

Introduction

The “Progressive era” of American politics, which spanned from the 1890s to 1920s and included memorable political figures such as presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, introduced politicians and public figures who believed in “the Hamiltonian concept of positive government” and a national government that had to extend its powers past the “strict construction of the Constitution by conservative judges” in order to “act against social evils and to extend the blessings of democracy to less favored lands.”¹ There is a major difference between capital ‘P’ Progressives, who lived during the Progressive era, and modern-day self-proclaimed progressives (lower-case ‘p’). Thomas C. Leonard, in his interview with Matthew Harwood for *The American Conservative*, proclaims that there is little that connects modern progressives to their ideological ancestors from the Progressive era of history, as “Today’s progressives emphasize racial equality and minority rights, decry U.S. imperialism, shun biological ideas in social science, and have little use for piety or proselytizing” whereas Progressive leaders were adamantly opposed to giving minorities increased rights, were proponents of imperialism and colonization, and believed in joining foreign wars to spread their political, social, and cultural ideals. But the one thing both sides continue to share to this day is their distrust of corporations, shared criticisms of unfettered capitalism, and having the belief that the federal government should be run like a technocracy.²

In this essay, I will be exploring and investigating the history of the modern progressive movement, their political platforms, their cultural and social ideals, key individuals that have and currently represent this political movement, and what the evolving popularity of the movement, within the Democratic Party, says about modern American society. There is no established date for when the modern progressive movement began as it is the culmination of many events, including the anti-war protests during the Vietnam Conflict, the latter stage of the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and the economic recessions of the early 1980s. With these events in mind, I will begin this essay with a short summary of the modern historiography of the progressive movement, and the two schools of progressive thought that dominate the modern Democratic Party. Then I will examine the nomination of George McGovern for the presidency of the United States by the Democratic Party, as McGovern ran the most progressive campaign for the United States presidency since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, signaling the birth of the modern post-New Deal progressive movement. I’ll continue to examine the evolution of the Democratic Party from then on to the modern day and examine how its history, and the dramatic 2016 and 2020 election cycles, has impacted the modern progressive movement and what it’s current political standing says about American society as a whole.

I wanted to research the origins of the modern progressive movement and its evolution from being virtually irrelevant in American politics to now dominating the current news cycle and having its representatives at the table in almost all political discussions in Washington D.C. In such politically polarizing times such as now, I believe that it is important to know how the modern American political movements were created, why they were created, and where those political movements currently stand today. Since the topic for my research paper is not only relatively new in the historical sense (less than 50 years old), but is still ongoing with no signs of ending anytime soon, the amount of primary and secondary resources available for me to use were almost endless. For this paper I used a wide array of newspapers for my primary sources since newspapers are among the best sources for analyzing current political coverage and the opinion pieces that come with them. The rest of my paper is supplemented by secondary sources in the form of books from historians and political scientists that cover the history of certain presidential campaigns or political figures from the modern progressive movement, or they explain in detail certain political strategies, ideologies, or other pieces of information that provide relevant background information to a particular topic in the paper. I also used several websites as well since they also provide political commentary, opinions, news coverage, and other sources of information in the current day, and actually began taking over newspapers as my most commonly used source the closer I got to the current day (all newspapers I used were accessed online as well).

¹William E. Leuchtenburg, “Progressivism and Imperialism: The Progressive Movement and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1916,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39, no. 3 (December 1952): 500-501, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://www-jstor-org.libproxy.mst.edu/stable/1895006>.

²Thomas C Leonard, interview by Matthew Harwood, *The American Conservative*, September 29, 2016, accessed September 1, 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-dark-heart-of-progressivism/>.

The two schools of “progressive” thought and the debate between which is the real successor to the “Progressive” movement

As will be discussed and mentioned throughout this essay many times, there are politicians, historians, pundits, political scientists, etc. among the left of American politics who claim to be “progressives” and who claim, in different ways, of being the heirs to the “Progressive” movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most will not directly mention the original Progressive movement and its leaders as being the source of inspiration for their economic and social policies because of the modern backlash over many social ideals sponsored and supported by that movement. That being said, the two schools of progressive thought that dominate American politics on the left, and particularly the Democratic Party, are the moderates and neoliberal factions within the party, and the rather new self identified progressives, many of whom are open Democratic Socialists.

When I say “moderates” and “neoliberals” I am classifying politicians, many of whom are in powerful positions among the Democratic Party, who claim to take the middle road of American politics. I will discuss later in this thesis what exactly that “middle road” entails regarding political policy, but a large part of these political ideas rests on the idea of pragmatism. This school of thought encourages compromise and working with conservatives to draft legislation on many issues, with most being related to sustaining the free trade model that has dominated American economics for decades and on issues relating to the national debt. A common consensus among political scholars is that moderates are becoming increasingly unpopular in American politics, in both the Republican and Democratic parties. The 2016 Presidential Election, which saw a Democratic Socialist Senator from Vermont, Bernard Sanders, running on a grassroots campaign with the theme of economic and socially progressive populism, run a strong second place campaign for the Democratic nomination, was seen as proof that political moderates no longer had the influence and power they once had.³

