

# Reflections on the Election

November 21, 2016



Post-election left analyses have accurately identified many of the immediate causes for our current debacle. Voter suppression, the Electoral College, the Democratic Party, the Clinton campaign, Hillary Clinton, labor leaders, hacked emails, FBI chief James Comey, Democratic primary voters who voted for Clinton, minority voters who didn't turn out in sufficient numbers — the list goes on. And all of these deserve blame. But I've seen very little self-reflection from the left. There have been some vigorous defenses of left actions, but little self-criticism and little to suggest that the same mistakes won't be repeated again.

Bad enough that we face a catastrophe. Let us at least learn some things from it. In what follows I offer some thoughts on left arguments and positions that I encountered many times over the past months in conversations, in email exchanges, in left media, and on left listserves.

1.

The left has a tendency to “know” things based on general Marxist principles. Yes, Marxism — and social theory more generally — have a lot to teach us. But we need to be more cautious about concluding on the basis of theory that X is impossible.

Two decades ago I took it as axiomatic that regimes don't give up power unless they are forced to do so. (I would often quote Frederick Douglass's “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”) So I was absolutely flabbergasted when the Soviet Union imploded. To be sure, many of the leading apparatchiks did not actually concede power, moving smoothly from commissar to oligarch. But had my theoretical blinders not prevented me and so many others on the left from anticipating the implosion, we might have been better able to warn about the dangers of the oligarchic transition.

In the same way, I knew that the American political system was deeply undemocratic. The wisdom of one's ideas did not matter if the big money backed your opponent or if the media chose to crush you. So it was a left truism that Trump couldn't win the Republican nomination because the ruling class wouldn't allow it, because Wall Street was funding his opponents, because the media, while covering him, wasn't supporting him. But the left (like most everyone else) was wrong. Our deep understanding of *Capital* didn't help us.

When Sanders started his run within the Democratic Party, I supported him, but I didn't think he had a chance. After all, the resources of the neoliberal party and its corporate backers didn't want him to win. But he received an astounding 43 percent of the vote. He was able to raise enough money from non-corporate sources to be a competitive candidate. Of course, he ultimately lost. But those leftists who said “we knew the powers that be would never let him win” were not engaging in

serious analysis. If the powers that be were so powerful they wouldn't have let him get 10 percent, let alone anything close to 43 percent. After all, the closer the outcome in the primary, the harder it would be for Clinton to win the general election. If a few things had gone a little differently, Sanders might have won. This is not to deny that the odds were stacked against him, that the super-delegates skewed the process, that the DNC had a thumb on the scale. But none of these things guaranteed that Sanders couldn't win — just as Clinton's huge corporate war-chest couldn't guarantee that she would crush him. All those people who said "we knew he couldn't win" probably also "knew" that he couldn't get more than a third of the vote. But he did. The left often acts like the sports fan who declares after team X pulls out a cliffhanger victory that "of course team X was going to win," when clearly it could also have gone the other way.

So when most leftists declared that Clinton could not possibly lose the general election against Trump — the ruling class wouldn't allow it — their track record as political prognosticators was already suspect. Our failure to predict what came before (no worse than most pundits, but no better either) should have encouraged a certain humility before announcing political certainties.

And of course this misplaced certainty was not just an abstract intellectual error. It had real consequences. When some of us suggested that people engage in strategic voting, many proclaimed that this was silly and unnecessary, because it was certain Clinton was going to win; there was no chance that Trump could prevail. There were many polls, of course, that encouraged this misjudgment. But when Nate Silver of 538.com gave his final prediction of 70% for Clinton, few acted as if they knew this meant Trump had a 30% chance of winning. This is like playing Russian roulette with 2 live bullets in the chambers along with the 4 blanks. (Or, as the same Silver put it a few weeks earlier, when the Cubs were down 3-1 in the World Series, their chance of winning was about the same as Trump's chance of winning the election.)

Polls are not oracles; they are based on what people say at a particular point in time. Polls have sampling error, random and systematic. A few wise leftists warned on the eve of the election that the outcome wasn't certain, that there were still 12 states that were close, including all the ones that turned out to matter on November 8.

