

# *the endless merry-go-round*



We just LOVE to ride on the merry-go-round!

# The Endless Merry-Go-Round

Can you hear the music? Can you smell the popcorn and fried whatever-on-a-stick? It's almost like it's time for the fair again. Snake oil salesmen mobbing you while cutting through the air-conditioned exhibition hall, some selling emu oil that claims to cure Covid, some promising reforms of this or that, telling you how **committed** they are: "this time is different!" they'll say.

We've seen this movie before. And we all know how it ends.

The bold reform becomes the watered down compromise which becomes the limited underfunded pilot program that dies a slow death.

Police "reform!" Low-income housing! Programs for our unhoused neighbors!

All promised by a smiling former hockey star with immaculate teeth and well-groomed hair.

"This time" will never be different. These texts were selected to help you understand why.

with love for Minneapolis,

silberfuchs

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# The Lure of Elections: From Political Power to Popular Power

*by Frank Ascaso, Enrique Guerrero-López, Patrick Berkman, Adam Weaver*

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the gravitational pull of electoral politics has gripped the left with renewed intensity. Fueled by the popularity of Sen. Bernie Sanders, discontent with political elites and the failure of the Democratic Party to defeat Trump, various segments of the left see an opening for breathing new life into building a “party of the 99 percent,” a “party of a new type” or a “mass socialist party.” Others are content running leftist candidates as Democrats under the guise of radical pragmatism. Given the history and structural limitations of such projects, social movements, activists and organizers should regard these calls with caution. If we want meaningful social change, or even basic progressive reforms, the electoral road leads us into a strategic cul-de-sac. Instead of better politicians, we need popular power — independent, self-managed and combative social movements capable of posing a credible threat to capitalism, the state, white supremacy and patriarchy.

The recent push toward electoral politics stems in large part from Senator Sanders’s insurgent primary campaign. For decades, Sanders occupied a relatively obscure position in the political arena. From his first stint in office as mayor of Burlington in the 1980s, to his recent years in the US Senate, Sanders’s lone voice against corporate power had little impact. Yet by 2016, the cumulative weight of deteriorating socioeconomic, political and ecological conditions, along with the growth of mass movements, laid the groundwork for the popularity of the Sanders campaign. Indeed, the

political terrain had already shifted before Sanders launched his “political revolution.”

An oft-cited 2011 Pew Poll revealed that 49 percent of Americans under 30 had a positive view of socialism, while just 47 percent had a favorable opinion of capitalism. Disillusionment with President Obama, coupled with a steady stream of post-recession movements from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter, had significantly altered public discourse, expanded the field of struggle and pulled the broader political spectrum to the left. In other words, the Sanders campaign slipped through the door kicked open by social movements and brought a broad cross-section of the left into the electoral arena.

Following the Sanders campaign, a growing mix of old and new voices have been clamoring for the left to consider electoral struggles. For example, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Jacobin Magazine and strategists like Max Elbaum at Organizing Upgrade have been some of the most vocal proponents of electoral strategies. They justify their calls in terms of fighting back against Trump and the far right, shifting politics to the left, and winning policy change like universal health care. Coupled with the recognition that we also need to build mass movements outside of the voting booth, these same organizations and individuals are promoting variations of an “inside-outside” strategy.

The “inside-outside” approach, which casts itself as hard-nosed, strategic and realistic, claims to hold out a possible middle path between focusing exclusively on movement-building and leaping headlong into the palace intrigue of beltway politics. Its advocates argue that social movements are of vital importance, but they can’t get it done alone: There needs to be a ballot-box strategy to punish bad incumbents, elect movement champions and enact real change by leveraging state power. In other words, as

Marxist political economist Leo Panitch often says, echoing civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, we need to move “from protest to politics.”

Their strategy is characterized by the following three points:

- If we want victories, we need strong, militant social movements in communities and workplaces agitating on the outside, but we also need movement champions in elected office changing the system from the inside. Through election campaigns, social movements can expand their base and have the ear of someone in power who can be held accountable to movement demands.
- Political campaigns are an effective way to bring up vital issues, expose more people to left politics and provide easy on-ramps for the newly politicized to get active. After Election Day, no matter how we do, our politics have reached a wider audience and built movement capacity.
- Currently the Democratic Party is the most viable vehicle for our candidates if we want them to win, but ultimately, we need to develop our capacity for building an independent party of the left. Alternatively, some argue that the Democratic Party is beyond repair and we need to build an independent political party of the left now.