What progressives, like Senator Sanders, argue for is a continuation of Progressive era policies regarding increased taxation on the ultra wealthy in society, more stringent government regulation of big businesses and Wall Street, and creating a more egalitarian society. What sets them apart from moderates and neoliberals is their resistance to running government through technocratic means and constant compromises with conservatives. They argue that liberals who compromise with conservatives harm the progressive movement and its ideals as much as conservative policies themselves. On issues such as climate change, healthcare, and foreign policy, progressives tend to lump moderate Democrats in the same political sphere as moderate Republicans and will fiercely resist signing onto legislation that they do not deem progressive enough. Following the path of the Republican Party, which became embroiled in a populist uprising in 2010 called the “Tea Party movement,” the 2018 midterm elections saw scores of progressives elected to Congress who were either Democratic Socialists or sympathetic to many of its causes. These new progressive Democrats almost immediately began resisting the Democratic caucus in the House of Representatives, which was/is dominated by members with moderate ideologies.⁴

The 1972 Presidential Election

The nomination of George McGovern, a progressive and popular senator out of the overwhelmingly conservative state of South Dakota, for the presidency under the banner of the Democratic Party is what many historians and political scientists consider the low point of progressivism in the United States. McGovern’s catastrophic defeat at the hands of an incumbent President Nixon in the 1972 election was used as evidence by Democratic moderates that pushing too far left would damage the Democratic Party in the long run and push the

³“Hillary Clinton on flip-flop charge: 'I'm a progressive, but I'm a progressive who likes to get things done,'" *The Week*, October 13, 2015, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://theweek.com/speedreads/583116/hillary-clinton-flipflop-charge-im-progressive-but-im-progressive-who-likes-things-done>.; Molly Ball, “Moderates: Who Are They, and What Do They Want?” *The Atlantic*, May 15, 2014, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/moderates-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want/370904/>.; Alan Greenblatt, “Moderates Are 'Politically Homeless.' Does Either Party Want Them?” *Governing*, March 27, 2019, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-moderate-voters-trump-centrists-2020.html>.; Jennifer Steinhauer, “Weighing the Effect of an Exit of Centrists,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2012, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/us/politics/pool-of-moderates-in-congress-is-shrinking.html>.; Wayne LeMieux, *The Democrats' New Path* (Charleston: BookSurge Publishing, 2006).; Nicol C. Rae, *Southern Democrats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).; Bell and Stanley, “*Making Sense of American Liberalism*,” 1-13.

⁴Win McCormack, “Republican Phantasmagoria,” *New Republic*, July 1, 2020, accessed September 29, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=143665478&site=ehost-live>.; David A. Graham, “How Far Have the Democrats Moved to the Left?” *Atlantic*, November 5, 2018, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/11/democratic-voters-move-leftward-range-issues/574834/>.

country further to the right. Policies in the 1972 Democratic Party Platform, such as: “a guaranteed job for all”; “progressive taxation”; ceasing all support to repressive governments from Greece to South Africa; immediately ending the Vietnam Conflict; and guaranteeing health-care for all citizens to name a few were seen by many political scientists as too far left to appeal to a broad spectrum of American voters.⁵ McGovern’s campaign has since been used as a warning by many Democrats and political strategists of the dangers of running a nationwide progressive campaign. James P. Pinkerton, a contributing editor for *The American Conservative*, and many other political observers made the case that the “McGovernization phenomenon,” which is defined as running too far left to be electable, was on track to take over the current Democratic Party and doom its 2020 nominee Joseph R. Biden.⁶ While the 2020 election is not the current topic of discussion, it is notable that many political observers continue to draw more connections between the birth of modern progressivism and its current embodiment.

On the other hand, progressives within the Democratic Party put McGovern’s historic loss less on himself as a candidate and more on the sheer amount of difficulties and hurdles his campaign faced against a president who had the power of the incumbency and who was known for his political skills. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. states in his book, *History of American Presidential Elections: 1789-1984*, that McGovern’s presidential campaign was taking in water the moment the Democratic primaries ended, culminating with Democratic officials pointing fingers at each other after being thoroughly routed in the general election. Party officials blamed McGovern for alienating key parts of the party’s base at the national convention, blamed his campaign for running an unorganized and unprofessional national campaign, and the big issue being the disastrous Eagleton episode that buried his candidacy as soon as it began.⁷ To sum up the episode in a just manner, the Eagleton episode revolved around McGovern choosing Thomas Eagleton, a young and energetic Democratic senator from Missouri, as his running mate but then having to let him go from the ticket after just 18 days after it was found out that Eagleton had suffered from “nervous exhaustion” and depression earlier in his career and even required shock therapy to help cure him. Eagleton never told the McGovern campaign about this private matter until it was discovered by the press, immediately sparking controversy over whether Eagleton was fit enough to be vice-president. McGovern, “a man widely reputed for his decency” had to “make a choice that few knew how to decide themselves”; even after Eagleton pleaded to stay on the ticket, assuring McGovern that he was medically cleared to be on the campaign trail and handle all necessary duties, McGovern’s campaign team forced him to make what was seen as a cruel decision and take Eagleton off the ticket.⁸ The whole fiasco was a large distraction from the rest of the Democratic National Convention and it hung over McGovern’s head for the rest of the campaign.

These ideological supporters of McGovern who tend to blame factors outside of his personal control for his loss to Nixon also point out that a majority of American society was trending more conservative as a result of the tumultuous sixties. The 1960’s brought great social unrest and dramatic change to the country; from the civil rights movement and the end of Jim Crow Segregation, to the anti-war movement that was engulfing college campuses nationwide, and even including the birth of the “Hippie” movement. These dramatic changes to many Americans “traditional” views of daily life and society were enough to push them directly into Nixon’s arms these historians claim, with a great example being Nixon and his political strategist Kevin Phillip’s “Southern Strategy,”⁹ which would be further explained by Reagan and Bush Sr. advisor Lee Atwater in his infamous 1981 interview on the true purpose behind the “Southern Strategy.”¹⁰ To these historians, there was just no possible way any Democratic campaign could have won against an incumbent Nixon who was essentially running on a “restoring law and order” campaign that acted as a counterrevolution to the chaotic 1960’s and early 70’s.