Bernie Sanders, running in the Democratic Party, did more to promote a left message, had a bigger impact, and threatened the capitalist status quo more than the left has been able to do over many years through a myriad of third party efforts. Is this an argument against third parties? Does this mean the Democratic Party can be taken over? I don't know. Perhaps the progressive wing of the Democratic Party will grow, and now having discovered that it doesn't need corporate money to win, take over the party. Maybe instead the party will split apart, into progressive and corporate wings. Maybe the 1% will smash the progressive wing and the latter will leave the party to join with the left in a new formation. We're in a new world and it's foolish to insist we know how things will play out. But if we'd like to see left ideas prevail, we're going to have to admit the limits of our knowledge, talk more to people, and certainly not denounce them for failing to behave as dictated in some canonical leftist text.

2.

Following the election, several Stein supporters were quick to declare that Stein did not help Trump win, reminding us that it was a "myth" that Nader had cost Gore the election in 2000.

One can understand why the Greens react so strongly to Democrats who blamed them for Gore's defeat. There were a thousand and one things that Gore and the Democratic Party could have done differently that would have swung the election in his favor. So the Democrats were completely hypocritical to attribute their loss to the behavior of a tiny left when they failed to take positions that

would better attract voters or to run a better campaign.

But like many things in life, election outcomes have multiple causes. If any one of these multiple causes hadn't occurred, the outcome might have been different. Some of those causes we — the left — have no control over and hence we bear no moral responsibility for them. These causes may provide many actionable lessons for others, but not for us. But those causes that we do control — our own behavior — are our moral responsibility and we ought to absorb lessons from them.

Consider an analogy. The Knicks lose a basketball game to the Bulls 100-99. What was the cause of their loss? Every one of the Knicks' missed shots was a cause and every Bulls' basket that the Knicks failed to stop was a cause. The loss had many causes. Now say X was a player on this Knicks team brought in for the final play of the game, and, with the ball at the top of the key, X misses the final shot. Was X *the* cause of the loss? No. There was no single cause. Any one of the other Knicks who missed a shot during the course of the game was also a cause of the loss, as was any Knick defender who had failed to stop a stoppable Bulls shot. It would be tacky for a Knick who missed multiple shots or who played multiple points of sloppy defense to blame X for the loss. But was X *a* cause of the loss? Of course. But for X's missed shot, the Knicks would have won. Now in a basketball game presumably all the players are trying to score, so missed shots are unintentional. No moral blame is appropriate. But what if we discovered that X had acted intentionally? (Perhaps he was pissed off at his coach.) It still would be the case that X was not *the* cause of the loss (if Y hadn't missed a bunch of prior shots, the Knicks would have won, despite X's sabotage). But certainly we would say that X was *a* cause of the loss. And even if it turned out that some other Knick players had also been annoyed at the coach and intentionally missed, X still bears some moral responsibility for the loss. After all, despite all the intentional bad play by some other Knicks, the team would still have won the game if X had made his shot.

In the 2000 election, the results were close enough that if Gore had won either Florida or New Hampshire, he would have been the president. In both these states, the Greens received more votes than Bush's margin over Gore. Thus, the Green voters were a cause of Bush's victory. Certainly they weren't the only cause: the Supreme Court, the Florida Secretary of State, Gore's failure to turn out more voters — these were all more significant causes. But the left had no control over or responsibility for these failings. It was responsible only for its own actions. Now, of course, no one expected such a close outcome. A Green voter in New Hampshire might well have regretted her vote. She didn't realize her vote would matter (which was indeed a highly unlikely outcome) and she didn't intend that her vote would count as it did. So she is guilty only of misjudging, or at worst of acting recklessly — not appreciating the risk she was taking of causing harm.

But a Green voter who says she would vote the same way, even knowing the outcome, did not just misjudge. She is both a cause of Bush's victory, and bears some moral responsibility for it. And those leftists who urged that Green vote and who say that, knowing the outcome, one should have voted that same way, they too bear some moral responsibility.

