

RIPPED APART



How Democrats Can
Fight Polarization to Win

Steven Stoft

Chapter 16

‘Our Revolution’ Meets the Jacksonians (And the Midterms)

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Contents of *Ripped Apart*

Part 1. What Polarizes Us?

1. The Perils of Polarization
2. Clear and Present Danger
3. How Polarization Develops
4. How to Depolarize a Cyclops
5. Three Political Traps
6. The Crime Bill Myth
7. The Purity Trap

Part 2. Charisma Traps

8. Smart People Get Sucked In
9. Good People Get Sucked In
10. Jonestown: Evil Charisma
11. Alex Jones: More Evil Charisma
12. The Charismatic Progressive
13. Trump: Charismatic Sociopath

Part 3. Populism Traps

14. What is Populism; Why Should We Care?
15. Trump: A Fake Jacksonian Populist
16. 'Our Revolution' Meets the Jacksonians
17. Economics vs. the Culture War
18. Sanders' Populist Strategy
19. Good Populism: The Kingfish
20. Utopian Populism
21. Don't Be the Enemy They Need

Part 4. Mythology Traps

- 22. Socialism, Liberalism and All That
- 23. Sanders' Socialism Myths
- 24. The Myth of the Utopian Savior
- 25. The Establishment Myth
- 26. The Myth of the Bully Pulpit
- 27. The Myth of the Overton Window

Part 5. Identity Politics

- 28. When the Klan Went Low, SNCC Went High
- 29. What Is Identity Politics?
- 30. Identity Politics—The Dark Side
- 31. Cultural Appropriation
- 32. The Microaggression Hoax
- 33. Roots of the New Identity Politics
- 34. Postmodernism: The Anti-Truth
- 35. The Ultimate Con Game

Part 6. Wrap-up and Overview

- 36. Radical-Left Mythology
- 37. The Tragic Paradox of Radicalism
- 38. How Progressive Change Happens
- 39. Putting the Pieces Together

‘Our Revolution’ Meets the Jacksonians

The People’s Party [won] the U.S. presidency and a majority of both houses of Congress in 2020.

—Robert Reich, March 25, 2016

There’s a theory going around that Tea Partiers are Berniecrats—they just don’t know it yet. Seriously. Sanders doesn’t say that; he leaves it to his surrogates, like his PACs and Professor Robert Reich. But the idea comes from Sanders’ socialist background.

Socialism assumes the working class is unified by an economic ideology but that workers sometimes get confused by establishment propaganda. So the Berniecrat “Brand New Congress” PAC, set up by one of his presidential campaign staffers in 2016, set out to run 400 Congressional campaigns in 2018. The idea was to elect a majority of Democrats *and* Republicans who would pledge allegiance to Sanders’ agenda and carry out his “revolution.”

If this theory is right, we should help his two PACs, “Justice Democrats” and “Brand New Congress,” and his super PAC, “Our Revolution,” take over the Democratic Party. If it’s not true, attacking all the “establishment” Democrats from inside the Party could be a disaster.

Well, this theory has been tested, and the results are in. The message for the 2020 election is absolutely clear—and shocking. So we will first take a brief look at this revolutionary plan and then examine the outcome of the 2018 midterms. Finally, we’ll look into the misunderstanding of Trump’s base, which is even more dangerous than these revolutionary fantasies.

Robert Reich Explains Bernie’s Revolution

“Millions who called themselves conservatives and Tea Partiers joined with millions who called themselves liberals and progressives.” Yes, in a fantastical March 2016 op-ed, Professor Robert Reich predicted that he

would someday look back on Bernie Sanders' Revolution which happened when the Tea Party went socialist. He continued, "The People's Party [won] the U.S. presidency and a majority of both houses of Congress in 2020."

Reich was contending there was still time to rip out the base of both major parties and join them at the hip to form the "People's Party" for a socialist/populist takeover in 2020. Bernie would be president. There would be peace and prosperity in the Promised Land. Reich, who served under Presidents Ford and Carter, and as Bill Clinton's Secretary of Labor, is Sanders' most distinguished interpreter.

It seems he's been beguiled by both the promise of the revolution, which he's waited a lifetime for, and confused by a misunderstanding of Trump's base.