The 1984 and 88’ Democratic Primaries

⁵Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “1972 Democratic Party Platform,” The American Presidency Project, originally published July 10, 1972, accessed September 6, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273248>.

⁶James P. Pinkerton, “The 2020 Democratic Party Goes Full McGovern,” *The American Conservative*, July 3, 2019, accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-2020-democratic-party-goes-full-mcgvorn/>.

⁷Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr. “1972-1984,” in *History of American Presidential Elections: 1789-1984*, eds. Albert Schweitzer and Fred L. Israel, suppl. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 19.

⁸Joshua M. Glasser, *The Eighteen-Day Running Mate : McGovern, Eagleton, and a Campaign in Crisis* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012), 4-5, accessed September 7, 2020, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.mst.edu/lib/umr-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3420890&ppg=14>.

⁹Jason C. Chavis, “What is the Southern Strategy?” Wisegeek, last modified August 31, 2020, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-southern-strategy.htm>.

¹⁰Lee Atwater, “Exclusive: Lee Atwater’s Infamous 1981 Interview on the Southern Strategy,” The Nation (video), November 13, 2012, accessed September 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_8E3ENrKrQ.

_____ Following the Watergate scandal that engulfed President Nixon's second term shortly after it began, his subsequent resignation as President of the United States, and Jimmy Carter retaking the presidency for the Democratic Party in the 1976 Presidential Election due to low enthusiasm and a post-Watergate malaise that lingered on President Ford, Democrats found themselves at a crossroad in the 1980's. Victory did not last long for Democrats as President Carter suffered a "McGovernesque" loss in the 1980 Presidential Election to the Republican nominee Ronald Reagan, a liberal-turned-conservative former actor and former governor of California. Most historians consider the 1980 election as a turning point in American political history, where a majority of American voters began a shift towards more moderate and conservative political ideologies and policies, which greatly impacted both the Republican and Democratic parties for the next thirty years.

After suffering their second electoral blowout in three election cycles, the Democratic Party headed into the 1984 election season looking to establish its identity in an ever changing American society. Many members found their identity by attempting to retreat back to the middle of the political spectrum, all while attempting to diversify their electorate as President Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party continued to dominate the white vote, especially in the south. The Democrats nominated Walter Mondale as their candidate for president in 1984, who was perceived as a safe choice who had widespread support among Democrats as Carter's vice president, especially among black voters who were becoming the party's most important bloc of voters. Mondale did not cruise to the nomination because he had to fend off a strong primary challenge from Senator Gary Hart of Colorado and more surprisingly a challenge from Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jackson was a civil rights leader, a friend and close advisor to Martin Luther King Jr., and Baptist minister who made a name for himself in the 1984 Democratic Primary by winning over three million votes.

Jackson ran a campaign fueled by his so-called "rainbow coalition" of minorities and disadvantaged communities, and it was a campaign that used his energetic campaign speeches, constant media appearances, and youthful enthusiasm to push for a more diverse Democratic Party.¹¹ While Jackson did not win the nomination, and did not receive major concessions in regards to the Democratic Party Platform, he did get the opportunity to give a primetime speech at the Democratic National Convention. His speech, where he claimed the United States represented "a rainbow" where everyone is "precious in God's sight," and New York Governor Mario Cuomo's keynote address to the convention, where he called out President Reagan repeatedly for ignoring the downtrodden members of American society by claiming that "this nation is more a 'Tale of Two Cities' than it is just a 'Shining City on a Hill'," electrified the convention.¹² By using religious imagery against President Reagan to highlight rampant inequality that remained in the United States, even as Reagan himself ran an unabashedly "pro-Christian" presidential campaign, was seen as a sign by historians and political scientists that the Democratic Party had chosen a future where they would be a socially tolerant and open party, but one of economic moderation and restraint. Even after nominating the first woman to a major party ticket as his vice presidential nominee, U.S. Representative Geraldine Ferraro of New York, Mondale lost to Reagan in an electoral blowout, winning only his home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

The 1988 Democratic Primary nominated former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis (who endorsed Mondale in 84') for president, with Jackson once again running for the nomination as well, but this time achieving a strong second place finish behind Dukakis. No other candidates who ran mounted any serious challenge to Dukakis (or Jackson for that matter), but failed candidates like Senator Al Gore of Tennessee and Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, would shape the party for decades to come after this election. The Jackson campaign believed that he had earned the vice presidential spot on the Dukakis ticket after coming in a strong second place in the primary, but Dukakis refused and picked Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas instead to add a southerner to the ticket. The progressive wing of the party was once again refused a chance at the spotlight, but in typical Jackson fashion he claimed he was not angry at being passed over for vice president because he was "too controlled...too clear...too mature to be angry" and vowed to continue to fight for the issues he campaigned on until Dukakis was officially nominated at the Democratic National Convention that year in Atlanta.¹³ Jackson's socially progressive ideals and ideas of economic populism had gained steam, but were again not enough to lift him to the nomination. Instead, Dukakis followed the path of three out of the last four Democratic nominees and got blown out in November by

¹¹Schlesinger, *History of American Presidential Elections*, 289-90.