Some argue that if Green voters hadn't voted Green, they wouldn't have voted at all, or maybe would have voted for some other party, even for Bush. (It's a sad commentary on the educational efficacy of the Green campaign or its potential to become a significant left vehicle for social change that it attracts people to its ranks whose second choice was George Bush.) It is true that if all Green voters would otherwise have been non-voters, then their Green votes had no effect on the outcome. But that doesn't lessen the moral responsibility of these voters. They still had it within their power to change the outcome of the election from the greater evil to the lesser evil and they chose not to do so. They didn't create the horrible choices they faced, and they aren't responsible for what they can't control. But they could control whether they voted.

The 2016 election was extremely close and the outcome had a great many causes, any one of which could have made a difference: widespread voter suppression, Clinton's failure to tack left rather than right during the campaign, Clinton's allocation of resources during the campaign, Comey's late letter about Clinton's email, the email hacking and WikiLeaks's strategically-timed leaks, Clinton's "deplorables" statement, Clinton's failure to address the email issue forthrightly, Clinton voters who stayed home — any of these might have been enough to change the result.

In this 2016 election, it was *not* the case that votes for Green voters cost Clinton the election. The Greens *did* get more votes in Michigan and Wisconsin than Trump's margin of victory — meaning that a few thousand Green voters in these two states had it within their power to move 26 electoral votes from Trump's column to Clinton's. These electoral votes, however, would not have been enough for Clinton to win.

But it was a very close thing. If the Democratic turnout in Pennsylvania had been just a tiny bit larger, the Green vote could have swung this state too, and together with Michigan and Wisconsin, this would have meant the difference between a Clinton win and the current Trump win. Some Green supporters cite the fact that the Green vote didn't tilt the result as confirmation of the wisdom of their position on the election. But there's no reason for us to celebrate the astuteness of a reckless action that turned out not to result in disaster. If you drive drunk across town at 90 miles an hour and avoid an accident, you don't gloat "See, I didn't kill anyone." And we don't praise your action. What is called for is rehab, not gloating.

Left indignation about the "spoiler" charge is perplexing for another reason. When asked directly whether someone should vote for Clinton if their vote would make the difference in the outcome, the vote-Green-everywhere folks said absolutely not. There is no lesser evil, they said. They are different evils, but not lesser and greater evils. Never vote for a bourgeois politician. I can never vote for someone who ... (fill in the blank with some Clinton grotesquery).

3.

In this election if every Stein vote went for Clinton, Clinton still would have lost. But this understates the impact of the Greens and the left. Many left arguments probably helped convince some voters that the difference between the candidates was not great enough to warrant voting. We can't be sure, of course, but it would be odd if the Greens' relentless message didn't influence more than just those who cast ballots for Stein.

Consider, for example, this interview with Jill Stein where the interviewer, Mehdi Hasan of Al Jazeera, agreed that both Trump and Clinton are evil and that the American people would rather not vote for either of them, but asked her what voters should do in a swing state, given that the next president will be Trump or Clinton. First, Stein argued that if all the people concerned about student debt voted for her, she would win the White House in a three-way race. This is literally true, but to put forward this hypothetical as if it had any relevance to the 2016 U.S. presidential election was not playing straight with the American people.

Pressed further, Stein replied that in this election we're not deciding what kind of future we will have, but whether we will have a future at all. Unfortunately, this may be true, given what scientists warn are the consequences of Trump's climate-change-denying energy policies. But that's not what Stein meant. Somehow a vote for her was going to be the difference between our surviving or not. How? Even if the Greens had gotten 5 percent of the vote, and hence federal funds in 2020, that can't lead to a Green Party president until many years after Trumpian energy policies have made climate change irreversible.

Hasan persisted. If a voter in a swing state asks you who the lesser evil is, what do you say? Stein threw back slogans and refused to answer. What if a voter in a swing state asked you should I vote for Clinton to stop Trump? Stein replied “absolutely not.” Even if this allows Trump to take the White House? Stein continued with her stock response: “I will feel terrible if Trump gets elected and I will feel terrible if Clinton gets elected.” Trump and Clinton, she says, are just “two ways to commit suicide.” “I would rather go down fighting than to allow myself to commit suicide by voting for” either Trump or Clinton.

