

Do Sanders Supporters Favor His Policies?

By **CHRISTOPHER H. ACHEN** and **LARRY M. BARTELS** MAY 23, 2016

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Bernie Sanders supporters in Carson, Calif. Credit Monica Almeida/The New York Times
Bernie Sanders is widely credited with pulling Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party to the left on major issues like [health care](#), [trade](#), [financial regulation](#) and the [minimum wage](#). Now he [says](#) he will battle all the way to

the convention on behalf of “people who are prepared to fight for real economic and social change.” But the premise animating that battle — that Mr. Sanders’s surprising success in the primary race is because of his liberal policy positions — may be familiar and comforting, but it is greatly exaggerated.

The notion that elections are decided by voters’ carefully weighing competing candidates’ stands on major issues reflects a strong faith in American political culture that citizens can control their government from the voting booth. We call it the “[folk theory](#)” of democracy.

When candidates surpass expectations, observers caught up in the folk theory believe that they have tapped some newly potent political issue or ideology. Thus, many [analysts](#) have argued that Mr. Sanders’s surprising support signals a momentous shift to the left among Democrats.

But wishing does not make it so. Decades of social-scientific evidence show that voting behavior is primarily a product of inherited partisan loyalties, social identities and symbolic attachments. Over time, engaged citizens may construct policy preferences and ideologies that rationalize their choices, but those issues are seldom fundamental.

That is one key reason contemporary American politics is so polarized: The electoral penalty for candidates taking extreme positions is quite modest because voters in the political center do not reliably support the candidates closest to them on the issues. (Mitt Romney is just the most [recent presidential candidate to lose](#) despite being perceived by most voters as closer to their ideological views than his opponent on a spectrum running from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative.”)

The most powerful social identities and symbolic attachments in this year’s Democratic race have favored Mrs. Clinton, not Mr. Sanders. She has been a leading figure in the Democratic Party for decades, a role model for many women and a longtime ally of African-Americans and other minority groups. For many primary voters, that history constitutes a powerful bond, and their loyalties are propelling Mrs. Clinton to the nomination despite her limitations as a candidate.

Mr. Sanders, on the other hand, is a sort of anti-Clinton — a political maverick from lily-white Vermont whose main claim to fame has been his insistence on calling himself an independent, a socialist, anything but a Democrat. That history has made him a convenient vessel for antipathy to Mrs. Clinton, the Democratic establishment and some of the party’s key constituencies. But it is a mistake to assume that voters who support Mr. Sanders because he is not Mrs. Clinton necessarily favor his left-leaning policy views.

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[Exit polls](#) conducted in two dozen primary and caucus states from early February through the end of April reveal only modest evidence of ideological structure in Democratic voting patterns, but ample evidence of the importance of group loyalties.

Mr. Sanders did just nine points better, on average, among liberals than he did among moderates. By comparison, he did 11 points worse among women than among men, 18 points worse among nonwhites than among whites and 28 points worse among those who identified as Democrats than among independents.

It is very hard to point to differences between Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Sanders's proposed policies that could plausibly account for such substantial cleavages. They are reflections of social identities, symbolic commitments and partisan loyalties.

Yet commentators who have been ready and willing to attribute Donald Trump's success to [anger](#), [authoritarianism](#), or [racism](#) rather than policy issues have taken little note of the extent to which Mr. Sanders's support is concentrated not among liberal ideologues but among disaffected white men.

More detailed evidence casts further doubt on the notion that support for Mr. Sanders reflects a shift to the left in the policy preferences of Democrats. In a survey conducted for the [American National Election Studies](#) in late January, supporters of Mr. Sanders were more pessimistic than Mrs. Clinton's supporters about "opportunity in America today for the average person to get ahead" and more likely to say that economic inequality had increased.

However, they were less likely than Mrs. Clinton's supporters to favor concrete policies that Mr. Sanders has offered as remedies for these ills, including a higher minimum wage, increasing government spending on health care and an expansion of government services financed by higher taxes. It is quite a stretch to view these people as the vanguard of a new, social-democratic-trending Democratic Party.

Mr. Sanders has drawn enthusiastic support from young people, a common pattern for outsider candidates. But here, too, the impression of ideological commitment is mostly illusory. While young Democrats in the January survey were more likely than those over age 35 to call themselves liberals, their ideological self-designations seem to have been much more lightly held, varying significantly when they were reinterviewed.

Moreover, warm views of Mr. Sanders increased the liberalism of young Democrats by as much as 1.5 points on the seven-point ideological scale. For many of them, liberal ideology seems to have been a short-term byproduct of enthusiasm for Mr. Sanders rather than a stable political conviction.

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Perhaps for that reason, the generational difference in ideology seems not to have translated into more liberal positions on concrete policy issues — even on the specific issues championed by Mr. Sanders. For example, young Democrats were less likely than older Democrats to support increased government funding of health care, substantially less likely to favor a higher minimum wage and less likely to support expanding government services. Their distinctive liberalism is mostly a matter of adopting campaign labels, not policy preferences.

Abraham Lincoln promised Americans “government of the people, by the people, for the people,” a notable departure from the republican system set up by the architects of the Constitution. In the 150 years since Lincoln, the ideal of government “by the people” has reshaped Americans’ democratic aspirations and their political practices — for example, in the Progressive Era introductions of direct primary elections and referendums and initiatives. It has also altered the way journalists and analysts see and describe electoral politics.

But that ideal makes sense, descriptively and normatively, only if citizens understand politics in terms of issues and ideologies and use their votes to convey clear policy signals that then determine the course of public policy. Americans’ commitment to the folk theory of democracy may make them wish that elections worked that way. But in the case of Bernie Sanders, as so often, belief in the folk theory is an act of faith, not realism.

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