¹²Douglas B. Harris and Lonce H. Bailey, *The Democratic Party: Documents Decoded* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014), 177 and 184, accessed September 14, 2020, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.mst.edu/lib/umr-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1812337>.

¹³Jesse Jackson, "Jackson Reaction to Dukakis' VP Announcement" (video of press conference), C-SPAN, July 12, 1988, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?3340-1/jackson-reaction-dukakis-vp-announcement>.

George H.W. Bush, who had been Reagan's vice president for eight years. One of the more memorable moments of his campaign did not even come from him, but Bentsen with his "you're no Jack Kennedy" quip during the Vice-Presidential Debate against Senator Dan Quayle of Indiana.¹⁴ Although Dukakis was painted as "too liberal" repeatedly by the Bush campaign and members of the media after his loss, his policies were not far off from the Democratic mainstream, leading many political insiders to believe that the Democratic Party needed new faces, not necessarily new policies, to represent the party on the national level.

The "third way" and a battle for the Democratic Party's identity

That new face was the one who introduced Dukakis at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. Clinton, a young and upstart southern governor who believed his party was going too far left to remain relevant nationally, pitched a "third way."¹⁵ This "third way" was a path down the middle of the American political spectrum, being tolerant and relatively open on social issues, but pro-growth, pro-free trade, and fiscally responsible on economic policies. But, as Christopher J. Georges wrote in August of 1992, just months before the presidential election between Clinton, President Bush, and independent businessman and billionaire Ross Perot, "Thirty-nine of the 49 specific proposals in his [Clinton's] National Economic Strategy are virtually identical to policies proposed in 1988 by Michael S. Dukakis."¹⁶ Political scientists see Clinton's nomination as the beginning of the Democratic Party's shift towards neoliberalism and the Republican Party's shift towards more right wing conservatism, with conservatives blaming Bush's moderate stances on many social issues and his pro-trade and pro-globalist economic policies for his loss to Clinton (while ignoring the fact that Perot garnered almost nineteen percent of the popular vote, which surely undercut Bush). From then on the Democratic Party won the popular vote in every presidential election, except 2004, while nominating candidates for president that fit the "New Democrat" model that was established in 1997 based on Clinton's "third way."¹⁷

Even with the election of the first African-American president in United States history in 2008, Barack H. Obama, who ran on campaign themes of "Hope" and "Change," and excited many progressives who thought he would push the Democratic Party to the left after beating Democratic establishment favorite Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, who happened to be Bill Clinton's wife and the former First Lady and presumptive heir to his "third way" legacy; but progressives were left disappointed once again when President Obama declared himself to be "a New Democrat."¹⁸ President Obama served two terms in office, all while watching the Republican Party being rapidly consumed by the Tea Party movement that formed in the 2010 midterm elections, whose ideology was rabidly anti-government and staunchly fiscally and socially conservative on almost all issues and policies. But Democrats did not follow their Republican counterparts and go off into their own political extremes on the left, instead choosing to continue the "third way," with former President Clinton even introducing President Obama at the 2012 Democratic National Convention by giving a rousing speech that helped send the Obama campaign into the November election with the momentum of a unified party.¹⁹

Finally, in 2016 progressives had their national champion in Senator Bernard "Bernie" Sanders of Vermont, who for years since being elected as Mayor of Burlington, Vermont in 1980, to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1991 as an independent, and then to the United States Senate in 2007, had been a vocal advocate for Democratic Socialist policies and had never officially associated himself with the Democratic Party until he ran for their nomination for president in 2016.²⁰ The 2016 Democratic Primary was seen by almost all political insiders to have been decided years before it had even begun, as it was widely known that Hillary Clinton, who had just served as

¹⁴"Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy," Wikipedia, last modified September 8, 2020, accessed September 15, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senator_you're_no_Jack_Kennedy.

¹⁵BBC News, "UK Politics: What is the Third Way?" BBC Online Network, September 27, 1999, accessed September 15, 2020, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/458626.stm>.

¹⁶Christopher J. Georges, "The Clinton Plan, Via Dukakis," *New York Times*, August 24, 1992, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/24/opinion/the-clinton-plan-via-dukakis.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹⁷"About Us," New Democratic Coalition, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/about-us>.

¹⁸Carol E. Lee and Jonathan Martin, "Obama: 'I am a New Democrat'," Politico, March 10, 2009, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/03/obama-i-am-a-new-democrat-019862#ixzz3o9jvkSUe>.

¹⁹Jeff Zeleny and Mark Landler, "Clinton Delivers Impassioned Plea for Obama Second Term," *New York Times*, September 6, 2012, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/us/politics/clinton-delivers-stirring-plea-for-obama-second-term.html>.

²⁰"What is Democratic Socialism?" Democratic Socialists of America, accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.dsusa.org/about-us/what-is-democratic-socialism/>.

President Obama's Secretary of State for four years, would run for the nomination and no notable figures from within the party had decided to challenge her. Even when Senator Sanders jumped into the race to seek the nomination as an independent, most people in the country had never heard of him before and thought nothing of his candidacy. What transpired next was a slugfest that absolutely no one in the political world saw coming, with Sanders winning twenty-three primaries and caucuses and gathering over thirteen million votes over the course of a primary that took the Clinton campaign all the way to California, the last state to cast their ballots, in order to officially clinch the nomination. Sanders ran an unabashedly left campaign that focused on progressive issues such as universal healthcare, ending many free trade agreements with other countries, making all public universities tuition free, and more policies that were far more progressive than anything McGovern ran on back in 1972.