But this is wrong; elections are a trap with more costs than benefits. Political change is a question of political power, and the electoral arena is a field of battle that caters to the already rich and powerful. It hands our power to politicians. As a result, when popular candidates win electoral office without the backing of powerful social movements (even candidates of the left), they are powerless to take meaningful action. Instead, electoral campaigns drain movements of vital resources that could be better spent elsewhere. The electoral road is not a shortcut to power; it is a dead end — structurally, historically and strategically.

# Elections Are A Scam

*by Morpheus*

As in every election we're now being bombarded with propaganda about how "your vote makes a difference" and associated nonsense. According to the official version ordinary citizens control the state by voting for candidates in elections. The President and other politicians are supposedly servants of "the people" and the government an instrument of the general populace. This version is a myth. It does not matter who is elected because the way the system is set up all elected representatives must do what big business and the state bureaucracy want, not what "the people" want. Elected representatives are figureheads. Politicians' rhetoric may change depending on who is elected, but they all have to implement the same policies given the same situation. Elections are a scam whose function is to create the illusion that "the people" control the government, not the elite, and to neutralize resistance movements. All voting does is strengthen the state & ruling class, it is not an effective means to change government policy.

If a party wins the elections but implements policies that go against the interests of big business then profits will go down and businesses & investors will withdraw their investments. This capital flight will cause the economy to crash. If the ruling party does not change its policies to appease big business then they'll lose the next elections due to the bad economy. In practice most parties change their policies to appease the corporate elite in order to avoid losing power.

This is not merely theoretical, it has happened repeatedly. It happened in India a few months ago. The left, lead by the Congress party, won the elections, leading to a coalition government with the Congress party and the Communist party. This caused the stock market to crash because investors feared a change in economic policy that would hurt their profits.

Sonia Ghandi, who was originally going to be the next Prime Minister, chose not to take the position and the new government was forced to adopt policies virtually identical to the previous government. Their rhetoric is different, but policy is basically the same.

Usually the mere threat of capital flight is enough to keep potentially recalcitrant politicians in line (although most politicians never even consider policies that conflict with the corporate elite/state bureaucracy). For example, Bill Clinton won election on a mildly liberal reformist platform. Once in office he was forced to abandon his campaign promises because if he continued them the bond market wouldn't react well and the economy would go down the tubes. Clinton's famous statement to his advisers upon realizing this was, *"You mean to tell me that the success of my program and my reelection hinges on the Federal Reserve and a bunch of fucking bond traders?"* He was thus forced to abandon his program before it even started, instead implementing one virtually identical to Republican proposals. He complained to his aides:

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"I hope you're all aware we're all Eisenhower Republicans. We're Eisenhower Republicans here, and we are fighting the Reagan Republicans. We stand for lower deficits and free trade and the bond market. Isn't that great?"

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In theory the government might be able to combat this by nationalizing industry but neither the Democrats nor Republicans (or most prominent third parties) are willing to do this. Even if they were, the Supreme Court would strike it down. If some way were found to get around this then the CIA and/or Pentagon would overthrow the government in a coup (or through less dramatic means). The CIA has overthrown many governments for nationalizing industry, or even just implementing policies not sufficiently favorable to US corporations, including Chile, Iran, Guatemala, Brazil, Greece, the Congo and many others. Doing the same on their home turf would be a piece of cake.

Once elected representatives are isolated from the general public but surrounded by bureaucrats and other politicians. They therefore have a tendency to see things from the perspective of politicians and bureaucrats, rather than from the perspective of the general public from which they are isolated, and are much more susceptible to pressure from government bureaucracies.

Elected representatives' dependency on the state bureaucracy for information makes them very susceptible to manipulation by the bureaucracies they are officially in charge of. For example, in the late '50s the CIA secured approval to launch an uprising in Indonesia by feeding a series of increasingly alarmist reports to their superiors in the National Security Council, who otherwise might have shot the proposed uprising down. This shows how government agencies (especially secretive ones) can pressure politicians and influence policy in preferred directions. This is enhanced by the fact that individual politicians come and go but the bureaucrats are permanent, which makes it easier for bureaucrats to manipulate information and ensures that politicians have less experience with such manipulation. Because the state bureaucracy is permanent while politicians are transitory state bureaucracies tend to accrue more power than elected representatives.

