

Statement on the 2008 Presidential Election

The November presidential election, now only three months away, will mark the welcome end of the Bush-Cheney regime – one of the worst administrations in U.S. history.

The corporate-dominated media tainted the primary season by once again treating the campaigns as a series of horse races – where voters are encouraged to vote not for the candidate who best represents their interests and values, but rather for the candidate the media says is most likely to win. For the media to judge a candidate as having a “winning trajectory,” he or she must be among those raising the most contributions from corporate-connected individuals.

We have little hope that over the next three months the media will focus on the policy differences between Senators John McCain and Barack Obama. That is tragic, because there are major differences between the commitments of both candidates and their respective parties that need to be aired and understood, even if these differences are not as great as the democratic Left might like. Obama promises to restore to American workers the right to organize; to renegotiate international trade agreements so they enforce and do not retard labor, environmental, and human rights; to re-regulate the financial sector and end speculative excess; to bring troops home from Iraq and invest the saved funds in domestic needs; and to move toward universal health care. That’s a program worth electing a president on– or fighting for in the event the president and his party renege.

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) holds a different view of electoral politics than that of the corporate media or even much of the Left. We see electoral politics as one means in a much broader struggle of grassroots democratic social movements to pressure the state to enact policies that address the needs of their constituencies and a wider public. The democratic reforms of both the New Deal (the Wagner Act, Social Security) and the Great Society (the civil rights acts, Medicare) did not derive from the beneficence of moderate presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. In the case of FDR, his modest programs were substitutes for more radical policies supported by numerous Congress members but deemed not winnable by the president and congressional leaders. The limited reforms of the New Deal and Great Society were enacted because Congress and the president were forced to respond at least minimally to the demands of the mass social movements of the CIO and the civil rights upsurge.

DSA has long recognized that the corporate, neoliberal wing of the Democratic Party is not an ally for radical democratic change. Its support for NAFTA, similar destructive trade legislation, and cuts in government aid to low-income citizens in the face of growing poverty and income inequality; its fronting for corporate power and “free market” ideology; its resistance to allowing the party to make a systemic critique of the war in Iraq, the “war on terror,” or the corporate stranglehold on civil society put it on the other side of a widening political divide. While Obama’s largest funders come from this wing of the party, the social forces fueling his campaign – people of color, union activists, and anti-war Democrats – have long opposed the neoliberal stranglehold on the Democratic Party.

Thus, DSA has no illusion that a Democratic presidential victory, combined with bulked-up Democratic majorities in both houses of the Congress, will in itself bring about significant

democratic reform. We do believe that such a political landscape would provide the most favorable terrain upon which mobilized, assertive social movements can pressure the government to appoint decent federal judges and agency administrators and enact desperately needed universal health care legislation, labor law reform, and a federally funded Marshall Plan to develop green technologies and green jobs.

Had the U.S. a genuine multiparty system, neoliberal positions would be held by a centrist party, and DSA would be organizing as part of a left electoral force against it. Given the U.S.'s restrictive election laws, the only electoral fight possible against corporate domination has to happen in and around the Democratic Party, on the federal, state, and (allowing for the rare exception) county and city levels.

An Obama presidency will not on its own force legislation facilitating single-payer health care (at least at the federal level) or truly progressive taxation and major cuts in wasteful and unneeded defense spending. But if DSA and other democratic forces can work in the fall elections to increase the ranks of the Congressional Progressive and Black and Latino caucuses, progressive legislation (backed by strong social movement mobilization) might well pass the next Congress.

Senator Barack Obama has attracted considerable support as a presidential candidate who promises to end "politics as usual." He has invigorated a significant youthful, multiracial cadre of supporters, as well as gained considerable support from liberal activists. The massive outpouring of small contributions in support of his campaign signals the potential power of his message, and his recent call for a windfall profits tax on the oil companies is encouraging.

Yet his campaign has centered more around gestures and symbols than on concrete policy alternatives; and where he has been concrete, as in health care, his plan falls short of universal coverage. And he often employs pro-market rhetoric to defend his programs and their failure to cover everyone.

While recognizing the critical limitations of the Obama candidacy and the American political system, DSA believes that the possible election of Senator Obama to the presidency in November represents a potential opening for social and labor movements to generate the critical political momentum necessary to implement a progressive political agenda. We know that a proactive and progressive government can come only on the heels of a broad coalition for social justice united against a reactionary Republicanism as well as a Democratic neoliberalism. Such a movement will also have to fight for a public finance system that can limit the power of corporate fundraising and lobbyists over both major political parties.

Thus, DSA offers its Economic Justice Agenda and its "four pillars" as a framework for such a progressive policy agenda. This program calls for:

1. Restoring progressive taxation to the levels before the Reagan administration and enacting massive cuts in wasteful defense spending;
2. Enacting single-payer universal health insurance and expanding public initiatives in child care, elder care and pension security;

3. Passing the Employee Free Choice Act as part of a broader effort to rebuild a powerful labor movement capable of achieving equity in the labor market; and
4. Implementing a U.S. foreign policy that promotes global institutions that advance labor, environmental, and human rights and regulate transnational corporations.

True democracy is not about one woman or man promising change for the American public. That takes consistent pressure from below. Who holds the presidency does matter, if only as a more accessible target for pressure. A Democratic presidency and Congress would also create popular expectations that rising inequality and injustice will be curbed. If the Democrats frustrate those hopes (as they did in the early 1960s), mass mobilization is likely to grow rather than subside.

Nor should the Left be so involved in the national presidential campaign that it ignores the fall primaries and general election races for the U.S. House and Senate. We need more progressives in Congress as well as increased Democratic majorities.

The November election can't be the end of a fight, but its beginning, and connections made on a local and national level leading up to November can position the Left to play a role in struggles to come.

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