Although he lost the primary, he pushed Clinton to the left on many issues throughout the campaign and pushed many progressive ideals and policies firmly into the mainstream. Clinton's loss in the 2016 Presidential Election to political outsider and billionaire Donald J. Trump, who ran a similarly energetic and populist campaign to clinch the Republican nomination over countless establishment figures from the party, convinced progressives that Sanders would have won the presidency if he had been the nominee. This statement was supported by a group of left-leaning activists who wrote *Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis*, which was an analysis of what went wrong for the party in their disastrous 2016 election; this analysis was not sponsored by the Democratic Party, as the party refused to undertake their own autopsy like the Republican Party did in 2012 following their loss to President Obama.

Autopsy concluded that the Democratic Party had grown too close to their big money donors and had neglected the blue-collar workers that had once been the backbone of the party; this statement was further confirmed when Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York even stated publicly in July of 2016 that "For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia."²¹ The analysis further concluded that along with blue-collar workers, Democrats had taken minority voters, particularly African Americans, for granted and failed to energize and mobilize them in the months leading up to the election. This was also the case for young voters and progressives who both overwhelmingly supported Sanders in the primary but failed to show up at the polls for Clinton. To progressives, the Democratic Party had grown complacent and refused to court new voters or change their electoral strategies, and the fact that the party put more effort into courting disenfranchised Republican voters than traditional working class voters, who were so instrumental in carrying the Obama ticket in 2008 and 2012, was just another sign that the party did not intend to listen to any new ideas from the left.²²

The results from the 2016 election, and the subsequent analysis of its results, had progressives mobilize like never before to elect more of themselves to Congress and to eventually win the presidency. This energy carried into the 2018 midterm elections as Democrats retook the House of Representatives and elected several openly progressive and Democratic Socialist candidates to national office, many being women of color, who were/are dubbed "The Squad" by both conservative and liberal political insiders.²³ Although newly elected New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democratic Socialist and a member of "The Squad," dominated political headlines along with the other openly progressive candidates who won seats to the House of Representatives in 2018, a majority of the new Democratic seats came from moderate candidates who dominated in the suburbs. For Democrats, the gains they made in the 2018 midterms followed a similar path to how the Republicans retook the House of Representatives in 2010, which relied on candidates running as a check on the incumbent president and running on healthcare. Personal animosity for President Trump fueled millions of Democratic voters to turn out for down ballot Democratic candidates in local, state, and federal races, but just as the Tea Party mobilized in 2010 in response to the Affordable Care Act, Democrats and dissatisfied Republican voters mobilized in 2018 to save the landmark healthcare law. While protecting and expanding access to healthcare was the single most important policy on the minds of Democratic voters, both progressives and moderates had very different

²¹ Jim Geraghty, "Chuck Schumer: Democrats Will Lose Blue-Collar Whites but Gain in the Suburbs," *National Review*, July 28, 2016, accessed October 19, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/chuck-schumer-democrats-will-lose-blue-collar-whites-gain-suburbs/>.

²² William Greider, "What Killed the Democratic Party?" *Nation*, November 20, 2017, accessed October 19, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=126012029&site=ehost-live>; "The Democratic Party in Crisis," *Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis*, October 2017, accessed October 19, 2020, <https://democraticautopsy.org/democratic-party-in-crisis/>.

²³ Kate Sullivan, "Here are the 4 congresswomen known as 'The Squad' targeted by Trump's racist tweets," *CNN*, July 16, 2019, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/15/politics/who-are-the-squad/index.html>.

ideas on how to achieve that policy. Progressives championed Medicare for All, a signature policy from Sanders' 2016 campaign, which guaranteed healthcare for all citizens; moderates insisted that protecting the Affordable Care Act from dissolution from a newly expanded Republican majority in the Senate, and then expanding its coverage opportunities for millions of Americans would suffice. With a Republican Senate and Democratic House, the current battle between these two factions over not just healthcare, but responses to climate change, taxation, and countless other policies will continue as an ideological one rather than a legislative one as no major bills from the House have a chance at becoming law in the current political climate.²⁴

Notable progressive politicians throughout the country saw the massive gains they had made on a statewide and national scale in the midterm elections and decided to carry this newfound momentum into the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary. Just as the 2018 midterms mirrored the Republican Tea Party revolution in 2010, resulting in massive gains for the party out of power including many ideologically extreme candidates, the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary similarly mirrored the fractious and wide open Republican Presidential Primary in 2016. The Republicans fielded an unprecedented seventeen major candidates for the party's nomination in 2016 that resulted in a fierce battle over the party's entire identity and future; in 2020 the Democratic Party expanded on that number with twenty-nine major candidates. Riding the high of his surprisingly strong primary run in 2016 and relishing the influence that he now held over the Democratic Party, Sanders decided to run for the nomination again in 2020, but this time it was more than just one candidate who stood in his way for the nomination.²⁵ Former Vice President Joseph R. Biden entered the contest after deciding to stay out of the 2016 race, representing the moderate lane of the party and promising that "nothing would fundamentally change"²⁶ if he was elected and that he would revert the party and its policies back to the Obama era. Biden did not have the moderate lane to himself however, as he had to fight off strong challenges from the young Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg; Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar; California Senator Kamala Harris; and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Sanders did not have an easy path towards consolidating the progressive vote either, having to compete with one his closest friends in the Senate, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, for the progressive vote. While not a Democratic Socialist like Sanders, Warren had been among the most outspoken progressive members of congress since her election to the Senate in 2012, and before that as President Obama's pick to supervise the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in 2010.