State bureaucracies can also manipulate the political process by leaking damaging information about politicians they don't like or by harassing parties or movements they don't like (such as COINTELPRO or the recent harassment of anti-war activists by the FBI). This gives an advantage to politicians favorable to the interests of the state bureaucracy.

State bureaucracies, especially the military and intelligence services, have a considerable degree of autonomy from elected representatives and so aren't truly controlled by those representatives. When New Zealand intelligence began secretly participating in Echelon, an international electronic spying system, New Zealand's Prime Minister didn't even know about it. Most of the CIA's covert actions (including coups) were done without Congressional approval and some, like CIA participation in Ghana's 1966 coup, didn't even have Presidential approval. Entire wars have been fought in secret, including Russia 1918–1920, Laos 1965–



1973 and Cambodia 1970–1975. When Congress cut off funding for the Contras (US-backed terrorists in Nicaragua) in the mid-80s the CIA (and other parts of the state bureaucracy) just kept doing it in secret, disregarding Congress's wishes.

The Pentagon can't even produce auditable books and regularly "loses" billions of dollars every year. Auditors for the Office of Management and Budget found that "unsubstantiated balance adjustments" for financial year 2000 totaled 1.1 trillion dollars. In other words, elected politicians (and especially congress) have no real control over Pentagon spending. The whole process of Congressional hearings and budgetary oversight is just an elaborate charade — they appropriate money and the Pentagon spends it however it wants to. Plus there's the "black budget" whose contents are kept secret, allowing the national security establishment to effectively do whatever they want with it.

All of this puts many state bureaucracies (especially the military and intelligence services) beyond effective control of elected representatives, let alone the general public. Their secrecy, manipulation of budgets and complexity (there are too many bureaucrats for representatives to effectively keep track of them all) gives government bureaucracies a considerable degree of autonomy. They go off and do whatever they want, either keeping things secret from elected politicians or pressuring them into going along with it.

What a politician says to win an election and what he actually does in office are two very different things; politicians regularly break their promises. This is not just a fluke but the outcome of the way the system is set up. Bush the second said he wouldn't engage in "nation-building" (taking other countries over) during the 2000 election campaign but has done it several times. He also claimed to support a balanced budget, but obviously abandoned that. Clinton advocated universal health care during the 1992 election campaign but there were more people without health insurance when he left office than when he took office. Bush the first said, "*read my lips — no new taxes!*" while running for office but raised taxes anyway. Reagan promised to shrink government but he drastically expanded the military-industrial complex and ran up huge

deficits. Rather than shrinking government, he reoriented it to make it more favorable to the rich.

Carter promised to make human rights the “soul of our foreign policy” but funded genocide in East Timor and backed brutal dictators in Argentina, South Korea, Chile, Brazil, Indonesia and elsewhere. During the 1964 elections leftists were encouraged by Democrats to vote for Johnson because Goldwater, his Republican opponent, was a fanatical warmonger who would escalate US involvement in Vietnam. Johnson won, and immediately proceeded to escalate US involvement in Vietnam. FDR promised to maintain a balanced budget and restrain government spending but did the exact opposite. Wilson won reelection in 1916 on the slogan “he kept us out of war” but then lied us into World War One. Hoover pledged to abolish poverty in 1928 but instead saw it skyrocket.

In the 1974 Canadian elections the Liberals criticized Tory plans to introduce wage and price controls but, shortly after winning office, implemented wage and price controls. In 1993 the Liberals promised to abolish the Goods and Service Tax but reneged on that after getting power. The British Liberal party promised to cut military spending during the 1906 elections but, after winning, went back on that promise in order to wage an arms race with Germany. In 1945 the British Labor party promised to set up a ministry of housing but abandoned it after winning the election.