Fortunately there will not be many leftists who are going to go out into the streets today, amid the anti-Trump protests, with banners reading “A Vote for Clinton Would Have Been Suicide” (though, alas, there may be some).

4.

There are three main reasons for the left to run a third party campaign: education, obtaining concessions, and building organizational capacity for the future. The educational purpose is served by telling the truth. When the Democrats try to obscure the systemic harms of capitalism, or try to suggest that tinkering will solve society’s deep-seated problems, it’s important that there be some voices pointing out the limits of liberal reforms and the possibility of real solutions. But there’s an unfortunate tendency in our enthusiasm for making these arguments that we obscure differences (a tendency reinforced by deep anger at the way the Clintonoids treated Sanders during the primaries). Freud wrote about the narcissism of small differences, which helps to explain why left sects so often reserve their greatest vitriol for like-minded groups with whom they have some tiny differences. But there’s a related and equally distorting tendency: minimizing the differences between two opponents. Compared to what is ultimately needed, the differences between two inadequate responses seem irrelevant. But this doesn’t always logically follow. Small differences in policies that have tremendous impact on people’s lives do in fact matter.

It’s important for the left to be honest and not accept the claims about Clinton emanating from the DNC. But it’s equally important not to exaggerate her flaws either. I had countless arguments with comrades who painted her as far more reactionary than she is and who dismissed all her campaign promises as meaningless. Some argued, for example, that Clinton wasn’t really pro-choice (look, she chose Kaine as her vice-president, someone on record supporting the Hyde amendment). Or that the platform on which Clinton was running didn’t matter at all, that she wouldn’t do any of it — as if it was of no consequence whether we’re trying to win \$15 an hour from a victorious candidate who ran on a platform promising it and who heads a party many of whose members were committed to it, versus one who ran on a platform opposing it and whose party was dead set against it. Yes, it was true that Clinton in the 1990s supported mass incarceration — but it was highly misleading to repeat this, as the left often did, as if it allowed us to predict that despite her campaign promises, her platform, and her social base her criminal justice policies in office would be no different from those of a candidate and party that *today* call for law and order, encourage violence against demonstrators, and have the endorsement of the KKK and the nation’s largest police union.

One of Stein’s oft-repeated slogans during the campaign was “What Trump is talking about, Clinton has been doing.” Really? Obama (and perhaps by implication Clinton) has been horrible on immigration. But none of the DREAMers fearing deportation would fail for a minute to see the difference between current policy and what Trump has called for. Obama and Clinton have been inconsistent on the environment, but have they tried to abolish the EPA or scuttle the Paris Climate agreement as Trump has called for? Obama and Clinton have offered only tepid opposition to Israeli settlements, but have they urged — as the Trump campaign has — that Israeli settlements be expanded, or tried to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, as Trump pledged to do? Obama may have killed as many as 800 civilians in his drone strikes, but neither he nor Clinton ever called for

the explicit targeting of terrorists' families as Trump has. (The myopia of those who mistook Trump for a peace candidate has been well refuted.)

I am not suggesting that we shouldn't have criticized Clinton. But if we are running a campaign mainly for its educational value, we need to be honest with people, neither underplaying nor exaggerating her failings. Sanders, of course, also criticized Clinton during the primaries, but what he said was reasonably accurate and he never suggested that she was indistinguishable from Trump.

5.

Even when third party efforts don't win, they can win concessions. A major party fearing defections to a leftwing third party might shift its platform in a progressive direction. Here one has to weigh the likely concessions that will be won against the danger of aiding the greater evil. This calculation is difficult to do objectively, particularly in the heat of a campaign.

Perhaps the Greens might have been able to push Clinton to the left. But their chances of doing so were much reduced by their attitude toward the very real concessions that Sanders got from Clinton on the Democratic platform. The platform called for the abolition of the death penalty, the end of mass incarceration, the goal of establishing a \$15 an hour minimum wage, a public option for health insurance, a call to eliminate Super PACs and overturn Citizens United, recognition of the need to put a price on carbon emissions, and free tuition at public colleges for working class families. None of these were Clinton's initial positions. Of course the Sanders forces didn't get all they wanted — after all, they had lost the primaries. But these were important concessions nonetheless. Yet rather than acknowledging these victories, many on the left insisted that the concessions were meaningless, focusing on the (very real) remaining problems. This made it easier for Clinton to dismiss any further leftward movement: her advisers probably told her "these people won't vote for you unless you adopt the whole Green Party platform."