Brand New Congress. A month after Reich's 2016 op-ed, 20 volunteers from Bernie Sanders' campaign, led by top campaign staffer Zack Exley, formed "Brand New Congress." As the *Huffington Post* explained at the time, they were "looking ahead to the 2018 midterm elections to replace Congress all at once" with lawmakers who agree with Sanders.

As Exley explained, "We want a supermajority in Congress ... and I think we get it by running Dems in blue areas, Republicans in deep-red areas, and by running independents wherever we didn't defeat incumbents." The first step would be to recruit 400 Congressional candidates by July 2017.

Just after finally endorsing Hillary Clinton in July 2016, Sanders announced his plan to form his super PAC, "Our Revolution." In early August, he began raising money for it and on August 24 he held a launch party.

In January 2017, Exley joined Saikat Chakrabarti, another top staffer from Sanders' campaign, to form "Justice Democrats." They recruited Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and two years later she was in Congress with Chakrabarti as her chief of staff.

Sanders' PACs Tackle the 2018 Midterms

In November 2016, the Democrats lost the presidency and both houses of Congress, and in 2018, the House was their only real chance to retake some power. There were 82 "battleground" House races (as identified by Ballotpedia) that could flip a seat from red to blue or blue to red, and fortunately 73 of these started out Republican.

As we now know, a blue wave flipped 43 seats from red to blue while we lost only three blue seats. Democratic turnout was massive.

Sanders' three PACs were, of course, busy "helping out." They fielded many candidates and eventually, between the three of them, made 117 endorsements. Only 38 of these were for battleground seats. Surprisingly, the three PACs agreed on only two of these candidates. (Radical factionalism is legendary.)

So how many of their endorsed candidates were part of the 43 who flipped blue seats to red and gave us back the House? The shocking answer is none, as in zero. So much for taking a supermajority of Congress all at once. Bernie's minions could not take back even a single seat from the Republicans.

And did they back any of the six Democrats who held onto their battleground seats? No. But they did back 10 Democrats who won. Who were they? The main thing to know is that every winning candidate they could find to endorse, whether their own candidate or an incumbent, was in a district where Clinton beat Trump by at least 30% (as in 65% to 35%). Apparently, with their politics, it's unlikely a candidate can win if the district isn't deep blue.

The most they could hope for, had they stopped their infighting, would have been to flip 40% of the Democratic seats from very progressive to Berniecrat progressive. That would just polarize the party and make it harder to get anything done.

Taking a look at the 10 winners they backed, we find that five were incumbents from deep-blue states that didn't need their help. Another was Jesus Garcia, who scored 44% against Rahm Emanuel when he ran for Chicago Mayor in 2015. He didn't need their help either.

The Big Win—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

The Bernie PACs' final four victories are known as "the Squad," so-called because they began posting "Squad pics" after the November election. They are Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Ayanna Pressley.

Ayanna Pressley primaried (to use a Tea-Party term that's been picked up by some Berniecrats) Mike Capuano, a 10-term incumbent, and a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus who supports Medicare-for-all. Pressley won 59 to 41%. She didn't need the Bernie PACs. Nothing wrong with this, but nothing much accomplished.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) primaryed Joseph Crowley, a 10-term incumbent backed by the very-progressive Working Families Party. She won her primary by 4,018 votes with 7.2% of registered Democrats voting for her while Crowley got only 5.5%.

Her largest margins of support came from neighborhoods in western Queens with lower Latino populations and higher White populations. She did poorly in the Black neighborhoods.

Chakrabarti, president of Justice Democrats, recruited AOC early and put together a coalition made up largely of people who had organized for Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign. They were joined by "Brand New Congress" and "Democratic Socialists of America," but not by Sanders or his own super PAC, "Our Revolution." Of course, it helped that Ocasio-Cortez performed her part brilliantly.

Ilhan Omar won her primary with 48.2% of the vote—not quite a landslide—and Rashida Tlaib won hers with only 31.2%.

Who Won the 2018 Midterms?

The entire "Squad" comes from dark-blue districts where Clinton decisively beat Trump by from 55% to 71%. (Yes, a 71% margin means 85% for Clinton and 14% for Trump!) Squad members and their supporters are on the left edge of those districts. They are in no way indicative of where the party or the country is or is headed.

