

Swing Left, Sink Trump

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Ahead of the important Iowa caucuses, many commentators are warning of history repeating itself. They see close parallels between the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the 1972 contest. Back then Democrats nominated a representative of their left wing in George McGovern and lost the elections in a landslide against the incumbent Richard Nixon. The parallels are further reinforced by today's knowledge of Nixon's character flaws and the impeachment he encountered after winning re-election. The 1972 loss has traumatized Democrats ever since. And so it is not surprising that many are worried about a repetition of the electoral disaster, as this year's primaries feature two candidates from the Democrats' progressive wing, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, with a chance of winning the nomination. Yet, despite some superficial parallels, 2020 is not 1972. The country and electoral behaviors have changed and both Sanders and Warren would have the potential to beat Trump.

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First, one has to consider demographic developments. The United States in 2020 is much more diverse than the United States in 1972. The country is simply less white today. (Up until 1980 [over 84 percent](#) of eligible voters were white, but in 2020 whites [only make up 66.7 percent of eligible voters](#)). [And while a majority of white Americans still support the Republicans \(according to PEW research, in 2018 some 43 percent of white voters lean Democratic comparing to 51 who are Republican-leaning\), the Democratic advantage among the other, growing groups is significant, with 84 percent of African-American and 63 percent of Hispanic voters leaning Democratic.](#) On top of this comes significant generational change. In 2020, those who are millennials and younger will potentially make up as big a share of the voting block as the Baby Boomers and their elders for the first time. In 2018 the voters under 30 [voted for Democrats by a 38-point margin](#).

John Judis and Ruy Teixeira argued back in 2004 that this new and increasingly successful Democratic coalition was “McGovern’s revenge.” This “alliance between minorities, working and single women, the college educated, and skilled professionals,” which first appeared during McGovern’s campaign, helped Barack Obama win two elections.

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These trends are not new, and many Democratic strategists are warning not to view demographic developments as being decisive on their own (“Demography is not destiny”). However, there is another factor that allows progressive candidates to be competitive in a general election: extreme political polarization. This has basically eliminated the chance for landslide victories by either side. Thus, almost any candidate who is nominated by one of the big parties has a chance to win.

In 2016, the “McGovern coalition” was not strong enough to pull out a win. While the Democrats won the popular vote, Republicans had and have a decisive structural advantage due their voter’s geographical distribution and the overrepresentation of rural states in the electoral college. That shocking loss has deeply unsettled the Democrats, given that it was only around 80,000 votes spread across three pivotal states that decided the election. Fearing another loss, many Democrats are looking for a “safe option” such as the well-known Joe Biden. Yet, it is often forgotten that Hillary Clinton was also seen as the “safe option” in 2008 and 2016. Though many may be longing for a candidate like Obama, they forget that he too was considered the risky, progressive candidate in 2008, as he promised to bring fundamental change to Washington.

American voters have repeatedly demonstrated that they want something new and different. Obama promised a hopeful renewal, Trump an angry one. Sanders and Warren, whatever their weaknesses may be, represent change. And they appear authentic in doing so.

On top of that, many of their supposed “leftist” positions are pretty popular, and not only among Democratic voters. Warren’s “Wealth Tax” reaches more than 60 percent support in several polls and is also supported by a majority of Republican-leaning voters. Her plan to forgive student debt is equally favored by a majority of 56 percent of voters. Although a majority of Americans is pleased with the current economic development, two-thirds no longer believe that the next generation will be better off. These are numbers that speak for systemic change. And maybe for some courage. More so than other candidates, Sanders and Warren dare express a desire for broad change.

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Only the complete nationalization of the healthcare system (Medicare for All), supported by Sanders and Warren, still seems rather unpopular and thus politically risky. Though even this “radical” plan finds up to 55 percent support in some polls; in others, such as a Fox News poll, only 40 percent backed the proposal. That would make it about as unpopular as Trump’s promise to build a wall at the border with Mexico. But even this promise proved successful in motivating his own base.

Finally, maybe the overall assumption that McGovern lost because he was too far to the left is flawed. Because we know today how the story ended for Nixon, we tend to forget that he was not a bad candidate. In 1972, the U.S. economy was still running strong, the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam had been dropping, and his rapprochement with China was a historic achievement. Of course, one should learn from history. Yet, sometimes, the fear of repeating mistakes could also just be that: fear.

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