#)

[Capitalist and That's Just the Way it Is](#)" Pelosi as the House speaker. Neither Ocasio-Cortez nor Pressley spoke out when Pelosi marked the Democrats' midterm victory on election night by promising to advance ["a bipartisan marketplace of ideas"](#) with the creeping white-nationalist Republicans and their horrific, [creeping-fascist president](#).

Sanders' recent ["Ten Point Plan" for Democrats](#) contains desirable progressive measures, including progressive taxes, "bold action on climate change" and "a path toward Medicare for All." But Brana is certainly right to predict the Pelosi-led Democratic majority will make little if any progress toward advancing a single one of these proposals.

There's no bold call in this plan for massive, desperately required reductions to the Pentagon's budget, which swallows up billions of taxpayer dollars required to implement the environmental and social democratic programs Sanders claims to support. And just last week, Bernie chatted up corporate "New" Democrats Beto O'Rourke and Cory Booker as possible 2020 hopefuls on "The Late Show With Stephen Colbert."

Brana isn't interested in forming the next third or fourth party on the margins of the America's [zero-sum elections system](#). He believes independent parties have a role to play in forcing major parties to change their tune on certain matters, but there's a limit to how far they can go. Instead, the MPP's goal is to replace the Democrats as the nation's second major party altogether—one that will fulfill its predecessor's declared mission of fighting for working people against corporate power. Curiously enough, the model here is not the [original Populist Party](#) of the 1890s, which splintered into the William Jennings Bryan Democrats and Eugene V. Debs Socialists. Instead, their template is the [Republican Party of the 1850s](#), which stepped into the vacuum following the demise of the Whig Party—a ship that had crashed upon the shoals of sectionalism and slavery.

The neoliberal post-New Deal Democrats have been shipwrecking for decades by corporate class rule and plutocracy. The Carter-Clinton-Obama-Pelosi Dems need to give way to a new People's

Party like the Daniel Webster-Winfield Scott-Millard Fillmore-Zachary Taylor [Whigs](#) gave way to the Republican Party of John Fremont, William Seward, Horace Greely, Salmon Chase and Abraham Lincoln in the mid-to-late 1850s.

When might this happen? Brana has no illusions about an overnight realignment, but he thinks two coming “shocks” to U.S. progressives and the nation at large could create the climate for a political realignment. First, Sanders, now 77, will run again for president as a Democrat and be defeated all over again by corporate Democrats who will rig the contest just as before, despite his groundswell of progressive support and his status as the most popular politician in the country. Brana believes the Democrats may nominate Joe Biden, 76, who is laughably [billing himself as “the anti-populist.”](#) Second, the U.S. economy will tumble into its next recession. This, in turn, will supercharge calls for serious regulation, even nationalization of the leading U.S. financial institutions, and for bringing our overgrown corporate oligopolies under public control.

So do we simply wait for these developments and hope for the best in the meantime? [Hardly](#). Endorsed by an impressive roster of progressive personalities, the MPP has rallied for climate justice with Zero Hour, demonstrated for peace with the Women’s March on the Pentagon, boycotted Driscoll’s berries on behalf of exploited farmer workers, picketed with striking teachers and hotel employees, promoted the public banking movement, backed the impressive independent congressional candidacy of Tim Canova in Florida, participated in civil disobedience with the Poor People’s Campaign, and helped institute Ranked Choice Voting in Maine. The fledgling party’s Labor-Community Campaign has also won the support of unions representing tens of thousands, along with AFL-CIO executive council members and state presidents.

Brana and his comrades are committed to working with the labor movement, which still has 15 million members and spends more than \$100 million on elections each year, making it a natural base for progressive political action in the country.

Their timing is impeccable. Thanks to a decades-long corporate takeover of the Democratic Party, the labor movement is more primed for independent political action now than it has been at any time in the last century. Consider these two remarkable [resolutions](#) passed at the 2017 AFL-CIO Convention: (1) “whether candidates are elected from the Republican or Democratic Party, the interests of Wall Street have been protected and advanced, while the interests of labor and working people have generally been set back,” and (2) “the time has passed when we can passively settle for the lesser of two evils politics.”

Encouraged by these remarkable statements on the part of the nation’s preeminent labor federation, MPP activists have consulted with leaders of the Labor Party of 1996-2007. Two lessons they take from their experience are the needs to run independent candidates outside the Democratic Party and to forge strong community alliances beyond the workplace and the union hall.

Brana thinks the economic and political earthquakes will be “watershed moments for an independent party to build a labor-community campaign” that could eventually sweep the Democrats off the national stage and open the door for a new progressive populism.

Ultimately, Brana’s vision may be our last, best hope of saving America from itself. The current political alignment is leading us over authoritarian and ecocidal cliffs, raising the distinct possibility that there will be no historians to record the politics of the neoliberal age, or whatever dystopian age comes to succeed it.

In the meantime, the so-called “blue wave” of the midterm elections could prove useful to the MPP’s cause. As I [have long argued](#), the Democrats are most able to effectively and deceptively pose as a popular opposition party and to claim that the solution to the nation’s problems is to vote them into power. They expose their corporatism when they hold key elected positions and reveal themselves as entirely inadequate to the task of representing the people.