6.

Some on the left have argued that for the Greens to have only campaigned in safe states was not the way real parties, serious parties, operate. How can you win an election if you skip a bunch of states? But consider: the Democrats didn't campaign in Mississippi. They knew they couldn't win the state, so they decided to concentrate where their efforts would make the greatest difference. Ditto for the Republicans in California. No one suggested that they weren't serious parties because of this. But more importantly, the situation of parties that have a chance to win the election and the parties who are running educational campaigns, trying to build for the future, are rather different. Democrats and Republicans *need* votes in swing states; the Greens do not. For the Greens to get to 5 percent (to obtain federal funding), the votes can come from anywhere. Spending time increasing the number of her voters in New York was a waste of time for Clinton, even though getting these voters might have been easier than getting the same number of additional voters in a swing state. But for Stein, it makes sense to go where the voters are most sympathetic. So in a misguided attempt to act like a real party, Green Party campaign strategy may well have reduced the party's nationwide total.

Moreover, there were surely some people in safe states who would have been inclined to support the Greens but who were so annoyed about Stein's obliviousness to the dangers of a Trump victory that they decided to vote for Clinton. So a safe state strategy might in fact have increased the total Green vote apart from any re-allocation of resources. In retrospect, I regret that I didn't use my safe New Jersey vote more strategically. Instead of just voting for Stein as I did, I should have joined with others and issued a statement saying that we would vote for Stein if and only if she didn't campaign in swing states.

Moreover, if one is trying to act like a real party, a serious party, one doesn't run for president every four years while virtually ignoring the *more than half a million* state and local offices around the country. Sure, if one could win the presidency that would be a good use of left resources. But why wouldn't left time and money and organizing be better spent on the very achievable aim of winning some of those local seats (as the right has long done)? This would be a long range strategy for change. But the Greens have won only half as many seats in local elections from 2011-2016 as they had a decade earlier, 2001-2006; today there are only 138 Green local officeholders in the country, (less than .03 percent of the total), which is what happens when you concentrate on national campaigns. This is not a successful strategy for building over the long term.

And there's one respect in which we don't want the Greens to be like a real party: and that's by misleading campaigning. So when Greens urged people on the eve of the election to vote for them because Stein had been polling between 4-6 percent — this wasn't being straight with people, and it was far more inaccurate than any of the Trump-Clinton predictions.

7.

Leftists of course have to take the long view. Radical change is not on the immediate agenda, so we need to think about enhancing our future prospects. But we need to keep in mind the way the short-term and the long-term interact.

I've already mentioned climate change and how short-run policies might have devastating consequences for the future. But this is not the only area in which concern for the long-run requires concern for the short run as well.

For example, part of the reason Clinton lost was because of the suppressed minority vote. But that suppression was enabled in part by the Supreme Court's 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision that removed the requirement for federal preclearance before changing state voting laws. That case, which will make all social change efforts in the United States more difficult, was decided by a 5-4 majority, including two justices appointed by George W. Bush. So the short-run issue of who would be president from 2001-2009 had a long-term consequence. And now Obama's successor will appoint at least one and perhaps three justices, so the impact of this short-run election will be felt for several decades, not just on voting rights, but on campaign finance, civil liberties, reproductive rights, LGBT rights.

Or consider that the prospects of building an independent political party that can really contest for power will depend in part on the strength of the labor movement, which in turn depends to a substantial degree on labor laws and regulations. But, as an article in *The American Prospect* put it, "things are about to get really ugly for the labor movement." So again our long-term prospects have been severely diminished.

Movements fare better when they are not subject to intense repression. One doesn't have to pretend that Obama or Clinton were model civil libertarians to realize that the coming growth of the authoritarian surveillance state under Trump-Pence and the alt-right will wreak havoc on immigration rights organizations, the Black Lives Matter movement, and most all of our social movements, with long-lasting effects.