The three Berniecrat PACs with their 117 endorsements didn't manage to back a single candidate who came within a mile of making a difference. In contrast, the moderate "New Dem" PAC endorsed 77 candidates and 42 won, including 33 who flipped red seats to blue. The "New Dem" PAC is tied to the New Democratic Caucus in the House.

The most important takeaway from this analysis is that every non-Berniecrat Democrat is focused on fighting Trump, and they're doing a damn good job of it. But Sanders and his PACs are focused on fighting only Democrats. In the crucial 2018 midterms, Berniecrats didn't help at all.

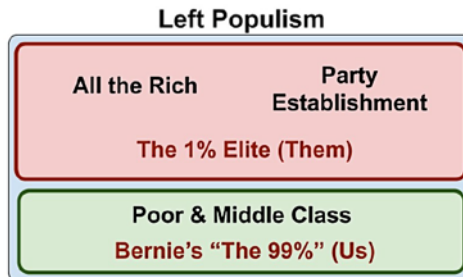
They predicted they could take a super-majority of Congress, and all they could do is win four seats in deep-blue districts. That tells you exactly how much their super-optimistic predictions are worth.

Left Populism vs. Jacksonian Populism

Sanders' "our revolution" theory misses the difference between right and left populism. That difference is what dooms his efforts.

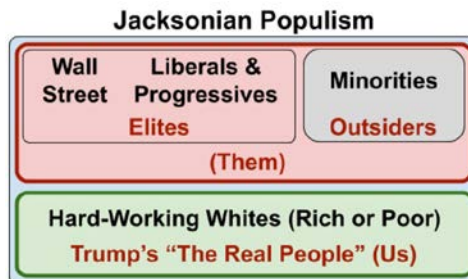
Left populism focuses on economic issues—which is completely sensible. But the populism of Trump's base is Jacksonian, and it focuses on the issues raised by George Wallace (Ch. 2) and by Trump. Those are mainly cultural issues—race, immigrants, guns, sexual minorities, religion, abortion, climate change, and political correctness.

Left populism presents a simple populist dichotomy. The elite consists of the richest 1% and their political enablers, and the rest are "the people."



According to the left-populist view, pretty much everyone is part of Us, so Trump's base is naturally in there with us. This makes Reich's view of "Our Revolution" and the dream of "Brand New Congress" seem like a real possibility.

To find out if Trump's base is really with us (but "they just don't know it yet"), we should take a look at the Jacksonian view of the world. That's shown in the diagram below.



Notice there are still two main groups—Them and Us. But Jacksonians, like most right-wing populists, split Them into the Elite and the Outsiders. These are the minorities, Blacks, immigrants, and sexual

minorities. The outsiders are excluded from “the real people” and are clearly not part of the elite. In this way, Jacksonians exclude about half the Democratic Party from “the real people.” But that’s not all.

A second surprise is the most shocking. Jacksonians see White liberals and progressives as part of the elite! In right-wing populism, the elite are usually seen as being in cahoots with the excluded group. Democrats are obvious champions of the poor and minorities—that’s what Democratic identity politics is all about. In the Jacksonian view, Democrats are in cahoots with the “outsiders.”

The third surprise is their sympathy for the “hard-working” rich. Jacksonians will tell you “they worked hard for their money.” Sometimes they sort of have a point. Consider Steve Jobs and LeBron James. The result is that Trump’s base classifies most billionaires as part of “the real people.” Even Trump, a presumed multi-billionaire born with a silver spoon in his mouth who brags about taking advantage of tax loopholes, gets a pass. Again, this makes a progressive alliance with the Tea Party hard to imagine.

Jacksonian Trumpsters see it working like this: Democrats arrange help for minorities from the federal government, and in return, these “outsiders” vote for us. Of course, they are right about this. The problem is that they exclude, as outsiders, the groups that Democrats most care about. Socialism tries to overcome this divide between progressives and Trump’s base by focusing on economic disadvantage. But that’s not what the Jacksonians focus on.

Conclusion

It’s important to understand the complaints of Trump’s base, and it’s helpful to try to win some over to our side. All this is depolarizing. But Reich and “Brand New Congress” go completely overboard when they try to recruit half the Tea Party to support Bernie’s platform. It makes no sense to trash our own party for the sake of an imaginary revolution based on a total misunderstanding of Trump and his Jacksonian base.

- Bernie’s Revolution will not materialize.
- Attempting a revolution will only polarize Democrats and the country. And that helps Trump.