

The Bernie Campaign: The Democratic Party's Biggest Insurrection in Decades

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Forty-eight years ago, a serious insurrection jeopardized the power structure of the national Democratic Party for the first time in memory. Propelled by the movement against the Vietnam War, that grassroots uprising cast a big electoral shadow soon after Senator Eugene McCarthy dared to challenge the incumbent for the Democratic presidential nomination.

When 1968 got underway, the news media were scoffing at McCarthy's antiwar campaign as quixotic and doomed. But in the nation's leadoff New Hampshire primary, McCarthy received 42 percent of the vote while President Lyndon B. Johnson couldn't quite get to 50 percent — results that were shattering for LBJ. Suddenly emboldened, Senator Robert Kennedy quickly entered the race. Two weeks later, Johnson announced that he wouldn't seek re-election.

Although the nomination eventually went to Johnson's vice president Hubert Humphrey — a supporter of the war who was the choice of Democratic power brokers — the unmasking of the party's undemocratic process led to internal reforms that aided the Democratic Party's second modern insurrection. It came four years later, when Senator George McGovern won the presidential nomination, thanks to grassroots movements involving young people and activists of color. But any sense of triumph disappeared in the wake of President Nixon's landslide re-election in November 1972.

The third major insurrection came in 1988, when Jesse Jackson led a dynamic, multiracial "rainbow" campaign for president that had major impacts on the national stage. (His previous campaign, in '84, had been relatively weak.) The 1988 primaries and caucuses were hard-fought, state by state, with rainbow activists working shoulder-to-shoulder, whether focused on issues of class, race or gender. (Back then, Jackson was a gutsy voice for social justice, for human rights and against war — much more willing to confront the Democratic Party establishment than he is now.) At the contentious Democratic National Convention that summer in Atlanta, where Jackson delegates were highly visible as 30 percent of the total, the old guard closed ranks behind nominee Michael Dukakis.

Now, as February 2016 gets underway, we're in the midst of the first major insurrection against the Democratic Party power structure in 28 years. The millions of us who support the Bernie Sanders campaign — whatever our [important criticisms](#) — should aim to fully grasp the huge opportunities and obstacles that await us.

Of the three previous insurrections, only one gained the nomination, and none won the presidency. Corporate capitalism — wielding its muscular appendage, mass media — can be depended upon to take off the gloves and pummel the insurrection's candidate to the extent

that the campaign has gained momentum. That happened to McCarthy, McGovern and Jackson. It's now happening to Sanders.

The last days of January brought [one](#) big-daily newspaper editorial after [another](#) after [another](#) attacking Bernie with vehemence and vitriol. The less unlikely his winning of the nomination gets, the more that mega-media assaults promoting [absurdities](#) will intensify.

Meanwhile — at least as long as her nomination is threatened from the left — Hillary Clinton will benefit from corporate biases that wallpaper the mass-media echo chambers. The Sunday *New York Times* [editorial](#) endorsing Clinton could hardly be more fanciful and hagiographic if written by her campaign.

Many of the same media outlets and overall corporate forces that denounced Eugene McCarthy in 1968, George McGovern in 1972 and Jesse Jackson in 1988 are gunning for Bernie Sanders in 2016. We shouldn't be surprised. But we should be ready, willing and able to do our own messaging — widely and intensely — in communities across the country.

At the same time, we should not confuse electoral campaigns with long-term political organizing. Campaigns for office are quite different matters than the more transformative task of building progressive infrastructure — and vibrant coalitions — that can endure and grow, year after year.

Genuinely progressive candidates can inspire and galvanize — and sometimes they can even win. But election campaigns, especially national ones, are almost always boom/bust. Sometimes they can help to fuel movement momentum, but they aren't the engine.

Election campaigns are distinct from movements even if they converge for a while, no matter what pundits and campaign spinners say. Candidates often want to harness social movements for their campaigns. But our best approach is to view electoral campaigns as — at best — subsets of movements, not the other way around.

The Bernie campaign could be a watershed for progressive organizing through the rest of this decade and beyond. That will largely depend on what activists do — in the next weeks, months and years.

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