Sanders and Warren continuously laid out detailed policy proposals that addressed almost every issue in American society through progressivism, and for a while it looked like progressives would finally be able to mount a presidential campaign with either Sanders or Warren at the helm. While Biden consistently polled as the national front runner for the nomination throughout 2019 and early 2020, strong debate performances from Sanders and Warren, to go along with both candidates raking in massive amounts of grassroots donations from individual donors (both candidates swore off of taking donations from super PAC's), put both of them within striking distance of the former vice president as the Iowa Caucus loomed in February. After winning the popular vote in Iowa, and narrowly trailing Buttigieg in pledged delegates, combined with a disappointing fourth place finish for Biden, Sanders immediately became the front-runner for the nomination. After winning the New Hampshire primary and Nevada caucus, to go along with Warren never placing higher than third in any of the races up to this point, Sanders was on track to win the nomination, but three things would ultimately block his path: an end to the non-aggression pact

²⁴ Rachel Bitecofer, "Fear Factor," *New Republic*, March 2020, accessed October 24, 2020, [http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=141536514&site=ehost-live](http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=141536514&site=ehost-live;).; Molly Ball, "Nation Divided," *TIME Magazine*, November 19, 2018, accessed October 24, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=132892401&site=ehost-live>.; John Nichols, "The AOC Effect," *Nation*, September 10, 2018, accessed October 24, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=131269017&site=ehost-live>.; Michael Sainato, "A PROGRESSIVE TIDE: The So-Called Blue Wave Is Powered by Candidates Pulling the Democratic Party to the Left," *Progressive* 82, no. 5 (October/November 2018): 21-24, accessed October 24, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=132008346&site=ehost-live>.; Peter J.S. Duncan, "Political alternatives on the Western Left: Podemos, Syriza, Sanders and Corbyn," in *Socialism, Capitalism and Alternatives: Area Studies and Global Theories*, edited by Peter J.S. Duncan and Elisabeth Schimpfössl (London: UCL Press, 2019), 181-212, accessed October 24, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh1dx77.17>.; Gary C. Jacobson, "Extreme Referendum: Donald Trump and the 2018 Midterm Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* 134, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 9-38, accessed October 24, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12866>.

²⁵ Taegan Goddard, "Sanders Is Most Popular Senator," Taegan Goddard's Political Wire, January 16, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://politicalwire.com/2020/01/16/sanders-is-most-popular-senator/>.

²⁶ Igor Derysh, "Joe Biden to rich donors: "Nothing would fundamentally change" if he's elected," *Salon*, June 19, 2019, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2019/06/19/joe-biden-to-rich-donors-nothing-would-fundamentally-change-if-hes-elected/>.

between his campaign and Warren's; the African-American community overwhelmingly supporting Biden; and the rest of the moderate field of candidates giving their support to Biden after the Super Tuesday contests.

Starting shortly before the Iowa Caucus and accelerating after dismal performances in New Hampshire and Nevada, Warren had begun to attack and differentiate herself from Sanders as Super Tuesday loomed, labeling herself as someone who can actually “get real stuff done.”²⁷ There had been signs for months that this makeshift non-aggression pact was nearing its expiration, with Sanders campaign staffers told to trash Warren when talking with voters, to Warren claiming that Sanders had told her in a closed door meeting that a woman could not win the presidency, but the moment that Warren began to publicly attack Sanders the progressive voting base became fractured beyond repair.²⁸ Sanders' campaign suffered another hit when Biden received the endorsement of Democratic Representative Jim Clyburn from South Carolina, long known as the kingmaker of Democratic politics in the state, just days before the state's crucial primary. Biden won the state handedly and gave his campaign a much needed boost going into Super Tuesday. Biden was easily winning the African-American vote in the polls going into South Carolina but didn't receive any initial gains from this key voting bloc due to the first three voting states having African-American voters make up less than ten percent of the total voting population. With countless states coming up on Super Tuesday with large percentages of African-American voters, combined with newfound momentum from his first win of the primary season, Biden went on to win ten of the fourteen states who cast their ballots on Super Tuesday.

Immediately following Biden's strong showing on Super Tuesday Buttigieg, Bloomberg, Klobuchar, and other candidates who had previously dropped out of the race endorsed Biden; this was combined with Warren dropping out of the race shortly after and refusing to endorse either Biden or Sanders, which was seen as a stinging blow to Sanders. Biden proceeded to rout Sanders throughout the next month of contests, including in Michigan where Sanders had stunned Secretary Clinton in 2016 by winning the contest against all odds, until the Vermont senator bowed out of the primary in early April. With Sanders' exit from the primary, the path was clear for Biden to clinch the nomination, which he officially did at the Democratic National Convention on August 20, 2020. Biden chose his former competitor, Senator Kamala Harris, as his running mate for the general election against President Trump who was renominated as the Republican's nominee for president.

Just as Sanders had done in 2016, him and Warren had pushed the Biden ticket further to the left compared to where the former vice-president had started at the onset of the primary. Even before effectively clinching the nomination, Biden had endorsed key policies from both Warren and Sanders, providing an olive branch to the millions of progressive supporters of the two candidates and assuring them that he would not leave them behind if he won the presidency.²⁹ Nonetheless, progressives had once again failed to win the Democratic nomination and with it the presidency.