And of course, those who *in the short run* are deported or get inadequate medical care because they lose their health coverage or are shot by unchecked cops — they don't have a long run.

8.

The American political system has various structural features that work against the success of third

parties. The Electoral College is deeply problematic, but it doesn't actually work against third parties — it should be eliminated for other reasons. The biggest problem is the winner-take-all plurality voting system. Most U.S. elections, including those for the president, give the office to the candidate who got the most votes, even if that is less than half the votes cast. This system puts third party supporters in a terrible bind. They either vote for their preferred third party, but at the risk of unintentionally helping their less favored major candidate win, or else they vote for their preferred major candidate, who they like much less than one or of the third party candidates.

It is crucial for the left to acknowledge the bind that people are in. How one votes in this situation will depend on the differences between the major party candidates and the likelihood that a third party vote will affect the outcome between them. To insist that people always reject the major party candidates — the bourgeois candidates — or else be a class collaborator; to intone that the lesser of two evils is still evil — is to fail to appreciate the dilemma that people face. As long as we have a winner-take-all plurality voting system, the prospects for building an independent political force are remote. What this means is that it is critical for the left to find ways to address this problem.

Many leftists support replacing our voting system with instant runoff voting or rank order voting or some other such scheme. Jill Stein is to be commended for writing an op-ed on this subject back in October in the *Chicago Tribune*, but most left media seem to treat voting systems as political arcana rather than real politics. Maine has just voted by referendum to introduce rank order voting. This needs to be a much bigger focus of our work.

We need to think of further new and imaginative ways of addressing this problem. One small solution is vote swapping, where a third party supporter in a swing state agrees to vote for a major party candidate if a major party supporter in a safe state agrees to vote for the third party. (The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals has deemed the practice legal.) It was even possible to trade two Stein votes in a safe state for one Clinton vote in a swing state. However, the Green Party of Ohio denounced the practice in part with the argument that they needed a 3% showing for future ballot access, but also because “We reject the mantra of the Democratic Party that a Clinton Presidency would be better than a Trump Presidency....We are not in the business of providing either the Democratic or Republican Parties support or encouragement. Nor will we assume that promises of reciprocity will be honored. We ask our supporters to ignore Democratic Party machinations designed to guarantee a Clinton Presidency.” (Stein got 0.8% of the vote in Ohio; Trump garnered an absolute majority of the vote.)

I have no idea whether vote-swapping can make a difference, but instead of denouncing such efforts as a Democratic plot, the left needs to sympathize with people's difficult choices and in solidarity with them try to find ways to minimize the systemic constraints.

9.

Political scientist Alex Gourevitch has written that we need to reject strategic voting because doing so assumes that we owe our votes to candidates. They have to earn our votes, he says, and if they don't, we have no responsibility to vote for them.

But this is, I would argue, the wrong way to think about elections. An election is not a contest where we are giving out an award for the most admirable candidate. For the left especially, elections are opportunities to minimize the harm that will be done to us.

Imagine you are being chased by a lion. There are two paths by which you can get away. On one path there is a very mean dog and on the other path there is a somewhat mean dog. If you choose the second route it does not mean that you are “a supporter” of somewhat mean dogs. It doesn't



mean you think the somewhat mean dog has earned your respect. It means only that you are trying to minimize the harm that will be done to you. And if there were a third path out of the woods that was blocked by a huge boulder, even though the path was covered in beautiful roses, it wouldn't make sense to go that way, even though it would mean you were not choosing a path based on fear.

To be sure, if the lion stopped for a while to feast on a deer, so you had some extra time, it would be good to go to the boulder and start to chip away at it, so in some future year that path would be open to you. But when you know you can't eliminate the boulder now and where you are not in a state of safety (a safe state, get it?) you've got to make a strategic decision. What choice will lead to the least harm?

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The challenge for the left is, and always has been, how do we protect people in the here and now while advancing the prospects for the more fundamental changes that we need? I don't presume to have the answer. But we can't just pat ourselves on the back for a job well done and repeat the same mistakes going forward. If we can learn from our mistakes, we have a chance to bring about a better future.