According to the official version when leftists get elected to office we should always (or almost always) get leftist policies and vice versa when rightists get elected to office but this is not the case. The German Green party was originally pacifist and was founded on an anti-nuclear power position. They gained power in a coalition government in the late 1990s but abandoned their program, effectively delaying the end of nuclear power in Germany until the nuclear industry wants to end it and supporting military intervention during the Kosovo war. Lula, the current president of Brazil, originally ran on an anti-corporate and anti-IMF platform but is now cooperating with the IMF (although his rhetoric, but not his policies, are sometimes critical of it) and he’s just as favorable towards corporate power as his predecessor.

The socialist/social democratic/labor parties in Europe were originally revolutionary Marxist parties aiming to establish a communist society. As they won elections and gained power they increasingly abandoned this goal and became ordinary capitalist parties. At first they continued to mouth Marxist rhetoric while pushing reformist policies, but eventually even Marxist rhetoric was abandoned. Prior to world war one they declared their opposition to any kind of inter-imperialist world war on the grounds that workers should not kill each other in order to benefit their capitalist masters. When world war one broke out all but two parties (the Bolsheviks and US Socialist party – neither of whom had gained much power through elections) abandoned this stance and supported their own government in a wave of patriotic fervor. Today they're pushing through Reagan/Clinton-style deregulation and "free market reforms," dismantling the very welfare states they formerly advocated.

The most liberal American president in the last 30 years was Richard Nixon, a Republican whose personal beliefs and rhetoric were quite conservative. He created the environmental protection agency, established diplomatic relations with China, (eventually) withdrew from Vietnam, ended the draft, supported affirmative action, proposed a minimum income and imposed price controls. Every president since Nixon – including Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton – has been more conservative.

In the US & UK Ronald Reagan & Margaret Thatcher implemented far right policies that attacked the social safety net and benefited big business in the name of the "free market." During the same time period in Australia and West Europe the supposedly left-wing parties (labor/social democrats/socialists) held power and implemented the same "free market" policies. Clinton & Blair from the supposedly left-wing parties (Democrat & Labor) later defeated Reagan & Thatcher's successors but once in office continued the same "free market" policies as their predecessors.

This refutes all the nonsense about how "your vote makes a difference." Politicians are required to implement the same policies (what the elite want) even if it conflicts with their campaign promises no matter who is elected. Elected representatives are figureheads. That's why there are so

many examples of people getting elected and then doing the opposite of what they promised. Electing different people to power is not an effective way to change policy. In practice, politicians differ only in the lies they tell to get in power. Once in power their policies are the same given the same situation, although the rhetoric and symbolism used to justify those policies may change greatly.

Changes in policy direction are due to changes in the situation, not who is elected to office. Most major changes in policy do not coincide with new people getting in office; they coincide with changes in the situation. When the Great Depression started the US government responded with Keynesian state interventions in the economy designed to resuscitate the economy and prevent growing population movements (caused by the depression) from bringing about revolution. This actually began under Hoover, who did more in this area than any previous President, even though these policies are usually attributed to the next President, FDR.

In the mid-twentieth century welfare states expanded in most Western societies as a way of preventing the then large revolutionary socialist movements from overthrowing the government (welfare programs can make the poor less likely to rebel since they are better off and because it makes the state seem more benevolent). The welfare state was in the elites' interests because it was a way to prevent revolution and decrease unrest, which helped them gain and keep power & profit. The state bureaucracy will sometimes nationalize a limited amount of industry under these conditions, as a way of preventing revolution and also of keeping capitalism going (selling unprofitable industries to the government can be a useful way for businesses & investors to recoup losses during a depression).

In the later twentieth century these revolutionary movements declined and the welfare state was gradually dismantled. It was no longer in the interests of the elite to maintain a welfare state because the threat of unrest & revolution was no longer there to justify the costs. In the US this started not under Reagan, as liberals usually claim, but in the later part of Carter's term with deregulation and other small attacks on the welfare state. Carter also initiated other policies liberals blame Reagan for,

including support for the Contras, Pol Pot, Afghan Mujahadeen and Saddam Hussein. This dismantling of the welfare state and general move to the right has continued under every subsequent President regardless of which party was in power.

In the US, during Nixon's term, there were a number of growing left-wing movements and spreading revolutionary ideology that threatened to overthrow the government. Had he not done things like end the draft, withdraw from Vietnam and implement other liberal reforms there was a real possibility that socialist revolution would erupt and even if it didn't there would have been greater unrest which would likely outweigh the cost of his reforms.