During the general election campaign Biden spoke to Wisconsin voters who were concerned about his tax proposals and whether he was in favor of socialism, to which he replied that he “beat the socialist...I am not a socialist.”³⁰ Even as the Biden/Harris ticket championed many progressive policy proposals that the former vice-president adopted from his former rivals, it was clear to all that he had to distance himself from Sanders while on the campaign trail to further avoid catching the “radical socialist” label that was being thrown at him from

²⁷ Gregory Krieg, “Elizabeth Warren's quiet campaign against Bernie Sanders,” CNN, February 21, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/21/politics/elizabeth-warren-bernie-sanders-new-attacks/index.html>.

²⁸ Astead W. Herndon and Jonathan Martin, “Warren Says Sanders Told Her a Woman Could Not Win the Presidency,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/us/politics/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-woman-president.html>.; Julia Manchester, “Warren attacks Bernie at debate, says his team 'trashed' her,” *The Hill*, February 25, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/484636-warren-attacks-bernie-at-debate-says-his-team-trashed-her>.; Ledyard King, Rebecca Morin and Groppe Maureen, “Elizabeth Warren's exit doesn't mean Bernie Sanders gets her progressive supporters, experts say,” *USA TODAY*, March 5, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/03/05/elizabeth-warrens-exit-does-help-campaign-sanders-biden/4963378002/>.

²⁹ Igor Bobic, “Joe Biden Endorses Warren And Sanders Plans Ahead Of Democratic Debate,” *Huffington Post*, March 15, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/biden-sanders-warren-plans-debate_n_5e6e8a0ec5b6747ef11f553e?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5ib20v&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAKs3JgeoaZ4ldRZcCozVLCRmZKYEcYuvZq0ut8p6SmXlclutUUXYA8KhjSP52xqq7Hx-Z94UqqUeCUE2PVYct ISNLWuzKFQLj 6U8tmE-7w5UkAaiN47op5IHlqWfSzB5Q1E-7nd6iYofv4g-K7kk GlzA7llkEguZZsN5q4hG.

³⁰ Sam Dorman, “Joe Biden blasts Bernie in pitch to Wisconsin voters: 'I beat the socialist',” *Fox News*, September 22, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/biden-bernie-sanders-beat-the-socialist>.

President Trump and the Republican Party. This uneasy alliance between progressives, moderate Democrats, independents, and disaffected Republicans held for Biden heading into election day however, with himself and Senator Harris being declared victors from most news agencies on November 7th, 2020 after days of waiting due to record voter turnout and over one-hundred million votes being cast ahead of election day, most by mail.³¹ But while President Biden took back the White House for Democrats, the Democratic Party as a whole massively underperformed expectations regarding retaking the Senate and either holding or even expanding their majority in the House, which has already led to finger pointing between progressives and the moderate Democratic establishment.

The party managed to barely reclaim control of the Senate via a tie-breaking vote from Vice President Harris after achieving a net pickup of only one senate seat on election day and two seats in the Georgia runoff elections on January 20th, even after there were several vulnerable incumbent Republicans in crucial swing states that were ripe for defeat. For the House, Democrats lost fifteen seats, for a net loss of twelve seats (they flipped three themselves); many of these Republican pickups came from newly elected Democrats in swing districts that President Trump won in 2016, Democrats took back in 2018, then were reclaimed by the president in 2020 when he was once again back on the ballot. The ideological debates and conflicts that had been occurring within the Democratic Party since the new wave of progressives were elected in 2018, but had been quietly pushed aside during the 2020 election cycle for the sake of party unity, immediately roared to life just days after election day. Newly reelected Representative Abigail Spanberger from Virginia, a moderate, blasted the Democratic Party's election strategy, saying on a conference call with other party members that the election had been "a failure" while blaming progressives for so many moderate Democrats losing their seats. She specifically targeted progressives' attachment to the Black Lives Matter movement, their embrace of Democratic Socialism, and other left wing policy proposals as reasons that the Republicans were able to tie these "radical" proposals to moderates in conservative districts that President Trump carried in 2016 and again in 2020.³² This view was challenged by Representative Ocasio-Cortez, who was also reelected, who blamed the party's lack of enthusiasm, lack of new and bold ideas to sell to the American people, and these ousted representatives' failure to invest in online advertising and other modern avenues of campaigning for their loss. She also added that if the incoming Biden Administration ignored progressive voters, and if the Democratic Party continued to attack progressive members of congress either privately or publicly, then the party would continue to lose elections and risk permanently fracturing the broad coalition that delivered Democrats the House in 2018 and the White House in 2020.³³

The 2020 election cycle, from the beginning of the Democratic Presidential Primary to the last congressional and senate races, has given the Democratic Party a muddled picture of its future. It is undeniable that even as a moderate Democrat himself, Joe Biden ran on "the most progressive platform of any Democratic nominee in the modern history of the party" according to Waleed Shahid, communications director for Justice Democrats.³⁴ Yet even after Biden's strong win in the presidential race, winning the same amount of electoral college votes as President Trump in 2016 (three-hundred and six), down ballot Democrats failed to keep up with the top of the ticket.

As I previously mentioned, most of these incumbent House members and several candidates for the Senate lost their seats or races in states that Biden won. This can be attributed to moderate Republican voters and right-leaning independents deciding to vote for Biden, yet deciding to remain conservative for the rest of their ticket. This is combined with the fact that every member of the House who supported Medicare for All, arguably the keystone policy of progressives throughout the country, won reelection, whereas many moderate Democrats who refused to endorse the policy lost their reelection bids, with many of them being freshmen representatives in swing districts.³⁵ So do progressives need the Democratic Party for its national electoral infrastructure, using it to broadcast

³¹ Josh Boak and Hannah Fingerhut, "How did Joe Biden do it? Examine the wide coalition that powered victory," *Billings Gazette*, November 7, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, https://billingsgazette.com/news/national/govt-and-politics/how-did-joe-biden-do-it-examine-the-wide-coalition-that-powered-victory/article_9dbca3d0-c8c2-5aae-849b-2b19761a5fd9.html.

³² "Spanberger criticizes Democrats' strategy in caucus call," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/spanberger-criticizes-democrats-strategy-in-caucus-call/2020/11/05/6ec2b368-258a-4061-9738-d83ee8971c3c_video.html?itid=ik_inline_manual_7.

³³ Astead W. Herndon, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Biden's Win, House Losses, and What's Next for the Left," *New York Times*, November 7, 2020, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/07/us/politics/aoc-biden-progressives.html>.

³⁴ Peter Beinart, "Biden Goes Big Without Sounding Like It," *Atlantic*, August 3, 2020, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/joe-bidens-big-bold-and-very-quiet-agenda/614878/>.

³⁵ Jon Queally, "Every. Single. One.!: Ocasio-Cortez Notes Every Democrat Who Backed Medicare for All Won Reelection in 2020," *Common Dreams*, November 7, 2020, accessed November 9, 2020,

their vision to America in the hope that the movement continues to catch fire and grow, or does this latest failure by Democratic leadership to gain control of the upper chamber and hold their strong lead in the lower prove that they need an influx of new progressive ideas and diversity?

At the moment, that's an impossible question to answer due to the obvious fact that President Trump was an incumbent president like no other; one that was so universally polarizing throughout the entire political spectrum that millions of conservatives and right-leaning independents decided to vote for a divided government over giving President Trump a second term and full control of congress once again. Biden's win should not be seen as a win for moderation and centrism, nor should this election be seen as a mandate for the Democratic Party to govern with no resistance; this election was a temporary political reset for the nation. Sanders and Warren may have pushed the Democratic Party further to the left once again, but they could not win the primary, showing the nation that the party was willing to compromise with progressives on certain policies but would refuse to tear down the entire system and start from scratch. Progressives have gotten closer and closer to reaching the pinnacle of power in the United States, and with a reeling Republican Party that now has to determine what its identity will be in a post-Trump age, along with a Democratic Party that has once again failed to gain a mandate from the American people to govern unopposed, the next two election cycles will be key to determining whether their bold vision for America is here to stay or if it was just a fluke born from levels of populism and energy never before seen in modern American politics.

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After analyzing progressive history in American politics from 1972 to today, I can say that American society is once again at a crossroads, and the 2020 election results prove it. Americans voted out arguably the most polarizing president in modern American history, who increased his vote total compared to his first election (first time that has ever happened in a losing bid), for a third way Democrat, yet refused to give him a strong mandate to govern by voting to reelect countless Republicans who promised to challenge the incoming president every step of the way. The awakening of populism and hyper-partisanship in the 2016 elections, that impacted both progressives and conservatives equally, ensure that no party or movement will ever truly have total control over government again. In prior election cycles one party would sweep an election and have the tendency to remain in power for multiple election cycles in a row, and then the power dynamic would flip to the other and follow the same pattern, but that pattern has been shattered. Populist progressives have more influence over Democratic leadership than ever before, while the Republican Party seemingly has an obligation to continue the policies and rhetoric of former President Trump or face his wrath in their future reelection bids. No longer will vast swaths of undecided voters be persuaded to change their previous voting tendencies and vote for the other party, now most of American society has already made up their minds on who to vote for in the next election cycle, so the new political strategy for both progressives, conservatives, and moderate voters from either party is to mobilize as many voters from their own base as possible. Former President Trump did not lose reelection because undecided voters chose Biden over him, he lost because his own base was out mobilized by the Democratic base and its coalition of progressives and moderates. Vast swaths of American society have chosen to forgo communicating with the other side of the political aisle, instead preferring to make sure that their own aisle has more voters than the other on election day. Progressives in Congress will have to decide whether it's worth working with the moderates on the other side of the aisle in their own party, or if their better off achieving their long standing policy goals by following the rest of American society and just voting out the rest of the moderates in the party by mobilizing their own voters in future primary elections, which may just spell the end of political cooperation and bipartisanship in American politics for the near future.

<https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/11/07/every-single-one-ocasio-cortez-notes-every-democrat-who-backed-medicare-all-won>.

³⁶ Peter Suderman, "Joe Biden Won the Democratic Primary. But Bernie Sanders Won the Party." Reason, June 2020, accessed November 7, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=142789111&site=ehost-live>; Sam Pizzigati, "How Much Is Too Much?" Nation, December 2, 2020, accessed November 7, 2020, <http://libproxy.mst.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=139659398&site=ehost-live>; Jim Tankersley and Thomas Kaplan, "One Guaranteed Winner in the Democratic Primary: Plans to Tax the Rich," *New York Times*, February 23, 2020, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/22/us/politics/democratic-wealth-tax-plans.html?searchResultPosition=1>; Lisa Lerer, "Obama Says Average American Doesn't Want to 'Tear Down System'," *New York Times*, May 5, 2020, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/15/us/politics/barack-obama-2020-dems.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

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