Although elections do not secure popular control over the state, they do help secure state control over the populace. Voting is a ritual that reinforces obedience to state authority. It creates the illusion that "the people" control the state, thereby masking elite rule. That illusion makes rebellion against the state less likely because it is seen as a legitimate institution and as an instrument of popular rule rather than the oligarchy it really is. This is why even totalitarian states like Russia under Stalin had elections. Embedded within all electoral campaigns is the myth that "the people" control the state through voting. This is implied & assumed by all election campaigns because if it wasn't true then the campaign for that candidate would be pointless.

This is why governments and corporations today are generally supportive of elections or at least do not question them. Government schools usually promote the importance of voting, teaching the official view that citizens control the state via elections, and some corporations (like MTV) even run commercials encouraging people to vote. It is in the interests of governments and corporations to promote voting because they serve to legitimize the system and reduce unrest.

In addition, elections can help neutralize resistance movements by getting disgruntled individuals to channel their efforts into the election, instead of more effective means of resistance. Since electoral campaigns are an ineffective means of changing policy, all the labor and resources put into

election campaigns are wasted. Potential rebellion is thus diverted into a dead end where it will not hurt the system. Boycotting elections doesn't necessarily change things, but participating in elections (and especially in election campaigns) changes things for the worse by legitimizing the state and wasting resources. A vote for anyone is a vote for capitalist "democracy" and to strengthen the state.

Some Democrats try to guilt leftists into voting for their candidate(s) by arguing that oppressed peoples — the poor, people of color (POC) — vote for their candidate and so you should therefore do the same. The most obvious problem with this is that most oppressed people don't vote. You're more likely to vote the richer and whiter you are. So by their logic you shouldn't be voting because most poor/POC don't vote.

This argument is also based on a logical fallacy. Just because someone is poor/non-white doesn't mean everything they believe is correct. Most believe in god and during periods in the past Leninism was quite popular among sections of the poor/POC. It does not follow from this that either idea is true. Just because oppression is wrong does not mean that everything an oppressed person believes is true.

Some leftists argue that having Democrats in power is better because they will be more responsive to leftist pressure than Republicans. This argument was widely used in 1992 to justify voting for Bill Clinton but the conservative policies implemented by his presidency, which were basically a continuation of the first Bush's policies, disprove this argument. To continue believing it after Clinton is to stick your head in the sand and ignore reality.

Influence actually goes the other way around: having a Democrat in office makes the left more likely to believe the president's lies and go along with his policies than if a Republican were in office doing the same thing. Clinton was able to gut welfare, something Reagan wanted to do but couldn't, because he was able to co-opt other Democrats into going along with it. Had a Republican done the same many more would have opposed it. When Clinton attacked Yugoslavia & bombed Iraq the response from the left was quite small, but when Bush attacked Iraq the left formed a much

larger movement against it. Many leftists (erroneously) think that a Democrat is preferable to a Republican and so are willing to give a Democrat the benefit of the doubt, and therefore are more likely to believe their lies, but will be much more skeptical of a Republican even if he does the same thing.

In addition, electing a Democrat can ruin left-wing movements if they support that candidate. Once in power that Democrat will have to do the same thing a Republican would under the same circumstances. This can cause leftists who supported the Democrats to become disillusioned and drop out – allowing the right to advance even further.

Some claim that the year 2000 “election”/coup shows that “every vote counts” but it actually shows the opposite. The Supreme Court decided who became president, not the voters. Gore would be president today if you went by what the voters wanted (and he would be doing the same thing Bush is doing).

Actual power lies with big business and the state bureaucracy, elected representatives must do what these institutions want. If they do not obey these institutions pressure on them will mount and various disciplinary mechanisms (such as capital flight) will come into play to force them to do so. Ultimately they will be removed from office (through elections, coups, or other means) if they continue to disobey these institutions. The White House and Congress don't really make the decisions, Wall Street and the Pentagon do. Who wins the election makes no difference (with rare exceptions) because all politicians must do what the elite want. Elections are a scam whose function is to neutralize resistance movements and dupe ordinary citizens into thinking they control the state.

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